Introduction: Troubled Times

On 11 March, 2020, when the World Health Organisation declared the spread of COVID-19 to have reached the status of pandemic, my wife and I were on a mini-break in Kent to celebrate our first wedding anniversary. I was walking down a shopping street in Deal, when I felt the buzz of my phone in my pocket. The notification was from the *Guardian* and to the point. I walked into a branch of Superdrug and bought a tiny bottle of hand sanitiser: the last one on the shelf, which bore the strict injunction that customers were only permitted to buy one per person.

We went back to our hotel and spent a pleasant evening, both trying not to talk about the pandemic and yet struggling to avoid it. As we drove home the next day, I wondered when we would next leave London, and what challenges everyone would face before some kind of normality either returned or established itself. My diary records the rapid development of the situation as sporting events and other things were cancelled or postponed.

This is not intended as a history of the pandemic or even the lockdown. While there are already people who have in a variety of ways tried to understand what happened in that way, I have neither the expertise to make sense of the science (though like many people I have tried to educate myself) nor the access to a broad enough range of sources to make this worthwhile. (Freedman, 2020; Kucharski, 2019; Wolfe, 2011; Saracci, 2010) The recent past is often in the deepest shadow and while there may well be views of

the management of the crisis that come through the following pages, I do not think that they will really be proved true or false until well after this is completed.*

[*There is a timeline and some statistical data at the back which are intended to help the reader contextualise particular images. While no chronology is innocent of interpretation, this is as far as I have gone down the historical path.]

I am a specialist in Holocaust Studies, and the role of photography in memory, particularly of traumatic events. While the comparison is not fair - the virus has no agenda beyond its own survival and should not be anthropomorphised by attributing motive - the work of Mendel Grossman and Henryk Ross in the Lodz Ghetto have definitely been influential. The desire to record one's presence in a situation is a powerful one. This is therefore perhaps best understood as a kind of *testimony*. Like all such documents, it is both a record of what happened and a record of the experience of *having been* there. I am selecting images and writing about them as a way of making sense of what - as I start writing and selecting - is still unfolding.

The process of selection is unashamedly personal. Particularly early on, the images were taken for amusement rather than with a conscious aim of documenting, and there are some things that might be expected that are not there. No ambulances or hospitals, for example. This was not investigative journalism. I took my camera with me to some medical appointments but there was no attempt to try and tell a story that is not fundamentally my own. Although there

were some things that I determined to record, there is nothing staged. All collections assume the weight of an archive but I make no claim to completeness or any decisive understanding. My view was restricted by my position as an "ordinary witness" and the viewfinder. What use future historians may be able to make of these images is not something I am in a position to know, and I am not interested in overly nudging them. But I have of course chosen the images and their juxtaposition: unfortunately that means you can trust neither the teller nor the tale completely. But this is, in my view, the normal way of things.

Taking the pictures

Technically I am a lazy photographer. These images have been taken on my Pentax K-5 and my iPhone 8+, with some enhancements on Photoshop Express, FILCA and Carbon apps. Street photography is a quick and hasty business and the microchips in my devices are faster and more accurate in making an exposure than I can hope to be. I do sometimes switch off autofocus and adjust aperture and exposure times, but more often I believe getting an image that can be manipulated (within reason) is more important than not getting an image because I wasn't ready. Like Henri Cartier-Bresson, I believe photography is a search for the *decisive moment*. Whether I've found it is up to you of course, but many images capture moments that had to be registered right then. Though the observation in the TV series *Six Feet Under* is true ("You can't take a picture of it: it's already gone.") a lot of photography is in trying to find the moment that isn't

gone just before it is.

There are also ethical questions and challenges. Street photography is fundamentally the practice of recording everyday moments in people's lives. Nick Turpin (2019) suggests it might be better described as "Candid Public Photography", though he also allows that "it" is constantly being redefined by practitioners. I think his term "observational documentary practice" gets closer to what I do than anything else. I am an observer - in ethnographic terms, I try to be a *participant* observer - but I am also analysing the scene with a view to how I can best record it. But I am aware that in being in the situation, analysing it, and recording it, I am also changing it, perhaps even (as far as the future is concerned) *creating* it.

UK law permits photographers to take pictures of people without their consent assuming they do not have a reasonable expectation of privacy, and assuming that the images meet the tests set out in the Voyeurism Act 2018. This leaves considerable space for the photographer to practice their craft.

But the law is not the whole story. Everyone in these pictures was, in a sense, *in extremis*, as was the photographer, and this strained the ethics of a craft that has been justly accused of voyeurism. Susan Sontag, in her seminal discussion *On Photography*, began by noting the "presumption of veracity" (Sontag, 1979: 6) that photographic images possess: "Photographic images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that

anyone can make or acquire." (Sontag, 1979: 4)

The photograph, however, is the product of framing, both literal and metaphorical. Literal framing is the degree to which a lens can capture the scene: there is no telling what was out of shot, to what destination a person was walking, or their point of origin. There is only what is bounded by the edges. The more metaphorical kind of framing consists of the ideas, beliefs, values, and intentions of the photographer, which lead them to point the camera at a particular subject and (much harder to account for) not at other subjects.

Dan Stone, in reference to the practice of history-writing, has criticised what he terms semiotic totalitarianism: narratives and practices proposing "a 'master-narrative' which is unidirectional and teleological; [which] does not admit that details have been left out, [which] is univocal, and implies a notion of order in history, specifically a form of progress, which the very events that they represent contradict." (Stone, 2003: 146) The photographer is able to present the reader/viewer (I never know which term is better) of photographs with a reality that is literally two-dimensional and defined. A photograph is *flat*: and tends to dictate reality flatly. By presenting their audience (?) with an image, the photographer deprives them of apparent ability to contradict. It is hard to work 'against the grain' of an emulsion, let alone pixels on a screen. The photographer's decision about what is included in the frame, what is in focus and what is relegated to background, is not subject to appeal. As Roland Barthes put it, the photograph "*fills the sight by force*" (Barthes, 2000: 91, italics in original) and you take the image

or you don't: "The only way I can transform the photograph is into refuse: either the drawer or the wastebasket." (ibid. 93)

The aggressive verbs associated with photography hint at this: shooting, capturing, transfixing, exposing. The skill of holding a camera with a long lens is not totally different from that of shooting a rifle. And everyone knows the experience of being captured in a way that is uncomfortable, unpleasant, or simply embarrassing.

But the photographer is not the whole story either. The person or object being photographed (and Sontag and many others have pointed out that photography confuses the two) *is there*. Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, argues that the photograph is based on "the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph." (2000: 76) While electronic images that are partially or wholly constructed challenge this assertion, for the purposes of street photography - or at least, *my* street photography - the question does not arise.

In another sense, photographs of people are the product of collaboration, between the photographer and the subject. Barthes famously identified the tensions in having one's photograph taken.

"Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art." (Barthes, 2000: 13)

Street photography deprives the subject of a photograph of at least some of their capacity to control these four aspects. It may be possible to guess who subjects want others to think they are, but it is hard to know who subjects think they are, even when they tell me - sometimes especially then. The photographer's sense of who the photographer thinks the subject is may be guessed at, but the only thing we have for certain is what the photographer (me in this case) uses to exhibit his art. It should be noted that Barthes's comment also identifies art with a mental process rather than an end result - what you see is what I, with the benefit of hindsight, want to communicate through what I have seen.

The exhibition *Exposed* (2010) at Tate Modern highlighted the ways photography is bound up with invasive looking. Sandra Phillips suggests that "the human hunger for seeing the forbidden" (Phillips, 2010: 11) is the root of it, but there is also a *possessive* quality to these invasions. At least when using my Pentax, my intentions were clear: this was *not* covert photography.

An opposite process can be seen in the work of Efe Efeturi, fashion influencer, photographer and stylist. I saw him this way:

But he depicted himself this way:

The two images illustrate the way technology can integrate the photographer and photographed. In the first image by me, Efeturi is small, part of the scene, and almost dominated by the camera. My point is to emphasise the emptiness of the square. In his image, he *is* the scene, uniting the four image-repertoires identified by Barthes into a single moment: one curated, orchestrated and finished by him.

Efe Efeturi is a professional style maker, whose craft in blending image-repertoires is the basis of his work. With some exceptions, the people in my photos were not consulted in the recording of their images, still less had a chance to construct themselves, beyond the construction we all perform in engaging with the world.

However, when individuals asked me not to photograph them I respected that choice, and there were also images I deleted or archived because I felt they crossed a line into the life of those depicted. A by-product of the digital age (in photography at least) is that such erasure is permanent: there is not even a negative to deface. In other cases, I hope it is clear that the photographs were the product of interaction and exchange: even if that was simply a thumbs-up, though sometimes there was real contact. This became more loaded when I started wearing a mask outside the house.

I have tried to avoid depicting people in ways that I feel diminish or humiliate them. The homeless of London, for this reason, appear through their absence: sleeping bags and duvets abandoned on pavements, the belongings telling stories. Paradoxically, this also reduces the homeless people themselves to their things. Engaging

with those homeless people who elected to stay on the streets or fell through the cracks of the effort to house them in hotels during the peak of the disease was not something that really arose. On a couple of occasions I deliberately ensured that I had a few coins to give to people who seemed to be in the same place every day, but trading for their image would have been tawdry. The sight of a homeless person in a sleeping bag *on the steps of a hotel* was similarly one which I felt was too harsh to record, though it illustrated the contradictions and failures of wider society and specific policy very graphically. I couldn't see a way to take the image without feeling I was violating an intimate moment.

The feet of a man poking out from under a duvet near Euston Station haunted me, but his stupor (or even death) had seemingly robbed him of the capacity to exercise any agency in his self-representation. I did not wish to compound that by making his misfortune picturesque. Making the world visible and thus better is one of the abiding myths of photography and its history, but the ambiguities of depicting what Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards and Erina Duganne termed *Beautiful Suffering* (2007) have to be kept at the front of one's mind.

It is important that life is revealed, and especially that injustice and inequality be displayed and thus challenged. It is the basis - perhaps even the definition - of documentary photography. The photographs of Lewis Hine documenting child labour; the photographs of Dorothea Lange in depression-hit rural America; Ron Haeberle's photographs of the My Lai massacre: all of these led to measurable change in the

world. Not to mention the photographs of the liberated concentration camps in 1945, of which Sontag wrote “nothing I have seen - in photographs or in real life - ever cut me as sharply, deeply instantaneously.” (Sontag 1979: 20)

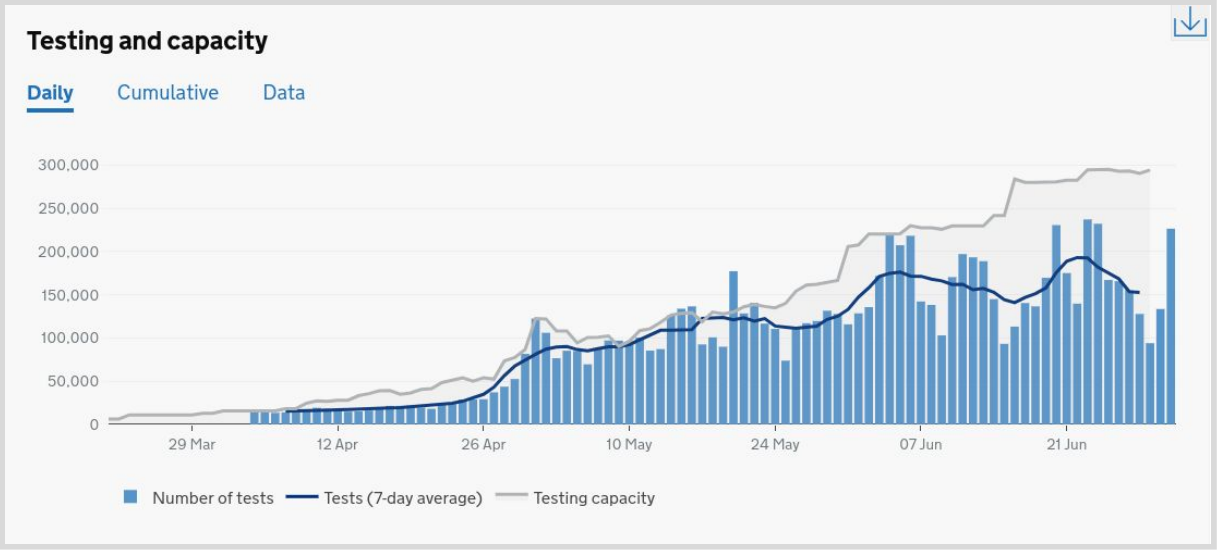
But as Mieke Bal has pointed out, in an exploration of Nan Goldin’s photograph *Nan one month after being battered*, there is a calculated risk in “translating from the unique woman to a condition of battered women [...] Her suffering, although endured by many, is singular in its loneliness.” (Bal, 2007: 104) We have to ensure that the voice of the depicted is always audible, where viewers are “made responsible for their own ways of seeing.” (ibid. 109) Street photography at its best can do this, but in Sontag’s words, “the ethical content of photographs is fragile [...] Time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art.” (Sontag, 1979: 21) The ambiguities of Diane Arbus’s “grotesques” are always close to the surface. It is often not clear whether we are laughing with or at, crying with or crying for. We must always remember the title of Sontag’s final book: we are so often *Regarding the Pain of Others*. (2003) There is always the peril of the “cruel gaze” identified by Bernd Huppauf: “disengaged and de-culturated to the level of zoology” (Huppauf, 1997: 27) - though this sets the bar of consciousness very low.

What happened?

Sontag’s statement in that final book that “being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern

experience" (Sontag, 2003: 16) was given a new edge by the growing realisation that the calamity was local. Pictures of doctors tending patients in crisis with inadequate equipment, despairing of the outcomes, are commonplace: but this was here, in our city, in our streets, in our hospital. Friends became unwell, some lost relatives. Questions were asked about why and how the response had been organised and how mistakes had been made. I remember the final visits to our local supermarket on 13 March: shelves emptier than usual, growing piles of items confiscated from potential hoarders at the checkouts, tense conversations between customers and staff.

Also on 13 March, Dr Michael Ryan of the World Health Organisation told a press conference "People who know their status can protect others." Unlike governments elsewhere (notably South Korea and New Zealand) the UK government did not pursue testing aggressively. As I write, the graph for testing on the Public Health England "dashboard" (Gov.UK, 2020) tells the story:



The slow start to systematic testing hampered a real response to the

disease. The public became very familiar with the concepts of social (or physical) distancing, herd immunity, and the R rate, but the step that many experts not advising the government advocated was simple: test, trace, isolate. Devi Sridhar, professor of public health at the University of Edinburgh, identified the virus as a major problem as early as January, and wrote a series of clear, impassioned articles for the *Guardian* newspaper. On 23 March, the day the Prime Minister instructed the UK to stay at home, she wrote:

We had a choice early on in the UK's trajectory to go down the South Korean path of mass testing, isolating carriers of the virus (50% of whom are asymptomatic), tracing all contacts to ensure they isolate as well, and at the same time taking soft measures to delay the spread. Instead, we watched and waited, and whether it was academic navel-gazing, political infighting, a sense of British exceptionalism, or a deliberate choice to minimise economic disruption over saving lives, we have ended up in a position where we are now closer to the Italy scenario than anticipated, and are faced with taking more and more drastic measures. (Sridhar 2020a)

The gravity of the situation was apparent well before that evening, but watching the Prime Minister speak brought home that we were living through something much bigger than us. "Nation" and "national" have become devalued by unscrupulous and careless over-use (not least by Boris Johnson himself), but as the speech came to an end it did seem as though "the nation" was united, despite his pound-shop Churchillian rhetoric. But the continued success of other countries in managing the disease without lockdown

has demonstrated that the way to manage disease is to “place the highest political priority on acquiring the testing kits, while drawing on apps and big data to support contact tracing. Through this path we can start quarantining only those carrying the virus, and not the entire population.” (Sridhar, 2020b)

As well as underlining the crucial importance of testing, tracing and isolating cases, perhaps this scrutiny of other people’s health status has contributed to a deeper consideration of status itself. To a remarkable degree, comfortable assumptions of class, wealth, gender and race have been attacked as though with a blowtorch. The recognition that many who may have considered themselves “important” were not “key workers” has produced a change in attitudes, though whether that change is long-lasting is a matter of hope. But as Susan Rubin Suleiman has written, “the future perfect is the historical tense par excellence.” (Suleiman, 2008: 17) Her definition of crisis is useful in understanding how we understand - or may come to understand - what happened.

“[…] a moment of choice, and sometimes of predicament or conflict, about remembrance of the past, whether by individuals or by groups. At issue in a crisis of memory is the question of self-representation: How we view ourselves, and how we represent ourselves to others, is indissociable from the stories we tell about our past.” (Suleiman, 2008: 1)

As I typed that quotation, an ambulance could be heard in the distance. Situated at a point in London where routes to three large

hospitals intersect, the sound of sirens seemed constant in our house in early April, amplified by the relative silence of the city as a whole. Crisis - both societal and individual - was a constant presence.

Early in March, I decided to read Albert Camus's *The Plague*. Written in 1947 as a commentary on collaboration with the German occupier, it seemed to bring the concerns of the moment into alignment with my academic background. Watching the city close down around us, the novel seemed to pinpoint the sense of creeping fear and dread that the virus brought with it. Living in central London, the reduction in footfall and traffic noise was particularly stark. One evening I realised I could hear the noise of train doors warning riders they were about to shut - this from half a mile away. On the first weekend of lockdown, my wife and I walked to Granary Square in Kings Cross. Except for the security guards, we were alone, and the wind carried the noise of underground trains, while whistling through vast cranes on a deserted building site.

For me, the days acquired a dreamlike quality as I walked along streets and roads almost empty of people. On days when the weather threatened rain, I often saw no-one, though I ranged quite far. I considered mapping my walks more precisely, but reflected on the words of Michel de Certeau that "surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by." (de Certeau, 1993: 157) Our steps create the city - or at least, *our* city - and the photographs record that of the city which I wished to record. Postcodes seem superfluous.

My mind went to the photographs of London in the Blitz by Bill Brandt: in the blackout, he took ghostly images of streets lit by moonlight, like stage sets. The description in Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light* of a plague-hit London in the sixteenth century seemed eerily apposite:

The plague is in Kingston and Windsor. Movements are restricted. Even a duke must manage with only six men to guard and serve him. Strangers are barred. Delivery men must quit the precincts as soon as they have dropped off their loads, and the royal nursery be scrubbed out twice a day. (Mantel, 2020: 513)

Sometimes art knows where life is going, and it's hard to say which is imitating the other. The silence created space for other things to be heard, as I recorded on 28 March:

(18:30) About half an hour ago, thanks to our high-density area and the lack of traffic noise, I heard someone coughing. I hope they're ok. Very sobering to reflect that isolation means we really don't know what struggles people are having behind closed doors and windows.

Positively, when we clapped for carers on a Thursday night, it seemed we could hear the whole city straining to shout their continued survival. I wrote in my diary that first evening:

In the distance I can hear the clapping and cheering across the city for NHS workers. It didn't last long here, just a minute or so, but the feeling of being together was moving. London is anonymous a lot of the time, but this is a moment when (almost) everybody needs to feel

the bonds of proximity. People looked out of doors and windows, cries of thanks and whistling echoing.

It swept up from toward Kings Cross, as though a royal progress were passing through the city. And then passed through to our right, the cry of gratitude and hope moving like spirit through the night. The silence is deeper now but also warmer.

If the word "national" ever meant anything, it was in those moments of defiant noise. Phil Whitaker, a West-Country GP who writes a column in the New Statesman, described the clamour:

We must have reached the first residential street just as the hour turned. Dozens of people were at their front gates, clapping and banging saucepans; wearing smiles and summer clothing. The visiting car is done out in unmistakable emergency service livery. Every group we approached started to wave and cheer. (Whitaker, 2020)

But Whitaker admitted, even as a GP working an out-of-hours shift, feeling "embarrassed and a fraud", pointing to the sacrifices of so many medical staff: 'On many occasions, I have wept for them – strangers to me, but people whose values and vocation I know and understand intimately.'

Specifically, Whitaker mentioned an article in the previous week's issue of the magazine by Edward Docx describing the work of Dr Jim Down, an intensive-care consultant at University College Hospital - our local hospital - during the peak of the disease in April. It is an astonishing piece of writing, skilfully and sensitively balancing the

global, national crisis with the individual decisions and dramas. I know UCH well and I could picture some of the locations described. Just before the pandemic, I had been to A&E with a possible fractured elbow, and I had imagined the staff coping with the disease in exactly the calm, kind, professional manner described.

Three things he [Jim Down] has come to understand. Human beings are capable of breathtaking dignity. Human beings are capable of breathtaking compassion. And, in the face of death, all human beings want to hear and to say the same thing: "I love you."

That's all there was, or is, or could ever be to say. It makes no difference, of course, to the virus, to science, to the swollen moon or the rising sun. But it makes all the difference in the world to human beings. (Docx, 2020: 33)

The disease stretched many things, some to breaking point, some beyond that, but for many I suspect the first thing to be stretched was their ability to make sense of the world around them. We look for signs of disease - rashes, sweating, runny noses - but differentiating between a "normal" cold or allergies and the disease which is (still) putting people in hospital is impossible without a laboratory. While out walking one day in Kings Cross, a roving Medic for the site passed on his bicycle, letting out a cough as he did so. "Hayfever," he called over his shoulder, in a tone at once apologetic and defensive. Adjusting to the realities of an - overused word alert - unprecedented set of circumstances has made people question the

structures and beliefs of the world before. As Camus wrote:

"Our fellow-citizens, as they now realised, had never thought that our little town might be a place particularly chosen as one where rats die in the sun and concierges perish from peculiar illnesses. From this point of view, indeed, they were mistaken and discovered they had to adjust their ideas. If it had all stopped there, old habits would no doubt have regained the upper hand. But others of our fellow-citizens, who were not concierges or poor people, were to follow M. Michel down that same path. This was where fear began - and with it, serious reflection." (Camus, 2013: 20)

The need for serious reflection was demonstrated graphically on 25 May, 2020, when Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, killed a 46-year-old man named George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for almost nine minutes in the middle of an arrest for allegedly trying to pass a counterfeit banknote. In the middle of a respiratory disease pandemic, the echo of Floyd's repeated statement that "I can't breathe" as he expired (on the floor, under Chauvin's knee) was chilling. In cities first across America and then the world, demonstrators repeated those words and added three more that had been circulating since 2013: Black Lives Matter.

For me, as for many others, the events in May and June 2020 have led to a reexamination of attitudes to race and its role in our past, present and future. As Ibram X. Kendi has written, "We know how to be racist. We know how to pretend to be not racist. Now let's know how to be antiracist." (Kendi, 2019: 11) Perhaps we will not complete

the work, but neither can we abandon it.

Walking along Caledonian Road a week after George Floyd was murdered, I was struck by the sight of two wooden boxes, presumably used to support plants.

The Statue of Liberty is inscribed with a poem by the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*, including the lines: "Give me your tired, your poor/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free". Never had the words seemed so resonant: particularly in light of the way enslaved Africans were not received kindly but captured and forced into slavery and cruelty. The repeated pleas by George Floyd to Derek Chauvin to get his knee off his neck meant less to the police officer than a painted sign on a box.

The cocky frat-boy-in-chief responded to nights of violent demonstration and clashes with police with a sinister taunting tweet, proclaiming that “When the looting starts, the shooting starts.”

In London, many people feared that the demonstrations would set off a new wave of infections, probably made worse by what was perceived as a sudden and not entirely warranted relaxation of lockdown. A peaceful protest in Hyde Park on 12 June was succeeded by one in Trafalgar Square which descended into violence after mounted police tried to “kettle” demonstrators. A policewoman was injured after a demonstrator fired a flare pistol and her horse bolted.

The next day, 13 June, Susan Rubin Suleiman’s statement (that crises of memory occur because ‘How we view ourselves, and how we represent ourselves to others, is indissociable from the stories we tell about our past’) was given form. A crowd in Bristol decided to pull down a statue of Edward Colston, an eighteenth-century city notable and a slave trader. The statue was rolled to the Avon and sunk, an echo of the practice aboard slave ships mid-Atlantic of drowning slaves who fell ill and threatened the health of the “cargo” through (of all things) epidemics. A circle was closed as the statue sank within sight of where Colston’s ships docked, though figures published in June showing disproportionate illness and death in the UK BAME population (PHE, 2020) showed that many things remained to be acknowledged, much less addressed. The third anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June also acted as a reminder that “The UK is not innocent”. Gary Younge wrote a scathing analysis of why minorities “remain more likely to fall foul both of the law of the land

and the law of probabilities" (Younge, 2020: 24) and identified BAME deaths from COVID as "collateral damage of British racism". (ibid. : 25)

The following weekend, antiracist protests were more dispersed as a far-right rally was threatened in central London. While drunken louts clashed with police and some antiracist demonstrators, the news carried images of small, friendly manifestations of solidarity. Young and old, rich and poor, something had caught on. We joined a demonstration in Hampstead Garden Suburb organised by young Jewish activists. Seeing the joy, pride and even love on the faces of passing black drivers and passengers was incredibly powerful: symbols are only the beginning, but they can be a powerful start. The reproduction of my images of the afternoon in local media (Frot, 2020; Boniface, 2020) was a source of pride that I had, however slightly, helped bring the issue to attention.

For myself, I looked at the photographs I had taken and considered them anew from the point of view of gender, race and ethnicity. Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, in their study *Reading National Geographic*, dissect the ways in which the magazine presented the "non-Western" subject and the convoluted relationships of "gaze", often reinforcing a glossy superiority in "the voyeurism of the photograph of the exotic." (Lutz and Collins, 2003: 368)

Mostly I was comfortable with what I had produced, though as Ibram X. Kendi notes (in an echo of Barthes's image-repertoires), the web

of racist gazes is a series of mirages, reflecting off each other.

We are what we see ourselves as, whether what we see exists or not. We are what people see us as, whether what they see exists or not. What people see in themselves and others has meaning and manifests itself in ideas and actions and policies, even if what they are seeing is an illusion. (Kendi, 2019: 37)

My perspective on my own work, therefore, is limited. I cannot know for sure how my subjects might respond to their depictions. I have the privilege of editorial control over my own work and therefore, in that moment, over their representation. I have become more conscious of *ensuring* (rather than trusting) that I produce positive, empowering images which show the diversity of the place I live in without tipping over into tokenism or exoticism. It is of course for you to decide whether I have succeeded.

What's Next?

Colson Whitehead's 2011 novel *Zone One* is set in the aftermath of a (zombie) pandemic. Everything is ruined and the survivors are trying to move away from their past. Even the name of the central protagonist, 'Mark Spitz' is assumed, a nickname acquired and then adopted.

Spitz's task is to deal with "stragglers": victims of the plague who have been infected but left with some vestige of their previous self. Unaware that the world has changed, they stay where they were bitten, going through motions that no longer correspond to action.

They stand by the photocopier, clicking the button; opening and then shutting a drawer; picking up dead telephones; “their lives had been an interminable loop of repeated gestures; now their existences were winnowed to this discrete and eternal moment.” (Whitehead, 2012: 50)

Although macabre, the “stragglers” are clearly more metaphor than threat. “Pratfalling over their accessories and then rising again like the mechanical entities they had become” (Whitehead, 2012: 28) they are there to highlight the contradictions of the world that has been, and to call into question whether the choice to “transport the old ways across the violent passage of the calamity” (ibid. 45) is the right one. The enemy is in the mind: whether the failure to accept that things have changed, the horrified realisation of the damage, or the attempt to make plans for what happens after. In the midst of the whirlwind, all we can do is tread water: the novel’s final line (“Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime” (ibid. 259) is an echo of the scene in Camus’s *The Plague* in which the narrator, Rieux, goes swimming.*

[*Spitz’s name - borrowed from the Olympic swimmer - is explained in Whitehead’s novel as an ironic commentary on the belief that “black people can’t swim”.]

In 1943, William Beveridge wrote *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, proposing a blanket scheme of social insurance based on universal contributions, along with a system of state education and healthcare, free at the point of use. In July 1948, the Labour

government of Clement Attlee established the National Health Service. In 2020, the virus exposed the damage done to the system by successive British governments since 1979: a benefits system focused on punitive assessments rather than addressing need; an education system focused on assessment rather than progression. Above all, a health service where hospital cleaners were employed by contractors rather than the hospitals in which they worked, while doctors improvised Personal Protective Equipment from bin liners and struggled to save lives while protecting their own. (Elmhirst, 2020)

Beveridge was given the job of writing his report substantially to keep him occupied and save others from enduring his personality. (Addison 1992: 21) Apparently freed from mundane political concerns, Beveridge argued that the war's demolition of the old certainties created space for radical change. "A revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching" thundered the introduction. (Beveridge, 1942: 6)

But pandemics, unless they are of the zombie kind, are not wars, though they do have a front line, where the consequences of strategic decisions are measured in lives. The physical fabric of our society has remained intact, something which struck me with particular force on a visit to the South Bank of the Thames, our first foray outside walking distance in months. St. Paul's still towered over the river: a sole survivor of the Blitz and a memorial to the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire.

With a background in Holocaust Studies, I find the use of the term *survivor* problematic (though some marketing executives have not had such qualms) but on that bright afternoon, the wind whistling toward the sea, there seemed a definite sense that we had all been through something and emerged the other side, bonds subtly strengthened by the ordeal.

Equally, though, the moment of emergence can be anticlimactic, or even offer fresh trauma. 2020 was the 75th anniversary of the end of WW2. Though the clouds (it transpired) were gathering, the commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz took place in Poland with full ceremony. Primo Levi, one of the 7000 left in the camp because he was too ill to march to his death, compared the experience of survival to an illness and warned of the stories told to

obscure the truth:

"Auschwitz is outside of us, but it is all around us, in the air. The plague has died away, but the infection still lingers and it would be foolish to deny it. Rejection of human solidarity, obtuse and cynical indifference to the suffering of others, abdication of the intellect and of moral sense to the principle of authority, and above all, at the root of everything, a sweeping tide of cowardice, a colossal cowardice which masks itself as warring virtue, love of country and faith in an idea." (Levi, 1987: ???)

In his study of the 1892 cholera outbreak in Hamburg, Richard Evans argues that there is an "indisoluble connection between medical science, economic interest, and political ideology." (Evans, 2005: 275) His description of the failure of the Hamburg authorities in 1892 could be applied to the UK in 2020 with barely a comma out of place:

[the authorities] "did their utmost to avoid official confirmation of the disease's presence in the city, and once they were forced to concede this point, made no campaign to impose quarantine, to isolate the victims, or to mount a campaign of disinfection [...] the avoidance of financial costs and the maintenance of public order remained the highest priorities." (Evans, 2005: ??)

He also, however, notes that "epidemics only lead to a breakdown of social order where their impact was really extreme." (ibid.: 474) Although "virtually everyone agreed in 1892 that social inequality,

poverty, poor housing, inadequate nutrition, and lack of public and private hygiene were major causes of the disaster" (ibid.: 507) he argues that such changes as were implemented were undertaken for political reasons (forestalling centralised control from Berlin) and largely benefitted the upper and middle classes. The poor who suffered disproportionately in the epidemic continued their "daily experience [of] injustice, inequality and exploitation." (ibid.: 556)

We have returned to the idea of *crisis* raised by Susan Rubin Suleiman: this is surely a time of predicament and conflict. Our remembrance of this past must honour the horrendous cost in time, money, opportunity and, above all, lives. As I write, the United Kingdom, which accounts for 0.87% of global population, has seen 43,906 of the 512,842 globally-recorded deaths: 8.6%. (World Health Organisation, 2020) In early May, that percentage was as high as 11.87%.

At the peak of the disease, indignation was strong. Some time in June, the mood shifted. Rightly or wrongly, the lockdown easing was expanded to non-essential shops and the streets were once again busy. Walking up Kentish Town Road, social distancing behaviour seemed to be at the minimum level required by the arrangements in shops and businesses. The requirement to wear face coverings on public transport seemed to be only patchily observed. My mind went to a picture I had taken weeks earlier, of a discarded newspaper, its pages fanned and faded.

I had worried then that the lessons of the pandemic would remain unlearnt, mistakes never called to account in the hurry to restart. The curious or even pitying looks I received walking around London masked suggested that memories had been very short.

I began this project to keep myself occupied when it felt we could only watch the sky falling. As the days passed, just as Michel de Certeau describes the walker shaping the city, engaging with the city shaped me. This is neither a fiercely activist denunciation nor a sentimental endorsement of a 'world before'. It is the chronicle of journeys through a city at a time of great individual and social pressure: in them I hope I have brought into vision "the everyday lives out of which people were torn in the crisis." (Evans, 2005: 567) Photography can only document what *was* (because if I photograph it, it's already gone). But records of the past can inform the present

and help shape the future. The Observer cartoonist Chris Riddell drew a cartoon early in lockdown. A couple face away and one asks the other: “When this is all over, what should change?” The answer is: “Everything”.

If I have one hope for this book, it is that it shows a world which will soon be transformed for the better. This book hopefully chronicles the time when “everything” finally began to change.

Camden, July 2020

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