Practices of Solidarity: Opposing Apartheid in the Centre of London

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Abstract

International solidarity is frequently presented as an asymmetrical flow of assistance travelling from one place to another. In contrast, we theorise the more complex, entangled and reciprocal flows of solidarity that serve to enact social change in more than one place simultaneously. The international campaign against apartheid was one of the most widespread, sustained social movements of the last century. This paper examines the spatial practices of the Non-Stop Picket of the South African Embassy in London (1986 – 1990). Drawing on archival and interview material, we examine how the Picket produced solidarity with those resisting apartheid in South(ern) Africa. We argue that how the need for anti-apartheid solidarity was framed politically cannot be understood in isolation from how it was performed in practice. The study of solidarity is enriched by paying attention to the micropolitics of the practices through which it is enacted and articulated through key sites.

Resumo

La solidaridad internacional es frecuentemente presentada como un flujo asimétrico de asistencia viajando de un lugar al otro. A diferencia, teorizamos los más complejos, enredados y recíprocos flujos de la solidaridad, cuales sirvan para promulgar el cambio social en mas de un lugar en forma simultánea. La campaña internacional en contra apartheid fue una de los movimientos sociales más amplios y sostenido del siglo pasado. Este artículo examina las prácticas espaciales del piquete continuo en frente a la Embajada de Sudáfrica en Londres (1986 - 1990). Sobre la base de materiales de archivos y entrevistas, examinamos como el piquete producía solidaridad con los que resistían apartheid en el Sur de África.

Argumentamos que cómo la necesidad para la solidaridad contra el apartheid se enmarca políticamente no puede ser entendido en forma aislada de cómo fue realizado en la práctica.

El estudio de la solidaridad se enriquece prestándole atención a la micropolíticas de las prácticas a través de la cual se promulgó y articula a través de los sitios clave.

Keywords

solidarity, non-stop picket, anti-apartheid protest, activist practices, politics

Non-Stop Against Apartheid

In the mid-1980s the crisis of white rule in South Africa was coming to a head under increasing pressure from its opponents both inside and outside the country. The boycott of the new Tricameral Parliament by South Africa's Indian and Coloured populations in August 1984, organised by the recently formed United Democratic Front, was a powerful blow to President Botha's attempts to reform apartheid. The use of the army to suppress the revolt in the country's townships which began in September 1984 provoked political action by the country's Black trade unions and international condemnation (Guelke 2005). Around the world, anti-apartheid campaigners sought ways to increase their pressure on the South African government and its supporters. In a situation where diverse groups were challenging apartheid, the African National Congress (ANC) sought to consolidate its position as the 'sole legitimate representative' of the South African people (Thomas 1996).

The international campaign against apartheid in South Africa, running from the late 1950s until the end of white minority rule in 1994, was one of the most widespread and sustained social movements of the last century. Thorn (2006; 2009) has argued that the international anti-apartheid campaign was one of the first real instances of a global social movement. In this paper, we examine the spatial practices of a particular British anti-apartheid protest in the late 1980s, to elaborate how the participants in the Non-Stop Picket of the South African Embassy performed their solidarity with those resisting apartheid in South Africa. We do not claim that any of the individual practices pursued by the group were unique amongst anti-apartheid campaigners, but we argue that they were assembled in the context of that protest to enact a specific understanding of international solidarity. In doing so, we contribute to geographical debates about the spatialities of solidarity (Featherstone 2012; Koopman 2008; Routledge 2012). We argue that too often, in the broader social sciences, discussions of political solidarity overlook the range of practices through which solidarity is mobilised and enacted. International solidarity is frequently presented as an

asymmetrical flow of assistance travelling from one place to another. In contrast, we argue that relations of solidarity can travel in more than one direction simultaneously, building complex webs of reciprocity. While the political framing used to mobilize international solidarity is important, we argue that this does more than just articulate connections between distant places, it also shapes the practices through which solidarity is performed and the form that solidarity takes. Moving beyond Featherstone's (2012) recent work, we argue that it is vital to pay greater attention to the practices through which these solidarities are enacted in key sites.

The Non-Stop Picket of the South African Embassy in London's Trafalgar Square was called and organised by the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group [hereafter, City Group]. For nearly four years, from April 1986 until just after Nelson Mandela's release from jail in February 1990, City Group and its supporters maintained a continual presence every day and night in front of South Africa House. At its peak, City Group had a membership of over 1000, but the Picket was generally kept going by a core group of fewer than 100 people, many of them school and university students, or unemployed youth, but plenty of people organised a commitment to the Picket around their careers. City Group was formed in 1982 by an exiled member of the ANC, Norma Kitson, along with her children, friends and colleagues. Amongst Norma's co-workers who helped form the group was Carol Brickley, a leading member of the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG), and that organisation was central to City Group's campaigning from the beginning. The RCG's politics certainly influenced those of City Group, and its position within the sectarian politics of the post-WWII British far Left undoubtedly shadowed many of the conflicts that City Group found themselves embroiled in. In the first four years of the group's existence, they regularly picketed the South African Embassy (including, in the summer of 1982, an 86-day Non-Stop Picket to demand improved prison conditions for Norma Kitson's husband, David Kitson, who was one of the longest serving white political prisoners in South Africa and in poor health at the time). At first, City Group operated as a local branch of the British national Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), but City Group's uncompromising and confrontational approach to solidarity activism alienated both members of the ANC leadership in London and leading members of the AAM. In February 1985, after two years of growing tension, including the accusation that it was little more than an RCG front launching a take-over bid for control of the national movement, City Group was 'disaffiliated' as a local branch of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (Fieldhouse 2005: 218 -226). As a result, the Non-Stop Picket of the South African Embassy – arguably one of the most visible expressions of anti-apartheid

solidarity in Britain during the final years of apartheid – was organised entirely without the support the ‘official’ national Anti-Apartheid Movement. Rather than prefacing the demise of City Group, the independence this gave them facilitated a radicalisation of their solidarity practices.

In this paper, we examine the practices through which the Non-Stop Picket produced solidarity with those resisting apartheid in South(ern) Africa and reproduced itself as a ‘non-stop’ protest. To this end, we engage with recent debates in geography about the multiple ways in which grassroots solidarities generate new political possibilities and reconfigure the relationships between (distant) places (Featherstone 2012; Massey 2008). Having positioned our analysis in relation to those debates, we examine first how City Group framed its political understanding of the role of an anti-apartheid solidarity group in Britain, and then how these politics were practised on the Non-Stop Picket.

Through our research we have gained privileged access to the complete archive of City Group’s papers covering the whole of the group’s existence (1982 – 1994). At present, this material is held privately by former members of the group, but we are hoping to work with them to secure its deposit in a public archive in due course. To date, we have also conducted interviews with more than 40 former members of the group. Finally, in different ways (and at very different ages) we both participated in the Non-Stop Picket and draw, autoethnographically, on our experiences there.

Geographies of Solidarity

The end of apartheid was brought about by a combination of ‘internal’ factors within the country, such as the township uprisings and trade union militancy of the mid-1980s that made the country ‘ungovernable’ to some extent and created splits within the South African ruling class, and ‘external’ factors such as the end of the Cold War and the pressure of international sanctions and other outcomes of the international solidarity movement (Bond 2000; Guelke 2005; Thorn 2006).

The international solidarity movement consisted of networks of organisations and flows of individuals, ideas, policies and activist tactics that were highly mobile, crossing geopolitical, ideological and cultural borders (Thorn 2009: 418 – 9). These (inter)national movements drew together churches, trade unions, student groups, political parties (primarily on the Left and Centre-Left) social movements and anti-colonial networks; each constituency carried with it its own historical legacies, ideological commitments and organisational traditions (Gurney 2000; Thorn 2009: 434). Thorn (2009: 419) argues that, in weaving

together an alliance between these disparate traditions, the anti-apartheid movement “contributed to the construction of a transnational political culture that was a part of wider, complex and multi-layered processes of political globalisation in the post-war era,” including postcolonial struggles, the Cold War and, in later years, emerging experiences of neoliberal globalisation. He suggests that these transnational networks of solidarity and political action made “an impact on the political cultures of countries all over the world,” (Thorn 2009: 421). Despite this passing reference to the generative effects of solidarity movements, Thorn (2009) primarily focuses on providing a topology of different kinds of actors/intermediaries within these social movements, rather than examining in detail the practices through which these solidarities were mobilized, performed and transmitted. The transnational mobility of South African (and Namibian) exiles was crucial to articulating and connecting different local and national movements against apartheid. In the case of City Group the experiences of the Kitson family (including the long-term consequences of their previous political disputes with other leading white members of the South African Communist Party) were central to shaping how the Non-Stop Picket operated as a solidarity movement and framed its politics (Brown and Yaffe 2013).

Defining solidarity as “a relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression,” Featherstone (2012: 5) has recently argued that the concept “has rarely been the subject of sustained theorization, reflection and investigation.” Mainstream sociological studies of social movements have been largely quiet on the subject and it is barely referred to in several recent texts reviewing the field (Chesters and Welsh 2011; Opp 2009). Political philosophers, however, have renewed their interest in exploring relations of solidarity in recent years (Gould 2007; Scholz 2008). This body of writing largely attends to the ethical commitments that might inspire acts of solidarity rather than the practices through which solidarity is generated, mobilized and practised. One useful insight offered by Scholz (2008: 34) is that, unlike the forms of social and civic solidarity identified by Durkheim and other sociologists, political solidarity tends to be performed by collectives that share a perception of an injustice but are not necessarily unified by “shared attributes, location, or even shared interests.” Scholz (2008: 56) notes that,

“To be in solidarity with those who suffer is to work for social change to alter the conditions that create that suffering, but simultaneously those in solidarity may need to respond directly to the concrete needs of others and help to alleviate suffering. That is, political solidarity

heeds a call for aid in multiple ways – the efforts of those people with the tools and means to assist others in distress might also be fulfilling the moral relation of political solidarity.”

Whilst solidarity does frequently respond to a ‘call for aid’ there are two limitations to the way in which Scholz conceptualises acts of political solidarity. First, although correct in identifying the necessity of concrete action to enact social change to alleviate inequalities or oppression, her interest in the moral obligation to act overlooks any concrete examination of the range of actions that can be undertaken as acts of solidarity in specific circumstances. Second, her choice of language – the ‘alleviation of suffering’ – comes close to reducing political solidarity to acts of humanitarian assistance and denies the possibility of more entangled relations of reciprocity and mutual solidarity that might seek to enact concrete social change in more than one location simultaneously. There appears to be an inherent asymmetry in her understanding of the power relations implicated in acts of solidarity. Here, we are in agreement with Featherstone’s (2012: 4) recent observation that “[t]he makings of [subaltern] solidarities have [...] frequently been marginalized and actively silenced.” We will engage more thoroughly with Featherstone’s work shortly.

Unsurprisingly, geographers have paid specific attention to the spatial relations of solidarity and the ways in which power and privilege are entangled in these relations. In Britain, Massey (2004; 2008) and Featherstone (2008; 2012) have been central to this endeavour. In a north American context, a group of scholars have explored the ways in which colonial impulses and practices within Canadian and US-based Latin American solidarity movements might be undermined (Koopman 2008; Sundberg 2007). Writing specifically about the challenges of sustaining progressive forms of solidarity within the global justice movement of movements of the early 2000s, Massey (2008: 313) observed that, “[o]ne of the problems that all such campaigns face is how to establish solidarity between different places and different struggles.” She suggests that across physical geographical distance and unequal access to resources, campaigns in different localities commonly seek to articulate and mobilize solidarity by stressing the ways in which those places are connected. The connections between distant places can be used to generate political solidarity in one of (at least) three ways. First, the political and economic relations connecting those places are identified as the root of the problem. Second, similarities between the places are identified. Or, third, a common enemy that affects both places is identified as their connection. Although she appears to suggest these as alternatives, we believe multiple different configurations of these analyses are often mobilized to frame (the need for) solidarity.

Solidarity actions can face in more than one direction and seek to intervene at more than one scale simultaneously. Massey (2008: 313) also identifies that there are also instances of “‘solidarity campaigns’ with a whole host of places and peoples (for example, Cuba, Palestine) that arise where there may be no ‘connection’ in the obvious sense but nonetheless there are forms of identification or support or fellow feeling.”

At first glance, it might be thought that British anti-apartheid solidarity campaigns fell into this category. However, as we shall examine in the following section, City Group framed its solidarity in terms of the connections, dating back to British colonial rule in Southern Africa, between the British and South African ruling classes, arguing that the same forces that benefited from apartheid also benefited from racism in Britain. In fact, the group deployed aspects of each of Massey’s three approaches to fostering solidarity – it identified British political and economic support for South Africa as a key issue (the material flows between the two nations); it identified common experiences of racism and oppression in both countries; and it identified a common enemy in the form of the capitalist class. Through political framings such as this, it is possible to identify the centrality of geographical relations to the politics of solidarity. As Massey (2008: 313) argues, “[l]ocality and interconnectedness are often part of the very politics, even the focus, of the struggle; they may be precisely what are contested – their rethinking may be a crucial part of political organising.”

What is crucial here is the act of ‘rethinking’ the political possibilities for how and why places are connected. Whilst humanitarian solidarity may simply seek to salve the worst expressions of global inequalities, political solidarity campaigns seek to intervene in the connections and flows between places, refusing to participate in the reproduction of inequalities and oppression, disrupting and attempting to change “some of the dominant, more settled trajectories,” (Massey 2008: 323). In making this point, Massey provides an important reminder that power and responsibility for inequality and injustice can be “distributed along long chains of command” (2008: 323) and, consequently, the sites at which acts of solidarity can be practised to disrupt these flows are multiple. In this respect, she argues, local and particular struggles are still crucial to transnational solidarity networks.

If Massey (2008) was mostly concerned with how different kinds of spatial relationships are understood and presented in the articulation of transnational solidarity, Featherstone (2012) in his more recent work has considered both how solidarity is performed through spatial practices and what its effects might be. He explores solidarity as a ‘transformative relation’, arguing that it is that the practice of extending solidarity across distance and difference plays an important role in “the active creation of new ways of

relating,” (Featherstone 2012: 5) and “new ways of configuring political relations and spaces,” (2012: 6). While Massey (2008) stresses the importance of communication and meeting places in the articulation and generation of transnational solidarity, Featherstone (2012: 6) extends this argument by acknowledging that solidarities are “shaped through diverse exchanges, contacts and linkages”. His project is largely to attend to the diverse practices through which political articulations of solidarity are enacted, paying particular “attention to the diverse forms of labour involved in shaping, assembling and maintaining transnational solidarities seeks to foreground the generative conduct of left political activity.” (Featherstone 2012: 12).

Of particular relevance to the case of international anti-apartheid solidarity, Featherstone notes that one key practice of solidarity is to apply ‘pressure from without’ on the perpetrators of inequality and oppression. He argues that, “[t]his ‘pressure from without’ can reshape the terrain of what is politically possible and what counts or is recognized as political. This contestation produces new ways of generating political community and different ways of shaping relations between places” (Featherstone 2012: 7). For Featherstone (2012: 7), then, solidarities are about more than the activation of relations between pre-existing communities and collectives. Collectives come into being through the acts of mobilizing solidarity, and a key practice for many solidarity campaigns is the act of engaging not only with those already committed to the cause, but the extension of the solidarity collective through the engagement of new people. This resonates with Chatterton’s (2006) exploration of the possibility of forging ‘uncommon ground’ with non-participating (and potentially unsympathetic) witnesses to acts of protest. Given its location on a busy thoroughfare in the heart of central London, the Non-Stop Picket actively sought to engage passing members of the public and devised particular practices to invite their participation (as we discuss later).

In the context of an extended solidarity campaign, like that waged by City Group, intense emotions can be generated through the coming together of the solidarity collective, the perceived urgency of the situation to which the solidarity responds and the shared experiences of those taking action together. Together, these embodied actions constitute the ‘sensuous solidarities’ examined by Routledge (2012), drawing on a far wider literature on the role of emotions in social movements and protest (Bosco 2007; Brown and Pickerill 2009; Goodwin *et al* 2001). Routledge (2012: 428) asserts that these sensuous solidarities are “indicative of both the performative character of activist subjectivities and the content of activists’ public (political) performances.” They are the “shared emotional templates”

through which activists “generate common narratives and solidarities,” (Routledge 2012: 430). Like Featherstone (2012: 37), we believe that sensuous solidarities are not just found in the protest acts of solidarity activists, but are embodied in the “passionate character of [the] connections” through which solidarity is assembled and articulated (Brown 2013). As we discuss below, a shared passionate opposition to the violence and injustice of apartheid helped assemble the group of young activists who maintained the Non-Stop Picket; whilst the intense passions of their shared experiences there enabled them to develop mutual trust across social difference, which enhanced their ability to act in solidarity with those resisting apartheid in South Africa.

Central to Featherstone’s (2012: 16) theorisation of solidarities is the suggestion that, by “[l]ocating solidarities as world-making processes, by tracing the geographies they shape, contest, [and] rework,” a greater understanding can be gained about “their productiveness and agency.” We share this ambition, and believe geographers can make a significant contribution to the study of transnational solidarities by attending to both the spatial relations and the embodied spatial practices through which they are enacted. However, our work extends this approach in at least three significant ways. First, we argue that the discursive ways in which solidarity is framed politically cannot be separated from how it is performed. Second, we suggest that more attention needs to be paid not only to how ideas travel through key nodes in the articulation of transnational solidarities, but attention is also due to the micropolitics of the practices through which these solidarities are enacted (Davies 2012). Finally, we make explicit a point that is implied throughout Featherstone’s work: relations of solidarity travel in and are orientated to more than one direction simultaneously. In the case of the Non-Stop Picket, this meant both drawing the links between the operation of apartheid in South Africa and racism in Britain, but also generating solidarity to support those activists who were criminalised and harassed in the course of their solidarity activism in London.

As Featherstone (2012: 30) has astutely recognised, “the geographies of power through which solidarities are fashioned can bear in significant ways on the political alternatives they generate.” For City Group, this not only meant intervening in the uneven power-geometries through which apartheid was sustained, but also operating within a broader solidarity movement within which the ANC and its allies were the dominant political force in determining who should receive solidarity. As we outline in the following section, this had a significant impact on how City Group framed and practised its solidarity.

Framing Solidarity

City Group's solidarity operated at several scales simultaneously and was orientated in multiple directions. City Group understood its role in opposing apartheid as subordinate to the actions of the black majority in South Africa and their popular organisations. They framed their role as a solidarity organisation in Britain as being to expose, target and disrupt British economic, political and diplomatic links with apartheid South Africa. They believed this could not be effective without also challenging systemic racism in Britain (Williams 2012). Alongside these tasks, their role was to offer political, moral, practical and material support to all those resisting apartheid in South Africa. Collectively the group embodied these aims through their conduct of the Non-Stop Picket and associated campaigns. The Non-Stop Picket was formed with three central demands: 1) the unconditional release of Nelson Mandela, 2) the release of *all* political prisoners in apartheid gaols, and 3) the closure of the South African Embassy in London. These demands were carefully formulated. On the face of it, these demands (or, at least, the first two) seemed relatively uncontroversial, but they created space for the articulation of a politics that differed from that of the national Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain in crucial ways. First, the apparently innocuous call for the release of *all* political prisoners was significant – without directly saying so, this was a coded reference to what City Group referred to as its 'non-sectarian' approach to solidarity work – namely that the group supported all progressive anti-apartheid tendencies in South Africa, not just the ANC. Officially this was also the position of the AAM. While, at times, they called for the release of 'all political prisoners'; in practice, the AAM seldom actively campaigned for non-ANC cadre (Fieldhouse 2005: 115 – 120; Klein 2009: 458).

We are cautious of presenting too strong a distinction between the political framing of City Group's solidarity and the practical enactment of those principles and demands. The group's politics developed through praxis. Ideas, demands and policy positions were formulated through the group's practice: they were debated formally at meetings and informally on the Picket; they were presented in literature that was circulated on protests; they changed over time. Despite this caveat, we find it useful to understand the group's political framework before examining in detail how these ideas were put into practice.

The demand for the closure of the South African Embassy served two purposes, first a focus on what the group termed 'British collaboration with apartheid' and second an opening to discuss the links between apartheid in South Africa and racism in Britain (Williams 2012). As Carol Brickley, City Group's Convenor said in her speech at the launch of the Non-Stop Picket on 19 April 1986:

“Britain is up to its neck in apartheid and that’s why we’re here today, that’s why we’re making our protest and that’s why we’re going to stay here.” (quoted in the documentary *Non-Stop Picket Against Apartheid outside the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square, 1986*ⁱ)

In what follows, we draw on City Group (and related) literature (Brickley 1985; Brickley, O’Halloran and Reed 1986) and an interview with Andy Higginbottom, who was Secretary of the Group for most of the Non-Stop Picket’s duration, to examine how they framed their solidarity at multiple scales. This political framing shaped how the Non-Stop Picket practised its solidarity. Andy articulates three aspects of the demand to end British collaboration with apartheid that he saw as central to City Group’s framing of their programmatic approach to solidarity work.

“Britain was the main beneficiary, in economic terms, of the apartheid system – the core relationship with the mining industry and through the banks, through the provisioning of arms etc. meant that the apartheid system was of major significance to the British economy. The relationship worked both ways (and still does, in actual fact). So we have a difference of programmatic character in the formation of City AA, which was – we want to build a movement of solidarity which challenges our own establishment’s (big business and government’s) connection with apartheid.” (Interview with Andy Higginbottom, April 2012)

Clearly he is articulating an approach to international solidarity that highlights the connections between the distant object of solidarity (those fighting apartheid in South Africa) and the place where that solidarity is mobilised. City Group sought to support the movement against apartheid in South Africa by highlighting the material interests of British-based multinationals (and sections of the British ruling class) in profiting from and sustaining apartheid. What Andy articulates is a form of solidarity activism that sought to understand and then intervene “in the material relations between places” (Featherstone 2012: 18). In addition to protesting outside the South African embassy, this was manifested in direct action campaigns to disrupt sporting links with South Africa, the business of South African Airways, and to promote consumer boycotts of South African goods.

Having identified the shared political and economic interests between elite groups in Britain and South Africa, a second aspect of the call to “End British Collaboration with apartheid!” then arose.

“That was how the British Establishment responded to protest against apartheid. They made a particular point of defending the South African Embassy and City Group did all it could to use it as a focal point, right there in Trafalgar Square in the centre of London, for protest. So the concrete form was ‘For the right to protest’ and the right to damage what (according to the Vienna Convention) was the ‘peace and dignity of a diplomatic mission’.” (Interview with Andy Higginbottom, April 2012)

The South African Embassy was chosen as the prime focus for City Group’s political campaigning due to its central, highly visible location, and for its symbolic place as the main representation of apartheid in Britain. In this way, City Group went about “making links [between distant place] localizable and contestable” (Featherstone 2012: 18). They sought to do more than just bear witness to the crimes of apartheid by standing outside the embassy, they sought to protest there in such a way that they disrupted its normal functioning. The Non-Stop Picket was a form of emplaced, durational direct action. The leadership of City Group was well aware that this disruptive and confrontational expression of protest would provoke a reaction from the Metropolitan Police. They used arrests, episodes of police harassment and resulting court cases politically as evidence of ‘British collaboration with apartheid’ and as a vector for highlighting the links between racism in Britain and apartheid in South Africa.

The third aspect of ‘British collaboration’ identified by Andy Higginbottom was, in his own terms ‘slightly more subtle’ and referred to the specific role of a solidarity movement. That was the questions of,

“What is the right relationship between a solidarity movement and a liberation movement? ... Well, clearly ... the main action to end the apartheid regime had to be the Black majority in South Africa. There’s no other way it could have been brought to an end without their sacrifice and without their struggle ... And this is part of the definition of a distinct role for a solidarity movement which is that it is subordinate to the struggle against apartheid [inside South Africa], but it has its own mission as well which is to challenge those responsible for continuing apartheid within its own society.” (Interview with Andy Higginbottom, April 2012)

This formulation of the subordinate role of an international solidarity group developed as (and through) the Group's critique of the work of the national Anti-Apartheid Movement and its acceptance of the ANC as the 'sole, legitimate representatives' (Thomas 1996: 234) of the black majority in South Africa. Whilst the AAM saw itself as subordinate to the ANC, City Group acknowledged that they did not represent all those resisting apartheid in South Africa. This critique spurred the development of City Group's 'non-sectarian' approach to solidarity and its support for a broad range of anti-apartheid tendencies. This framing of the distinct role of international solidarity movements had geographical implications – their role was to prioritise exposing and disrupting the actions of those within their own society who sustained connections with apartheid South Africa. Simultaneously, they also developed their own connections with those resisting apartheid and sent material aid to the South African liberation movements. This 'non-sectarian' approach to anti-apartheid solidarity shaped who the group campaigned for and the range of political voices it listened to and took seriously. It also shaped the slogans and symbols used on the Non-Stop Picket – expanding the group's political vocabulary beyond the slogans of the ANC and its allies. In the face of hostility from some sections of the ANC's exiled leadership, in practice, City Group's 'non-sectarian' approach to solidarity work involved the development of close working relationships with members of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Black Consciousness Movement (of Azania) (BCMA) (Maaba 2001). In July 1989 City Group assisted the London PAC to host a rally at which their recently freed President, Zephaniah Mothopeng spoke. After the rally, the PAC sent the following note of appreciation to City Group:

“The success of the meeting vindicates the right principles of unity and non-sectarianism the City Group rightfully upholds. Please accept comrades [the] PAC's highest consideration.”
(Letter from London PAC, 14 July 1989)

The mundane, everyday practices through which the Picket operated – its presence outside the Embassy, but also its material culture (placards, banners and songs) and the interactions with the public were practices designed to foster and convey its solidarity across national borders (and sought to dissolve strong boundaries around who could be an 'activist'). Despite its international political focus, City Group primarily operated regionally within London whilst also addressing national issues within the UK.. It did this by linking apartheid to racism in Britain and by building links with other militant anti-apartheid campaigners in Britain. City Group sought to mobilise other campaigning groups in the UK (gay rights,

women's rights, anti-imperialist) to anti-apartheid solidarity work, and offered them mutual support and solidarity in exchange. In particular, the group articulated 'counter-topographies' of resistance (Katz 2001), drawing new 'maps of grievance' (Featherstone 2012) through joint campaigning and the exchange of speakers at rallies and protests, the connections between national liberation struggles in Ireland, Palestine and Tamil Eelam with the situation in South Africa. Also, the group's victories in defending the right to protest (Bailey and Taylor 2009: 318; Brown and Yaffe 2013), which for a time set legal precedents in relation to the application of the controversial Public Order Act (1986), had positive implications for broader activist movements in the UK.

City Group's political solidarity was also practised at the local scale – maintaining the integrity of the Picket against the actions of the Home Office, the police and assaults by neo-fascists. City Group offered effective legal support to arrestees and political support for those activists who experienced police harassment. Its work defending the right to protest was played out locally in Trafalgar Square and in the courtrooms of central London, even as it had national implications. In the next section of this paper, we elaborate and explore in more detail how the political principles outlined above were enacted through the everyday practices of the Non-Stop Picket.

Practices of Solidarity

To most fully examine how the Non-Stop Picket embodied and performed its solidarity within the space available, we elaborate the everyday practices of the Picket. Although there were continuities in its political praxis, the Picket operated very differently when a handful of people were present compared to rallies of several thousand protestors. In this section, we examine how the everyday presence and practices of the picket 'assembled connections' and built transnational activist networks that sought both to build a movement that could support those resisting apartheid in Southern Africa and disrupt support for the apartheid regime.

The daily life of the Non-Stop Picket can be thought of as comprised of an assemblage of practices through which anti-apartheid solidarity was performed. These include, but were not limited to, practices of educating the public about apartheid, mobilising support for action against apartheid (itself a bundle of various campaigning practices), collecting material aid for those resisting apartheid, and fostering cultures of resistance (to apartheid in South Africa and racism in Britain). There were also a set of practices designed to ensure effective legal support and solidarity for the protestors themselves when they found themselves in conflict with the police. Together the performance of these practices generated

affinity and solidarity amongst the members of the picket, as well as generating solidarity with those distant others resisting apartheid in South Africa and Namibia. In what follows, we examine each of these practices in turn, whilst recognising that many of the routine activities on the Non-Stop Picket served more than one end, or quickly progressed from one practice of solidarity to another.

Before proceeding further, though, it is useful to describe something of the appearance of the Non-Stop Picket and how it was organised. Unlike many contemporary protest camps (Feigenbaum et al, forthcoming), the Non-Stop Picket was not organised horizontally. City Group and the Picket had an organisational hierarchy. The group held open weekly meetings throughout the period of the Non-Stop Picket to which all its supporters (and sympathetic members of the public) were welcome. There was also an committee (elected on an annual basis by the group's membership) which organised its campaigns. In order to sustain the Picket as a continuous, on-going protest, the week was divided into a series of three and six hour shifts. Groups and individuals pledged to attend one or more shifts each week, and one committee member, the Picket Organiser was responsible for ensuring the rota was filled each week. On each shift, one picketer took on the role of being the Chief Steward. They were responsible for focusing the political work of the Picket during the shift, welcoming and including new supporters in that work, and were the primary line of communication between the Picket and the police. This role was necessary to prevent the police sabotaging the Picket or carrying out low-level intelligence gathering by 'chatting' to picketers. The Chief Steward often needed to make tactical decisions about how to respond to potential arrest situations, and kept a record of all interactions with the police (and other key incidents) which often proved invaluable in the legal defence of arrestees.

Interviewee Francis, who joined the Picket in 1989 having graduated from the Royal College of Music, offered the following description of the physical appearance of the Picket:

"There was a large banner held up by two fixed poles. It was usually colourful and often had a portrait of Nelson Mandela. ... There were usually several placards on the ground, (when there were many picketers, some would hold them or wear them). Sometimes they gave facts, sometimes they focused on a current event or campaign. Often they had general slogans like: 'Black Majority Rule', 'One Person, One Vote', 'One Settler, One Bullet', *etc.* These changed very often. ... There were three brightly coloured boxes which stored leaflets, petitions and

other picket materials and which served as seats for weary picketers. A large, black plastic rubbish bin was at the front. It was where we kept public donations.”

He went on to recognise that the rhythms of the Picket changed with the times of day, the day of the week and the seasons.

“Different shifts varied enormously depending on who was there and how many people there were. The weather, the time of day and the season all had a huge effect on what it was like on the picket. The liveliest times were when the weather was fine on weekend afternoons or early evenings.”

For Nicole, who joined the picket early on as a school student and maintained a weekly commitment until 1990, a typical shift on the Picket involved, “Turn up, chant, sing, get people to sign the petitions or take leaflets, listen to the arguments with passers-by, laugh at the police...”. The picket’s infrastructure served several purposes, some practical, some symbolic. The banner and placards communicated the protestors’ cause with the passing public. Their colour and design were eye-catching. The momentary double-take that these displays could provoke, as a tourist or local worker walked by, provided an opportunity for encounter with the picketers. That barely perceptible slowing of pace was greeted with the call “Sign the petition for the release of Nelson Mandela” (which was sometimes a question; sometimes more of an instruction). Here the picketer’s petition board (a clipboard with printed petition sheets fixed to it, usually held resting along the petitioner’s forearm) was a key tool for interaction. The petition board was a device for initiating conversation, engaging in popular education, and extending an invitation to join and participate in the picket. While the member of the public was stationary, perhaps adding their name to the petition, an experienced picketer would talk to them about the Picket and about apartheid or recent events in South Africa. With the signature (nearly) committed to the petition sheet, the picket would gesture to the donations bucket and ask for a donation. These donations were vital to sustaining the campaigning of the Non-Stop Picket, but thousands of pounds were also regularly sent as material aid to the families of political prisoners in South Africa and to the various liberation movements. Finally, before the encounter ended, the picketer would offer a leaflet for a forthcoming event, offer a newsletter about past activities and, if the person seemed particularly keen and interested, invite them to stop and join the Picket for a few minutes. The petition boards, petition sheets, leaflets and newsletters were such a central

aspect of the protest's political work that they formed the bulk of the materials stored in the boxes beneath the banner.

Encounters on the picket, usually initiated through discussions across a petition board, not only served to recruit new picketers, but led to sustained correspondence (and reciprocal solidarity) with groups and individuals around the world. The City Group archives are littered with correspondence from contacts in, amongst other places, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Spain, Sweden, the United States, and Yugoslavia. In September 1986, Stephen Hellian of Saskatoon, Canada wrote to the group recounting how he and friends had visited the Non-Stop Picket during a trip to London and asking how they could help publicise it as a means of building their own boycott of South African goods in their home town. At times these transnational networks generated more practical interventions. In January 1987, a representative of the Free South Africa Committee in Canada wrote to City Group enclosing a copy of a letter they had sent to Sir Kenneth Newman, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, complaining about the violent arrest and harassment of protestors on the Non-Stop Picket. Encounters with the Non-Stop Picket also inspired (directly or indirectly) attempts to set up similar protests in other countries – including a week-long protest outside the South African Embassy in Madrid in October 1987. Here it should be noted that the Non-Stop Picket was not the only long-term protest at a South African embassy – it was preceded by the year-long protests outside the South African consulate in Washington DC in 1984-85 (Metz 1986) and by the Southern African Liberation Centre (SALC) opposite the South African embassy in Canberra. There is little evidence of direct correspondence between City Group and the protests in Washington, but they were in regular contact with the SALC and there was some modest exchange of personnel. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the extent to which these actions replicated the politics of the Non-Stop Picket as well as its form, it is certainly the case that the SALC in Canberra developed a close relationship with the PAC representatives in Australia and this oriented its politics in similar ways to those of City Group. Lucie, an American student who had joined the Picket in 1987 during a semester abroad in London, described how her involvement inspired her to organise anti-apartheid protests in Texas on her return.

“I think the picket inspired me to do something ... anything, no matter how small. While most of my work in Texas was inspired by the cause and by Mandela the individual, the picket was important because it made me feel like a small action could make a big difference. When I got back home to the US, no anti-apartheid work was going on in my community so I

simply organized a ‘March for Mandela’ on the date of [the 1976] Soweto [uprising]. Houston was the site of the only SA consulate in the US – a very quiet and productive consulate – so our goal was to make that known and try to shut it down.” (Interview with Lucie Smoker, March 2012)

Encounters initiated on a windy pavement in central London had effects in distant places around the world. Conversations over a petition board or the exchange of a leaflet could open up new possibilities for political action at a distance. Through the Non-Stop Picket, transnational networks of anti-apartheid activists were established and maintained. International action against apartheid proliferated and the constituent parts of those networks offered solidarity to each other, as well as those resisting apartheid in South Africa.

One defining feature of the Non-Stop Picket was its noise. The Picket could be quiet, if the number of protestors present was low, or it was the middle of the night, but very often it was alive with sound. During the day picketers would use one of the group's megaphones to make speeches about apartheid, or lead others in chanting. But picketers also sang. They sang songs created out of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and other songs followed, improvised on the Picket to celebrate its work. Singing was so central to the life of the Picket that the lyrics of these South African freedom songs were printed on song sheets for distribution on the Non-Stop Picket to encourage all picketers to join in. For most picketers, this required singing songs in a foreign language, learned phonetically through repetition of the sounds, and trusting other activists’ explanation of what the words meant.

The practice of collective singing brought picketers together. It helped activate the Picket when energy was flagging, providing focus and impetus to keep going with the political work of petitioning, fund-raising and engaging passing members of the public in dialogue. If the Picket was under threat from police intervention or fascist attack, choral singing could help cohere the Picket as a collective, so that it was better able to defend itself against attack. Singing songs from the struggle against apartheid was itself a form of solidarity, a means of spreading a political message and symbolically sharing a culture of resistance with those resisting racist rule in South Africa. Information released by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (nd) records that representatives of the embassy repeatedly complained about the noise of the Picket. One can only imagine what it must have been like for the South African diplomats trying to work to the accompanying sound of songs banned in their own country and advocating the demise of the regime they represented.

By standing outside the entrance to the South African Embassy, the Non-Stop Picket drew attention to the role of the embassy as the diplomatic representatives of the apartheid regime. This provided opportunities for popular education as well as various forms of direct action designed to disrupt the ‘peace and dignity’ of the embassy with the ultimate aim of closing it down. One further practice of solidarity enacted on the Picket was to bear witness to the crimes and violence of apartheid. Over the years City Group developed a repertoire of rituals to remember those killed by the apartheid regime. When political prisoners were executed, anti-apartheid activists were assassinated by South African agents, or the South African Defence Force massacred youth in the townships, City Group would respond to witness that act of state violence. Very often this involved a ritual of placing flowers and rolls of paper listing the names of those killed by the regime on the imposing, monumental gates of South Africa House. Sometimes this would be a modest and spontaneous act by the protestors gathered on the Picket for a particular shift, but during the weekly Friday night rallies or other large gatherings, a dignified queue would form as scores of protestors waited to add their flowers to the Embassy gates until they were bedecked in flowers of remembrance.

The picket organised legal and social support for its own supporters and in doing so, made itself the focus of solidarity. The legal defence of picketers who were arrested and harassed by the police, alongside legal action taken to defend the Picket’s right to continue protesting outside the Embassy in an effective manner, were frequently conducted politically, thus making the cases public the subject of appeals for solidarity themselves. The act of standing together outside the embassy regularly, often for hours at a time over an extended period fostered strong social solidarity amongst the group. This had many implications for picketers’ lives, but this close familiarity also generated levels of trust between them that enabled them to be more effective when taking action together; although, this is not to overlook how the intensity of life on the Picket and constant scrutiny from the police also stoked interpersonal conflict, suspicions and paranoia (c.f. Routledge 2012). As Helen, a graduate who joined the Picket on moving to London in 1989, observed,

“I think there was very strong solidarity between and for all members of the picket when it came the big stuff (support for someone arrested etc.) and at a day to day level there was usual a good ambience and spirit on the picket with all sorts of people working together. From time to time there were some arguments [and] unfriendly behaviour ... which I found really upsetting.” (Interview with Helen Landau, December 2011)

The everyday social movement practices outlined in the preceding paragraphs produced solidarity that acted on spatial relations operating at different spatial scales. Some of those practices sought to disrupt and reconfigure relations between Britain and South Africa; others sought to assemble and connect those engaged in cognate acts in different locations globally; whilst others still sought to gel together social movement actors on a pavement in Trafalgar Square.

Conclusions

For just short of four years, ending thirteen days after Nelson Mandela's release from jail in February 1990, City Group maintained a Non-Stop Picket outside the South African Embassy in London. Positioned on a broad pavement in Trafalgar Square in the heart of London, this continuous protest was a highly visible expression of opposition to apartheid and solidarity with those South African people who were fighting to end it. The duration of the picket over those four years was key to its distinctiveness and helped add moral weight to the legitimacy of its cause. In this paper we have examined how the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group framed its solidarity, as well as the numerous entangled practices through which it was enacted and performed.

Our study of the Non-Stop Picket extends recent geographical debates theorizing the heterogeneous ways in which solidarity between subaltern groups generate new political possibilities and reconfigure the relationships between (distant) places (Featherstone 2012; Massey 2008). City Group located its protest outside the South African Embassy for very deliberate reasons – as a diplomatic mission it was the symbolic and material representation of the apartheid regime in Britain. The Embassy materialised British political and economic links with South Africa. By its constant presence and its noisy, confrontational style of protest, the Non-Stop Picket disrupted the 'peace and dignity' of the Embassy and, with the aim of forcing its closure (until apartheid was ended), actively sought to disrupt existing relationships between Britain and apartheid South Africa. However in mobilizing British people to stand in solidarity with the Black majority in South Africa and their allies, the group also sought to generate new (subaltern) relationships between the populations of both countries.

We draw three main conclusions from this study as a means of intervening in the ongoing debates about geographies of solidarity. First, that how solidarity is framed politically cannot be separated from how it is performed. City Group understood its role (as a solidarity

organisation) as being subordinate to the actions of the Black Majority in South Africa and their popular organisations. As a British-based solidarity organisation, City Group framed its role as being to target and disrupt British economic, political and diplomatic links with apartheid South Africa. The group believed this could not be effective without also challenging systemic racism in Britain. Alongside these tasks, City Group attempted to offer political, moral, practical and material support to those resisting apartheid in South Africa.

Second, we have argued that greater attention needs to be to the micropolitics of the practices through which solidarity is enacted and articulated through key sites. In terms of international anti-apartheid solidarity, the Non-Stop Picket was one such key site. Participants in the Non-Stop Picket embodied City Group's approach to solidarity through their conduct there. The daily life of the Non-Stop Picket can be thought of as an assemblage of practices through which anti-apartheid solidarity was performed. By understanding solidarity in this way, it is possible to appreciate solidarity as more than a moral obligation. Attention to how solidarity is enacted and practised in specific sites offers greater possibilities for understanding how this form of activism acts for social change and generates new political possibilities beyond the cause it principally addresses.

Finally, we have suggested that relations of solidarity travel in and face more than one direction simultaneously. For a protest sustained by a relatively small group of young activists, the Non-Stop Picket had a disproportionately high profile in London and internationally. Its longevity, its location, and ways in which it practised its solidarity helped in this respect. Trafalgar Square was at the time a major transport hub in London and an important tourist destination. Many people stumbled across the protest, joined it for a short while and took news and inspiration from it back to their home towns and beyond. In this way, and through the other aspects of its campaigning, City Group positioned itself within transnational networks of anti-apartheid activists. The Non-Stop Picket provided a platform for representatives of the smaller Pan-Africanist and Black Consciousness movements in South Africa and Namibia (as well as dissident or marginalised voices within the ANC). This solidarity was reciprocated to the extent that, in the face of City Group's strained relationship with the London ANC, the support offered to the Non-Stop Picket by the PAC and BCM(A) gave the protest a legitimacy it might otherwise have lacked. Crucially, City Group served as a key hub in connecting solidarity groups around the world who were either committed to using direct action tactics in their protests and/or were open to providing solidarity to *all* political tendencies within the South African liberation movement(s). As we have shown, within these networks, solidarity flowed laterally as well as being extended to those resisting

apartheid in South Africa. When Non-Stop Picketers were arrested or harassed, letters of protest were dispatched by supporters around the world. In return, City Group sent delegations to anti-apartheid protests in France, Ireland and the Netherlands to exchange tactics and consolidate these networks of mutual support. Through the strong interpersonal bonds fostered through the shared experience of participating in the Picket over an extended period of time, as well as the structures of legal support that the group held in place, City Group also generated solidarity in defence of its own members.

Through the Non-Stop Picket, the members and supporters of City Group practised solidarity in many different ways. These practices operated at multiple spatial scales and were orientated towards disrupting or reconfiguring spatial relationships at different distances from the protest. These practices not only sought to embody City Group's political framework and understanding of the role of a solidarity organisation, they also served to sustain the Non-Stop Picket opposing apartheid in the centre of London.

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i The documentary *Non-Stop Picket Against Apartheid outside the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square, 1986* is available here - <http://www.revolutionarycommunist.org/index.php/britain/2286-non-stop-picket-against-apartheid-25th-anniversary-2011> (last accessed 19 June 2013).