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Cooking and Commensality after Grenfell: *Together: Our Community Cookbook*

Abstract: This essay provides a reading of the Hubb Community Kitchen's *Together: Our Community Cookbook*, which was produced in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017, as a collection of recipes that speaks of commensality as a shared practice that connects cook-writers to reader-cooks. Its reading of the cookbook is grounded in the literatures on commensality, on community cookbooks, and on activist representation of Grenfell. It provides a close reading of *Together*, located in the context of the Hubb Community Kitchen set up after the Grenfell fire. The essay is the first in a two-part series of discussions using a cookbook called *Together* to explore the work of food media in producing and performing forms of commensality.

THE FOCUS OF THIS essay is a cookbook, *Together: Our Community Kitchen*, produced in the aftermath of a catastrophic fire that devastated a block of social housing, Grenfell Tower, in London in 2017. It is the first of a two-part series of essays, each focusing on a cookbook called *Together*. Across the two essays, I explore the representations of commensality that each book centers on, which emerged as a response to a particular crisis: in this essay, the Grenfell Tower fire, which left seventy-two people dead and hundreds more homeless; in the second essay (Bell 2024), the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying lockdowns, plus the post-COVID emergence of a "new normal," viewed through the lens of cooking and eating. The decision to write two essays arose from my desire to give enough space for a full discussion of each central text and its broader context; to try to combine analysis of the two *Together*s would necessitate a much shallower engagement and would not enable me to develop both the specific themes of each essay and their shared themes (the latter appear at the close of the second essay). Both essays are embedded in broader discussions of commensality—the sharing of food. I briefly sketch some key elements of the literature on commensality here, but I do not repeat this in the second essay—the material discussed has relevance for my reading of both texts and their respective contexts, and key motifs from this review are picked up wherever they are put to work in both essays.

The literature on commensality is well developed, with important insights from across many disciplines (for recent reviews/overviews, see Jönsson et al. 2021; Lestar et al. 2024). Different formations of commensality have been identified in this literature, for example domestic versus institutional and everyday versus exceptional commensal events (Grignon 2001), or the difference between commensal units—those we habitually share food with—and commensal circles, or our pool of potential meal partners (Sobal 2000). We could say that everyday commensality involves commensal units whereas exceptional commensality might draw together members of commensal circles.

A key concern in this literature is the perceived decline in shared eating, and the "destructuring" of meals, especially in families (Fischler 2011). While there remains considerable debate about the reality of this concern, it shows us the high social value accorded to commensality (Mäkelä 2000). Also at the heart of the literature is an understanding of the value of sharing food at different scales, from the family or household to the local community/neighbourhood and the city (Sobal and Nelson 2003; Julier 2013; Marovelli 2019), and also of food sharing within and across communities, with a notable focus on ethnic, diasporic, and transnational/translocal identities and food practices (Wise 2011; Duruz and Khoo 2015; Bailey 2017).

However, much of this research retains a focus on physical co-presence, and the literal sharing of food "at the table" (Bascuñan-Wiley et al. 2022). In my discussion, I want to further expand our understandings of commensality by thinking about what we might call "imagined commensality," which can also extend our scalar reach to include national and global scales. In the former, there is work on the role of national cuisines in fostering national identity and togetherness, and on "gastronationalism" (Ichijo and Ranta 2022). At the global scale, it has been suggested that we increasingly "eat together," whether due to the homogenization of diets

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worldwide due to globalization, or through practices of "diasporic commensality" that mobilize food practices as a way to connect across distance and that enable the sharing of recipes, food practices, and meals (Marte 2011; Wilson 2019). This view expands our understanding of commensal circles, and in these essays I want to explore the role of food media — cookbooks and cookery television — in enabling commensalities that do not depend on co-presence.

The recipe collection discussed in this essay, *Together: Our Community Cookbook*, was written and compiled by members of the Hubb Community Kitchen, a group of women who came together in 2017 to cook meals for survivors of the Grenfell fire in London, UK. The book's publication was supported by Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex, who visited the kitchen, provided a foreword to the book, and used her role in the philanthropic Royal Foundation to fundraise for the HCK's work through donating profits from *Together*'s sales. The book places emphasis on togetherness in and beyond the community affected by the fire, and the recipes are chosen to reflect the multicultural population of Grenfell Tower. The second *Together*, discussed in a separate paper, is by Jamie Oliver, well-known British celebrity chef, and came out following the COVID-19 pandemic, accompanied by a TV series. Jamie's *Together* focuses on the pleasures of sharing food that had been denied beyond our immediate households during COVID lockdowns (Bell, 2024).

My overall aim across the paired essays is to think about the work that commensality is being tasked with, the forms of togetherness that are mobilized, and the common ground (and differences) between the two texts. In keeping with media coverage and public conversation, I refer to the central figure in each text by their first name only: Meghan and Jamie. This act of familiarity is in fact part of the togetherness performed here; we are on first-name terms with these celebrities, who are using their status to embody what being together means.

Grenfell, the Hubb Community Kitchen, and Meghan

The Hubb Community Kitchen (HCK), located in the Al-Manaar mosque and Muslim cultural heritage center in London's Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, was set up in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophic fire at the nearby Grenfell Tower, a twenty-four-story block of social housing in the same borough. At 12:54 a.m. on June 14, 2017, a fire broke out in one of Grenfell's 120 flats, spreading quickly up the outside of the block until the whole of Grenfell Tower was ablaze. The fire spread so rapidly due to external cladding that had been added to the Tower and which, in a cost-cutting move by developers, was switched to a cheaper material known to pose a fire risk (Hodkinson 2019). Seventy-two people (including 18 children) lost their lives in the fire, hundreds were injured, and two hundred homes were destroyed in the Tower and adjacent properties. A public inquiry into the fire concluded that "No one should have died at Grenfell Tower [. . .] Each and every one of the risks which eventuated at Grenfell Tower on that night were well known by many and ought to have been known by all"(Booth 2022), and showed a "spider's web of blame" for the fire among central and local government, building contractors, the manufacturers and providers of the cladding, fire testing services, and the London Fire Brigade (Butler 2024: 9; Grenfell Tower Inquiry 2024).

The geographical location of Grenfell Tower has been the subject of much critical commentary. It is sited in the north of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, an area of London marked by an "unparalleled geography of inequality [. . .] where elegant uninhabited mansions rub alongside communities enduring diminishing public services, a housing crisis, and rising homelessness" (MacLeod 2018: 467). In fact, the presence of extreme wealth alongside extreme poverty in the borough in part accounts for the "renovations" to the Tower that caused the fire to spread; the cladding was added not for the benefit of Grenfell residents but to enhance the Tower's visual appearance for wealthy incomers moving into homes with Grenfell in their sightlines.

A seven-minute walk south from Grenfell takes you to Kensington Palace, one of London's royal residences, and at the time of the fire the London home of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. (Following their withdrawal from royal duties and relocation to Los Angeles, Harry and Meghan no longer use the property.)

Survivors from the fire were displaced from their homes, with many housed in temporary accommodations, and in the aftermath it was local people and volunteers who stepped in to help those affected, though there was also "an extraordinary nation-wide groundswell of generosity and compassion" — contrasting with a slow and inadequate response from local and national government (MacLeod 2018: 461). Feeding those who had lost their homes became a key focus, with a makeshift kitchen quickly assembled outside a nearby church, and a community iftar arranged for those who were observing Ramadan at the time of the fire. Later, when some ex-residents were temporarily housed in a nearby budget chain hotel, workers there, who saw that the survivors were only being given breakfast and subsisting on takeaways for

other meals, organized an informal supper to share with them (Launchbury 2021), foreshadowing the later role of hospitality workers in emergency food provisioning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Meinster 2020).

Among the efforts to support Grenfell residents after the fire, the HCK was established to feed those who had lost their homes, with many of the cooks themselves having been residents of the Tower. *Together* arose from the activities of the group of women who formed the HCK. The idea of making a cookbook to raise funds for the kitchen emerged when Meghan visited in January 2018. As recounted in the introduction to *Together*:

> One day in January we had a surprise visit from Meghan; she cooked with us, and asked why the kitchen was only open two days a week. We replied, "funding." We thought she was joking when she said, "Well, how about making a cookbook?" But here we are, publishing *Together*, which will help keep the kitchen open as long as we need it. (HCK 2018: 10)

It is this story, and the cookbook that resulted from Meghan's visit, that I focus on here.

Together: Our Community Cookbook

Together became the first project that Meghan led on within The Royal Foundation, a charitable enterprise jointly established by Harry and Meghan with William and Catherine, then the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. As the blurb on the back of the book says, all profits from the sale of the book benefit the HCK, "helping to widen its reach to others in the community, and enabling similar projects to continue transforming lives through the power of cooking" (HCK 2018: back cover). The self-set target for the book was to sell over 50,000 copies and in so doing raise more than £250,000. It was reported in the UK news media that by June 2019 this target has been more than doubled, the book by then having sold over 130,000 copies (Devine 2019).[1]

Together was launched in September 2018 at an event at Kensington Palace, described in the news media as Meghan's "first big moment as a working royal" (Bailey 2018). In her speech she recounts the origin story of the book in much the same way as in the foreword to *Together*. She describes it as a "tremendous labour of love" and says she was "embraced" by the women she met in her first visit to the kitchen, not long after she had moved to London, praising "their warmth, their kindness, and also to be able to be in this city and see in this one small room how multicultural it was. On a personal level, I felt so proud to live in a city that can have so much diversity. It's 12 countries represented in this one group of women! It's pretty outstanding" (qtd. in Bailey 2018). She continues:

> This is more than just a cookbook. And what I mean by that is the power of food is more than just the meal itself. It is the story behind it. And when you get to know the story behind the recipe, you get to know the person behind it. And that's what we're talking about in terms of coming together, to really engage and talk and to be able to celebrate what connects us rather than what divides us. That I believe is the ethos of *Together*. (qtd. in Bailey 2018)

So, at the heart of *Together* is an attempt to suggest common experiences and common ground. In the book's foreword, Meghan positions herself as newly arrived in London and with an itinerant upbringing, noting how both new tastes and tastes of home have helped her as she moved from the United States first to Canada and then to London. In the only other academic discussion of *Together* published to date, Laura Clancy (2024) is critical of this attempt to stretch the commonality beyond the women of the HCK and the residents of Grenfell in order to include Meghan, but to me her analysis presents only a partial reading of *Together* and Meghan's presence at and connection with the HCK. I want to read the book differently, while not denying the critical issues that Clancy delineates about royal privilege and the different subject positions of the HCK women and Meghan. To do so, I want first to read *Together* on its own terms, looking closely at the text itself, and then to locate it in the tradition of community cookbooks, before thinking about the HCK itself and the activities of cooking together in the setting of the community kitchen. Finally, I bring *Together* into discussions of creative responses to the Grenfell fire, to think about the book as a cultural artefact that sits alongside the poetry, film, and music more often discussed in this context. While not losing sight of Meghan's role in the book, I want not to let that overdetermine my reading, and instead offer a more sympathetic critique of *Together*'s content and message.

Reading and Cooking *Together*

Across its 127 pages, *Together* offers its readers fifty recipes, all presented in the same way: each recipe is named for the person who contributed it to the book, who also provides a brief contextualizing "story" to locate the dish in their own biography. In total, nineteen different cook-writers contribute recipes, which are in many cases geographically located, speaking of the cook-writer's life and family, typified by migration and the mixing of nationalities in families. While not every cook-writer tells us their nationality, most mention their dish's place of origin, and at least fifteen countries are included, from Algeria to Yemen, Italy to Uganda, Russia to

Iraq. The recipes are organized into five categories—breakfasts; snacks, sharing plates, and dips; lunches and dinners; salads and sides; and desserts and drinks—and are prefaced by a dedication "to all those whose lives were impacted by the fire at Grenfell Tower" (HCK 2018: 4), the foreword by Meghan and an introduction attributed to The Women of the Hubb Community Kitchen. Neither the front cover nor the spine of the book mentions the HCK, however; both give the book's title and "Foreword by HRH The Duchess of Sussex," suggesting that association with Meghan is a major selling point for the book (or at least is imagined as such by its publishers). The front cover also features four photographs: two women from the HCK, a table laden with food, and Meghan cooking in the HCK.

Meghan's foreword, as noted earlier, retells the story of her involvement in the project and speaks of her own experiences of migration and the role of food in her identity. It opens:

> *Together* is more than a cookbook. This is a tale of friendship, and a story of togetherness. It is a homage to the power of cooking as a community, and the recipes allow us to connect, share and look forward. (Markle in HCK 2018: 6)

She describes the HCK as a "melting pot of cultures and personalities," adding "I immediately felt connected to this community kitchen; it is a place for women to laugh, grieve, cry and cook together [. . .] it creates a space to feel a sense of normality" (8). She writes that the cultural diversity of the cooks "creates what I would describe as a passport on a plate: the power of a meal to take you to places you've never been, or transport you right back to where you came from" (8). And she mentions her own experience of this transport, talking about collard greens, gumbo, black-eyed peas, and cornbread as a connection to her roots and her identity as a "Southern California girl" (8).[2] Finally, Meghan speaks to us, the reader-cooks of *Together*: "the meals that bring us together are the meals that allow us to grow, to listen, to engage and to be present. We invite you to do the same, *together*, in your home, communities and beyond" (9, emphasis in original). The foreword also includes two photographs of Meghan cooking or serving food at the HCK (one a repeat from the front cover), and the book is well illustrated throughout, with full- and double-page photo spreads of the food and the cook-writers (and at least seven photos of Meghan at the HCK).

The collectively penned introduction provides more context and more encouragement to us as reader-cooks to enjoy the dishes presented:

> The thing we want most is for you to enjoy cooking these recipes at home with your families. Each dish has a story, some handed down from generation to generation. We hope that by making them, and serving them, you will weave your own stories in with ours, creating a connection across our countries and cultures. (HCK 2018: 10)

This idea of building a connection between cook-writers and reader-cooks repeats at various times in the book, emphasizing a broader togetherness "across our countries and cultures." The short biographical stories that introduce each recipe, as already noted, often allude to migration and movement, as well as cultural mixing, such as through marriage or intercultural exchange. So, Cherine Mallah's barley porridge recipe is adapted for her "gym freak" Lebanese husband (HCK 2018: 18), Intlak Alasaeigh tells us that her spiced potato kibbeh was "always on our table back in Baghdad" (34), Leila Hedjem got her "Greek recipe" for tzatziki from her Irish mum (46), while also telling us when introducing her Lebanese vegetable lasagne recipe that "My mother was Irish, my father Algerian; I was raised in France and went to school in Switzerland, so I had a real melting pot of influences" (85).

Sanna Mirza prefaces her recipe for Persian lamb and herb stew by saying "my family are originally from Pakistan and my husband is from Iran," adding that "when I looked into it, I found connections between Pakistani and Persian cultures going way back" (57). And Aysha Bora gives us a rich biography of her life with cooking, introducing her recipe for kuka paka:

> When I was growing up I hated cooking. My family is from India and preparing big meals for the extended family was part of our culture, but I used to beg for any job other than cooking. Then I got married and moved to Africa and suddenly everything changed—I began calling my mother and asking for her recipes. She told me: "Cooking for someone you love is what makes you a good cook." This curry is a particular favourite of my family in Tanzania. (HCK 2018: 71)

Sometimes advice is offered on where to source foodstuffs, such as injera, or how to work around hard-to-find ingredients like gum mastic, while what are assumed to be unfamiliar foods (such as kefir) are explained, addressing reader-cooks imagined to be in need of such explanation and advice. And we hear about previous lives and imagined futures: Munira Mahmud writes "my life-long dream has been to have a food van" (45), Alham Saeid tells us "I have a master's degree in chemistry, but when I came to Britain from Iraq it wasn't easy to combine this with family life, so now the kitchen is my laboratory" (62), and Faiza Hayani Bellili says that she ran her own translation agency in Algeria and was homesick when she moved to the UK, so she uses food to connect her to home.

Some of the stories also connect the cook-writer directly to Grenfell. Introducing her Egyptian lamb fattah recipe, Munira Mahmud tells us, "My husband was born in Grenfell; his was one of the first families to move in. I learned to

make this dish from his mother" (30), writing later to accompany her recipe for vegetable samosas that "Grenfell was a real community and my neighbour Rania and I used to party with food all the time" (40). Aysha Bora's vada recipe begins "I work at Al-Manaar and on the day of the Grenfell disaster I helped cook for 200 people—it was the first time I'd ever cooked for anyone outside my family" (36), and Hiwot Dagnachew says in her recipe for Ethiopian spicy red lentils and greens with tomato salad, "Grenfell was such a great community, so it's really nice to come along to the Hubb Kitchen and be back among the people who were your neighbours; it's a real social gathering" (83). In her recipe for carrot and onion chapatis, Lillian Olwa recounts her post-fire experience: "I got so fed up with the takeaways we eat living in temporary accommodation that I found myself craving home-cooked food and the taste I had grown up with in Uganda" (102).

In the brief introductions to the recipes we thus build a sense of both individual culinary biographies and how these have come together around Grenfell, the HCK, and *Together*. While some are clearly nostalgic for a home left behind, others reflect stories of migration, adaptation, and cultural mixing across time and space. Food is revealed to be highly evocative, restorative, and connecting, but also a living daily experience, such as when Aysha Bora says, "We're all foodies in my family [. . .] we all eat together every evening, sitting on the floor, talking about our day" (108). Such mundane practices endure even after the horrific disruption to daily life caused by the fire.

Recipes are further contextualized in terms of who the cook-writer learned them from (family often, but also neighbors), who they are enjoyed with (again, often family), and their broader significance (often religious, but also in terms of national identity and memories of places). Most are accompanied by a full-page photograph of either the finished dish or its cooking or serving, often with the cook-writer in the image. Following the recipes, at the end of the book is a short description of the remit and work of The Royal Foundation, and a related section called Cooking in the Community, encouraging readers to connect via social media and reiterating the book's central message:

> Every dish tell a unique story of history, culture and family, personally introduced by the women on each page. These memories remind us that *Together* is more than a cookbook; it is a storybook of a West London community and how the act of cooking together has helped them to connect, heal and look forward. At the heart of this book is the message that a simple, shared dish can create connections between people, restore hope and normality, and provide a sense of home—wherever you may be in the world. (HCK 2018: 127)

Here we see again that the book is about connections, that the "story" of this particular West London community is at once very specific, located in the context of the Grenfell fire, but also universal, speaking to each reader's need for "a sense of home—wherever you may be in the world."

In her critical analysis of *Together*, Clancy (2024: 601) sees the book's narrative as one of "culinary cosmo-multiculturalism," drawing on Ann-Marie Fortier's argument that "the migrant-as-ethnic is invited *on*, not *at*, the kitchen table" (Fortier 2008: 93, qtd. in Clancy 2024: 601, emphasis in original)—suggesting that the cook-writer's recipes are offered up for consumption, but that her life is reduced to her dish and that is the extent of the cook-reader's engagement with the writer-cook's life. This reading takes us only so far, however, and ignores the complexities, "ambivalent identifications," and "complicated entanglement[s]" of cross-cultural engagement through and with food (Duruz 2004: 63; Duruz 2013). On this point, I find more useful the distinction drawn by Hope Alkon and Grosglik (2021) between "eating the other" as an act of appropriation, and "eating with the other" as an act of appreciation. Closer engagement with *Together* brings those complexities into focus, and for me locates the text more as an example of the latter than the former, with its emphasis on "treating foods and cooks with respect, sharing food as equals, and giving voice to marginalized experiences, especially those that illuminate marginalization and struggle rather than sugar-coat lived experiences" and that do so by "depict[ing] everyday people as doing their best to cope with circumstances beyond their making" (Hope Alkon and Grosglik 2021: 2, 5).

Together as Community Cookbook

One way to explore these complexities, identifications, and entanglements is to read *Together* in the context of community cookbooks (see also Clancy 2020). In work tracing their history (excavated primarily in US research), we see how these books write about identity, community, and belonging through their recipes. The scholarship on community/charitable cookbooks—the name varies, but the books share similar characteristics, in featuring recipes contributed by female "home cooks" united by shared ethnic, religious, and/or geographical identity, and with an explicit fund-raising (and sometimes consciousness-raising) mission—shows us how "careful, contextual reading" can enable us to "glean from these texts much about how their women compilers saw themselves and projected their values" (Bower 1997: 137). Anne Bower adds that "community cookbooks do more than

simply 'reflect' the society in which they were published. These books demonstrate the participation of the women who wrote them in the *creation* of that society" (138, emphasis in original). Bower offers her own reading of a 1909 book called *Our Sisters' Recipes*, which resonates with *Together*, for example in its practice of naming each recipe for its cook-writer, making the recipe an asset for its contributor and a gift from her to the reader-cook. Kennan Ferguson (2012: 699) has also discussed the practices of naming in community cookbooks, noting that while individual recipes are connected to their individual cook-writers, the books are attributed to collectives or groups, such that the community embodied in the book arises "from the collective tastes of the participants." In *Together*, photographs of the cooks in the HCK repeatedly frame cooking as a collective, enjoyable, female activity, projecting an image of what this kind of cooking feels like. Meanwhile, the naming of each recipe's cook-writer gives reader-cooks a concrete sense of who the recipes come from, connecting to her story. Taken together, the naming, the stories, and the recipes in community cookbooks evidence "a politics of celebrating women getting together, creating collectively, feeding and nurturing others, valuing women and women's work" (Ferguson 2012: 696). This is not to deny that community cookbooks can also be exclusive and exclusionary, for example around class and race, nor that they can problematically reproduce an idealization of women's unpaid labor as a gift or as a form of care; it is important not to romanticize the community cookbook.

As Bower (1997: 141) writes, "we can learn more about the community created in [a] cookbook by looking at the recipes themselves," and in *Together*, as already sketched, we see ethnicity, nationality, and migration foregrounded, but we also hear of family, friends, neighbors, and Grenfell as a community. We hear of the meanings of particular dishes, of adaptations and concessions made when cooking these in London, and of broader culinary practices, such as those associated with Ramadan. As migrants, whether first, second, or third generation, the cook-writers' recipes speak of cultural mixing across time and space. Of course, given that the HCK is based in a mosque, we see Muslim influence strongly present, while recipes span the Muslim world and beyond. Yet, at the same time, the book speaks of the "vertical multi-ethnic coexistence" of Grenfell Tower (Balampanidis and Bourlessas 2018), of the convergence of so many people's lives to this single point, this one block of 120 flats in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, in West London, in June 2017. There is a "sense of autochthony" (Ferguson 2012: 712) in *Together*, even while it celebrates migrant cuisines—all cuisines that have come together in Grenfell. As Shameem Black (2010: 1) says of Indian celebrity chef Madhur Jaffrey's food writing, such "narratives of cooking and eating strive to rewrite the dislocations of diaspora and migration into a rooted sense of place, literally domesticating complicated cultural collisions while accentuating the global intersections that inform the domestic sphere." This chimes with Phil Scraton's (2019: ix–x) description of Grenfell:

> a community within a community enriched by diversity, united by humanity. A tower block in which difference—cultural, religious, social, political, economic—was celebrated in lives coming together under one roof by chance and opportunity. A community of mutual respect regardless of life histories, in which difference in age and background were recognized, accepted and celebrated.

Bower also reminds us that two communities are framed in these books: the community of cook-writers and the community of reader-cooks, and how the former imagines and addresses the latter also tells us something important about how community cookbooks work—potentially creating a third community that connects both groups. Where in *Our Sisters' Recipes* she finds a "lack of textual conviviality" which for her evidences a "lack of real sisterhood" despite the book's title (Bower 1997:146), *Together* is better equipped with convivial features, in its mode of address, its individual recipe stories, and its willingness to emphasize the meanings and values of food within and beyond Grenfell: to make a community that connects cook-writers with reader-cooks. Of course, the reader-cooks are also imagining the lives of the cook-writers who have compiled the book, and there is scope for misunderstanding and misrepresentation on both sides. Yet, as Black (2010: 2) writes, "we might understand the cookbook as a genre with aspirations to promote new forms of vernacular and embodied cosmopolitanism." The word Ferguson uses to describe what community cookbooks do is *intensify*: "They intensify a sense of belonging and a sense of community. But they also intensify at a corporal, somatic level in that the recipes they contain translate into food, bursting with flavor and meaning, nourishing the body and stimulating the taste buds." She adds that the cookbooks allow their authors to "bring themselves into textual being" (Ferguson 2012: 698, 700).

Of course, the project of the HCK is not just a cookbook; alongside the "textual being" that *Together* enables, the Hubb is a working kitchen, based in a mosque and cultural heritage center, which since 2017 has been cooking and serving meals, initially for those affected by the Grenfell fire, and now for the wider community. Writing a cookbook for an imagined audience of reader-cooks is way different from staffing an actual community kitchen that cooks and serves food to local people. It's important to remember that it is a *community*

kitchen—a physical space where people come together through food, cooking, serving, and eating in their physical (not just textual) being. Spaces of emergency food provisioning such as HCK occupy a "messy middle ground" for participants where, despite asymmetries in caring relations, "physical proximity and the sense that some aspects of their lives could be shared, even if partially and fleetingly, [can give] a base on which to build understanding and respect for the other" (Phillips and Willatt 2020: 209). As Intlak Alsaiegh puts it when introducing her kubba haleb recipe in *Together*, "I've worked at Al-Manaar since 2001 and have seen the power of food in creating a welcoming atmosphere. People of different nationalities are sometimes fearful of each other—sharing food helps them to relax and the bonds of friendship are made" (HCK 2018: 33). So, along with the community of cook-writers and reader-cooks brought into being by *Together*, the HCK connects these to the cooks and eaters who share food and friendship there, and the HCK offers co-present commensality, while *Together* extends that beyond co-presence.

Together as "Activist Representation"

In this final section, I want to change tack and connect *Together* to a series of discussions about creative responses to Grenfell. My aim in doing so is ask whether *Together* can be read as part of what Claire Launchbury (2021: 9) names "activist representation" of Grenfell; or rather, to ask why it has *not* been included in this emerging catalogue of cultural production that seeks to address the Grenfell fire. Can a cookbook "play a role in the difficult pursuit of reparation and restoration," as Paul Gilroy (2023) asks of Steve McQueen's 2023 film *Grenfell*? Launchbury gathers selected responses from writers and musicians in a "suite of cultural production" (9) that bears witness to the Grenfell fire: works by rapper Lowkey, spoken word artist Potent Whisper, and poets Ben Okri and Jay Bernard. As she concludes:

> These cultural forms offer a space of representation allied to solidarity within the community and where interventions that understand that agitating at the margins can facilitate better results for all than top-down imposition of either care or of narrative. (Launchbury 2021: 12)

When I first read this, as well as Launchbury's earlier warning about "artists of significance" whose work "ventriloquise[s]" the voices of Grenfell (9), I saw how readily *Together* could be slotted into that latter category if the book and the kitchen were overdetermined by Meghan and seen as a ventriloquizing top-down imposition of care. But I also felt a separation emerging in this commentary, between those forms of cultural response and representation deemed to be sufficiently cultural, like poetry, and those not recognized as belonging to the properly cultural, notable by their absence, such as cookbooks. And when Dominic Davies (2023), also focusing on poetic responses to the Grenfell fire, wrote that "human life depends on representation and recognition [. . .] human life becomes more valuable the more it has access to avenues of self-representation and the more these representations are recognized by others" (587), I wondered what it would take to bring *Together* into the fold, alongside not just poems and songs and films but also expressions of vernacular remembrance such as the Wall of Truth assembled by survivors and relatives or the memorial walks and community garden—all of which sprang up in the wake of the fire, and have been frequently celebrated as community-based articulations of grief, anger, and hope. As Davies argues in a discussion of Jay Bernard's poetry, "justice requires community representation and clear avenues for self-representation, and [. . .] this begins in artistic and cultural spheres, especially when there is no room for this representation in legal or political ones" (596). Rather than "social murder," to recall a term used to describe what happened at Grenfell, Davies urges for a focus on cultural works that emphasize "social life." Gilroy reflects on this in his essay on McQueen's film:

> Let us hope that this exercise in destabilising, commemorative perception can be restorative. It asks nothing less than that its viewers rethink the terms of our own relation with Grenfell Tower and face up to the discomfort that emerges with all attempts to make art respond to histories of suffering or orchestrate the refuse of reality so that it becomes capable of summoning and transmitting precious glimpses of a different way of life. The mutual aid and empathic, convivial concern that emerged spontaneously to support the victims of this disaster—who had been let down by incompetent, insensitive and indifferent government—pointed to that very possibility. (Gilroy 2023)

The last part of this statement caught my eye: the conviviality of mutual aid is seen by Gilroy as a pointer to what art might do: transmit glimpses of a different way of life, the social life that Davies speaks of, the counterforce to social murder. While *Together* does not dwell on the horror of the Grenfell fire, or the very real challenges of living as a migrant, it feels too much to ask it to do everything on its own. Like the responses celebrated in the research discussed here, different artists use different forms of expression to throw light on Grenfell; it is when we take them together that a more rounded picture emerges, and there is surely room in that picture for "mutual aid and empathic, convivial concern" alongside rage and mourning. This echoes a comment by Luce Giard (qtd. in Duruz 2004: 58): "Good cooks are never

sad or idle – they work at fashioning the world, at giving birth to the joy of the ephemeral [. . .] Women's gestures and women's voices [. . .] make the earth livable." The cooks of the HCK embody this work of making life liveable after the Grenfell fire, in their gestures and their voices, in their recipes and their shared meals, and through *Together* widen their commensal circle to invite reader-cooks to share those recipes and meals.

Moving away from the written or spoken word, Anna Viola Sborgi (2019) looks at screen media coverage of Grenfell. She highlights as positive attributes of the documentary films she selects their collaborative nature and their focus on individuals affected by the fire, which she sees as "part of an overall attempt to single out survivors and residents as human beings with their individual life stories and different ways of coping, rather than portraying the community as an indistinct whole" (103). At the same time, the films foreground community, not as an indistinct whole but as a living collectivity of individual experiences and voices.

Taking stock of what we see in these discussions of "activist representation," then, we find: the suite of cultural production, both "artistic" and vernacular; the importance of representation, self-representation, and recognition; a focus on social life over social murder; conviviality as a guide for the arts; and keeping individuals present as individuals while foregrounding community. I think we can tick all of these off as present in some way or another in *Together*, so why has it been either ignored or subject to criticism? Returning to the literature on cookbooks provides us with some possible explanations. Shameem Black, in her work on Madhur Jaffrey, asks "why scholars have been reluctant to understand culinary practices as exemplars of [. . .] cosmopolitanism" (Black 2010: 4), which I see as a related question. It is the question of the status accorded to cookbooks and other culinary practices in the field of cultural production. Her answer is that she detects "hidden bias at work about the kinds of activities that count as cosmopolitan in the first place" (5)—hidden bias that she connects to the association of cooking to feminized and domestic labor. Reading Launchbury, Davies, and Sborgi, I prefer to see more in common between the works they explore and celebrate and what I have described in *Together* and the HCK, rather than to see differences. Like Black, I sense hidden bias, not only about cookbooks and cooking as feminized and domestic, but also perhaps the anti-Meghan (and Harry) discourse that has pervaded the UK news media since the couple started dating, and which contributed significantly to their withdrawal from royal public life.

Turning back to the scholarship on community cookbooks for a moment, Ferguson (2012: 697) shows how these texts can in fact be fitted into a lineage of activist cultural production, even if feminists might have once balked at their celebration of the domestic. Crucially, she sees these cookbooks as *political*, as offering "counterhistories," evidencing "women's collective world making" and "reinscrib[ing] the virtues of caretaking" (697). I see in these a clear connection to Diego Astorga de Ita's (2023: 5) "antiromantic poetics" of the kitchen, in which he writes that "women have made of the kitchen a space for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power." These seem to be important features that *Together* shares with community cookbooks as a genre. Bower (1997), remember, said that community cookbooks do more than reflect society, they *create* it, while Ferguson argues convincingly that community cookbooks politicize food. Revaluing a devalued genre, Ferguson's arguments apply to the present as much as to the past, and when they are brought into contact with *Together*, they demand a reassessment and relocation of the book within the tradition of the community cookbook as political and as an important form of cultural production and activist representation. They also ask us to see cooking as itself a cultural and activist practice, a way of making life liveable, so that the work of the HCK is properly sited in the context of responses to Grenfell that, through their focus on mutual aid and conviviality (to echo Gilroy), can in fact lead the task of calling into being "precious glimpses of a different way of life." As Astorga de Ita (2023: 7, 1, 6) writes, while the kitchen "cannot be an acritical panacea," it is nonetheless a space for "memories and tastes not only of beauty, but of loss and devastation," and can be understood as "a political space of possibility [that] holds in itself and its labours the possibility of new ethics and aesthetics where relation and communality become central." Marte (2011: 184) meanwhile sees both cooking and remembering as forms of "creative cultural work" for diasporic cooks—and cookbooks can be powerful sites of remembrance (Duruz 2004; Cuch 2021). I would argue that the HCK and *Together* resonate very clearly with this description as a political space of possibility and remembrance where, to repeat a phrase used many times in the book, the power of food and of cooking and eating together suggests precisely a new ethics and aesthetics centered on relation and communality, embodied in acts of commensality.

Conclusion

Together: Our Community Cookbook depicts and shares a domestic and diasporic commensality. It sits in a very particular context, strongly rooted in the place and time of the

Grenfell Tower fire, but much of its message is universal. Sharing food is a way of connecting, a way to create normality and a sense of home, and assembling this into a cookbook is a way to connect cook-writers with a wider community of reader-cooks who can experience a taste of their own home, or bring new tastes into their homes. It also uses the cookbook as a form of remembrance, mourning, and celebration. Like other community cookbooks, the recipes in *Together* both celebrate and create community through their "stories of family, love, of survival and of connection," as Meghan writes in the foreword (HCK 2018: 9). And the conviviality of both the book and the kitchen—and all the cookbooks and kitchens where cook-writers and reader-cooks connect through food—speaks of possibility, which is itself a way to politicize food (Astorga de Ita 2023). While it is important to think critically about Meghan's role in *Together*, this should not overdetermine the book or the work of the HCK. Scraton's (2019: x) words about Grenfell Tower, that there difference was "celebrated in lives coming together [in a] community of mutual respect regardless of life histories," could easily be applied to *Together*, set in the tradition of both community cookbooks and activist representation (or community cookbooks *as* activist representation).

In my second essay, written to be read side by side with this one and published beside it in *Gastronomica*, we move from Grenfell Tower to a different context—the COVID-19 pandemic—but, through a reading of a second cookbook called *Together* (and its associated TV series), we can make connections in terms of how togetherness is called upon as a way to glimpse a "different way of life" and to both respond to and move beyond a crisis through practices of commensality.

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NOTES

1. Following "Megxit" and then the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the charity has been renamed The Royal Foundation of the Prince and Princess of Wales, and all mention of Harry and Meghan's involvement and of the Hubb and Together has vanished from its website; Harry and Meghan have meanwhile established the Archewell Foundation for their philanthropic work.

2. This description of Meghan's connection to her roots and identity through food, with its resonance with soul food, points to further common ground between her and the HCK cooks-writers: much of the media critique of Meghan had a clearly racialized dimension, suggesting a shared experience of racism in the UK. However, a more sustained discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay.

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