

Solidarities Under Strain: Place-Based Identities in

Turbulent Times

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Placing Solidarities

In these increasingly perilous political times of alt-right populism, unsubstantiated fear of the Other, and geopolitical events capable of shifting social landscapes, significant insurgencies have matured in response to events of political unrest and instability and, with them, an outpouring of various and, seemingly conflicting, notions of solidarity. The political momentum surrounding solidarity's contemporary usage in the last few decades has resulted in new theoretical challenges, leading to important debates on what solidarity and solidaristic practices are, how they should look, and whether they are synonymous with notions and practices of 'belonging,' 'fraternity,' or 'shared responsibility' (Bayertz, 1997; Hoelz, 2004; Kymlicka, 2015; Roediger, 2016; Oosterlynck et al., 2016, 2017

While unsettling solidarity may seem perilous, doing so offers an opportunity to "produce new ways of configuring political relations and spaces" (Featherstone, 2012, 5-6; Roediger, 2016). Therefore, this research problematized place-based political solidarity and explore the tensions and fractures of by adopting a relational approach. Equipping this perspective, I focused on the role of the embodied, the affective, and the remembered in the construction of the identities of solidarities and their performativity (see also Routledge et al., 2007, Pratt, 2008; Schwenkel, 2013; Wilson, 2017; Muehlebach, 2017). As such, this work engages with recent scholarship that emphasizes the significance of understanding how interpersonal relations, affective and emotional attachments, and embodiment influence both the building and enactment of solidarity across places and borders (McFarlane, 2009; Routledge et al., 2007; Pratt, 2008; Wilson, 2009, 2016, 2017; Featherstone, 2012; Routledge, 2012).

Identifying Solidarities

Building on these critical discussions, my upcoming research aims to explore two intersecting dimensions of solidarity in the North East of England in the context of politically turbulent Brexit times: (1) the diverse forms of labour that go into maintaining solidarities and forms of place-based identity, pride and collectivity and; (2) the tensions and fractures that undermine and challenge solidarities, addressing how solidarities may fail, or be overridden.

The research will focus on the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, a town with a long history of border politics. Berwick's history has seen the town incorporated in both England and Scotland at different points, with its present identification as part of the North East of England being challenged by political parties in both countries. Given its border history, its relative socioeconomic disadvantage and its ageing population, Berwick presents a unique opportunity to explore how place-based solidarities, senses of identity and collectivity, are maintained and challenged in the turbulent politics of the present.



Challenging Solidarities

The need to continue developing a more expansive sense of solidarity in which the role of conflict and struggle in solidaristic becoming and practices, explore solidarities potential for exclusion and marginalization, and analyze the micropolitics of practices through which solidarity is enacted and articulated becomes clear (Rorty, 1989; Brown et al., 2014; Roediger, 2016; Kelliher, 2021). However, to do so first requires prioritizing a relational account of solidarity in which one considers how different scales can be mutually constitutive and the local and multiple ways that places relate to each other (Williams, 1989; Wilson, 2009, 2016, 2017; Kelliher, 2021). Notably, Brown et al., (2014) argues that adopting a more relational and place-based approach to solidarity requires a willingness to unsettle both the spatial relations and embodied spatial practices through which solidarities are enacted (see also Massey, 2008; Featherstone, 2012).



To adopt a relational approach to solidarity acknowledges their material and historical conditions and facilitates thinking of solidarity "as a particular assembly of bodies in time and space and of these bodies and their movement together as generative of political feeling and action" (Muehlebach, 2017, 100). As Pratt (2008) argues in her account on Canadian human rights activists in the Philippines and Wilson (2017) contends in her engagement with solidarities and space of encounter, the connections of solidarities are not disembodied or dispassionate. Rather, the embodied, affective, and emotive dimensions of support are inseparable from mobilizations of action and are "constitutive of a variety of economic, political and geopolitical practices" (Wilson, 53; see also Pain and Staeheloi, 2014; Povinello, 2006; Smith, 2016; Vasudevan, 2015; Wilson, 2016).

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Reframing Solidarities

One such way to interrogate these tensions and fractures within the affective, remembered, and embodied relational elements of solidarity is to critically re-imagine solidarities by incorporating the lens of trauma. Notably, trauma has become a keyword through which clinicians and practitioners approach violence (Kirmayer et al., 2007). The metaphor of trauma, as seen by critical studies of it, extends it far beyond psychology and medicine to also encompass and elucidate the social and cultural ruptures that define our individual, historical, and socio-political identities both in the extraordinary and within the everyday (Erikson, 1995; Caruth, 1995, 1996; Alexander, 2004; Kaplan, 2005; Casper and Wertheimer, 2016).



Geographical engagement with trauma is exemplified by—but by no means limited to—Coddington and Voutsinas (2017) and Adams-Hutchinson (2015) in which both extend theoretical discussion on the spatiality and temporality of trauma. Exploring Coddington and Voutsinas' work further, Coddington and Voutsinas argue for trauma's continued geographical relevance, particularly as definitions continue to expand so that traumatic events and experiences are no longer constrained to singular places or times. They conclude that trauma's inherent mobility forces an engagement with the radical interconnectedness people share with others and that "through the rupture of both spatial and temporal continuity," trauma is capable of exposing the threshold separating "past from present, here from there, self from other" (15).

Yet, as Coddington and Voutsinas (2017) remark, the political implications of the geographies of trauma are not yet fully realized and require further research. However, engaging with these geographies offers "at the very least the potential to unsettle, to disrupt, to open a space where change may indeed be possible" and unveils new modes of listening and witnessing to the multifaceted, generative, and transformative aspects of solidarity (16; Smith et al., 2005; Caruth, 1995, Adams-Hutchinson, 2015). In other words, I plan to explore how trauma can be utilized to address the intersections between the tensions and landscapes in which they form and are practiced. I believe that taking this turn in the analysis of solidarity, as Smith et al (2005) argues, exercises a geographical imaginary that helps me engage more critically with how solidarities are relationally experienced across scales, bodies, affects, and emotions and embrace solidarities under strain (4; Massey, 2008; Featherstone 2008, 2012; Kelliher, 2021).

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