

‘Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Material Culture, Heritage and Now’ Report

In 2022, I was invited by Professor Wessie Ling from [CREATURE](#) at London Metropolitan University, and Caroline Kamana Director of the [Liliesleaf Trust UK](#) to develop the ‘[Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Material Culture, Heritage and Now](#)’. This CREATURE-Liliesleaf joint project is a pilot investigation of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) artefacts and visual materials that had been collected and preserved by a few key figures involved in the AAM campaign in the UK, such as, Christabel Gurney, activist, historian, and editor of *Anti-Apartheid News* between 1969 to 1980; Tom Bell, who was recruited to smuggle into South Africa *Bucket Bombs* (harmless devices) that exploded ANC leaflets into the air; Jeff Howarth, LondonMet Academic Liaison Librarian for the [TUC Library Collection](#) which holds archival materials from the AAM. The aim of this research project is to examine selected everyday objects and visual materials, such as badges, mugs, flyers, posters, and even a suitcase, as points of discussion through which memories, stories, and understandings may be uncovered. The first stage of the project is informed by the mentioned individuals, through whom the point of discussion generated is expected to be extended with the communities (in)directly involving in and/or connecting to the Anti-Apartheid movement.

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The Boycott movement was formed by exiled South Africans in Britain and their British allies to draw attention to the atrocities of the Apartheid regime in South Africa by boycotting products that were made by South African companies, and companies that supported the South African Apartheid government and their regime. By 1960 the Boycott Movement evolved into the Anti-Apartheid Movement fighting for full isolation of apartheid South Africa including all exported and imported products, while at the same time campaigning for the freedom of Southern Africa’s oppressed peoples.

The researching of quotidian ephemeral objects produced to support the AAM campaign presents one with an overarching understanding of a movement that spans over 60 years. However, when focusing the lens on specific material objects, one can delve deeper into this history that not only surrounds these everyday items but also of the memories, testimonies and actions of the people who have collected and preserved them for future use and thus ensuring that history is not forgotten or misleadingly told.

The process of choosing and identifying objects was based primarily on their functionality as symbols of heritage that crosses the geographical, and political connections between South African and Great Britain. Using this framework as a point of enquiry, permitted the natural development of conducting oral history interviews alongside the close examination of these chosen objects, and allowed a greater insight of the significant value; badges, flyers, posters, mugs and even a suitcase holds in the production of generating knowledge and understanding of the various approaches to campaigning for freedom. These selected objects play a role in understanding the social history of political activism and campaigning through the close examination of their double usage from political tools in one context and decorative accessories, or intimate vessels in another. These objects are not only used or worn as symbols of activism, but equally operate as transgenerational and transnational objects that allows the exchanging of information. The usage of these 'familiar object(s) primarily characterised by its use value, might acquire a new meaning and a distinctively political use'.¹ Conducting oral histories alongside objects create a point of entry, that reveals stories that move beyond the materiality of the badge, flyer, or mug, and lets one comprehend the cultural and political landscape of the time. As suggested in Linda Sandino's article, 'interviews have now become a standard method for eliciting information about objects as diverse as fridge magnets.'² On the other hand, oral histories 'focuses on people in order to understand them as subjects in the socio-historical context of the immediate past or the present', and it is this approach that is used to elicit information.³

¹ Christopher Fletcher. *Everyday Political Objects: From the Middle Ages to the Contemporary World*. Routledge, London. 2021

² Alison J. Clarke. Taste Wars and Design Dilemmas: Aesthetic Practice in the Home, in C. Painter (ed.), *Contemporary Art and the Home*. Routledge: London, 2002, p. 131-151.

³ Linda Sandino. Introduction Oral Histories and Design: Objects and Subjects. *Journal of Design History*, winter, 2006, Vol. 19 (04)



Figure 1: Collection of artefacts and visual materials. Courtesy of Christabel Gurney Private Collection.

Take for example, the *No To Botha* badge promoting the 2nd of June 1984 demonstration against P.W. Botha's visit to the UK. As an object the round pin backed badge functions as an accessory that one wears as a fashion statement or to signify their affiliation to political group, or institution. Using the badge as a prompt to open a dialogic space through which memories may be located, creates a tangible thread that connects the past to the present. The importance of exposing these historical threads that travel through time provides an opportunity for present generations to revisit history through objects and oral histories that are connected to the Anti-Apartheid Movement and relate their learnings to current global campaigns, such as Black Lives Matter and or Extinction Rebellion.

My initial meeting with Christabel Gurney enabled the examination of her archived collection of Anti-Apartheid Movement materials. Stored in old shoe boxes, on bookshelves, in chester of draws and cupboards are posters, flyers, badges, mugs, T-shirts, and hats that address the complex nature of the movement. The number of badges that Christabel held in her collections spanned an array of affiliated supporters of the movement; from the TUC, women's movements, S.A Congress Trade Unions, and Haringey and Brent councils to name but a few, captured the levels of which the AAM campaign operated in Britain.

The process of photographing the selection of objects was a slow and methodical one, that afforded me the opportunity to examine each item closely, while thinking of the additional questions to ask Christabel. The *No To Botha* badge stood out because of its direct message denouncing P.W. Botha and announcement to join the demonstration. The interview process

that followed created a space for Christabel to access her memories surrounding the 2nd of June demonstrations.



Figure 2: Anti-Apartheid Badge. Courtesy of Christabel Gurney Private Collection.

P.W. Botha's European Tours objective was to break out of South Africa's international isolation, and to draw attention to their economic situation, as well as establish healthy trading links along their Cape Sea route. As Christabel Gurney remembers:

This is when the President came here in '84', and he had talks with Margret Thatcher at Chequers, because they were afraid to bring him through central London, so he never went to Downing Street. We went to Chequers.⁴

Though many of the oral history sessions offer up similar memories of historical events, adventures, fears, and the seriousness and importance of the AAM campaign, each of the separate recounting of events directed the trajectory of the research into deeper understandings of the involvement of the individuals and the importance of the material objects that had been collected as well as their connection to history, as Richard Grassby suggests, 'objects give material form to the rules and belief patterns of those who trade, purchase, or use them', further adding, that 'although artefacts are produced at particular moments, their persistence creates histories', that allows the owner to speak through.⁵

⁴ Extract taken from oral history interview with Christabel Gurney on Monday 5th December 2022

⁵ Richard Grassby. *Material Culture and Cultural History. The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Spring, 2005, Vol. 35 (4)

Though there are small collections of materials and objects in private hands, the main Anti-Apartheid Movement archives were donated to the Bodleian Libraries in Oxford, with some added to their digital repository '[Forward to Freedom](#)' (created by Christabel Gurney and Jeff Howarth). It was through the oral history interviews that my investigations led to the examinations of AAM materials in their Special Collections room and where I was confronted by the deeply insidious nature of the apartheid regime, that went far beyond the exciting, yet important stories of protesting outside supermarkets. When requesting items to view on my visit, I had by mistake ordered a box of restricted images. It was only when instructed by the archivist that the enormity of what I was about to see dawned on me. Contained within several archival boxes were black and white and colour images of the heinous destruction of human life, from mass graves to the murdered bodies of young African men and women, looked upon with triumphant disdain by police officers and soldiers alike. The awareness of being a witness to events that spanned back across time felt incredibly important, albeit, painful, and it was with that decision in mind that I continued to work my way through the collection of images.

This experience allowed me to understand the full scope and necessity of this research project and its relevancy in today's climate. As a campaign, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, although crossing decades was incredibly successful. Its multifaceted approach, from boycotts, strikes, protest, the bucket bombing of leaflets, as well as public speeches and the lobbying of Members of Parliament, inspired and informed people up and down the country about the atrocities taking place in South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique to name but a few countries.

There are generations today who are not aware of the apartheid regime or how close it is in history to our time. The further development of this research project will provide the continuation of the archive. As Stuart Hall suggests:

Constituting an archive represents a significant moment, on which we need to reflect with care. It occurs at that moment when a relatively random collection of works, whose movement appears simply to be propelled from one creative production to the next, is at the point of becoming something more ordered and considered: an object of reflection and debate.⁶

⁶ Stuart Hall. *Constituting An Archive*. *Third Text*, 15:54, 89-92. 2001

The opportunity for people to access and engage with these important artefacts and visual materials in a space that fosters the exchange of knowledge keeps at bay the possibility of the archival materials sliding into the recess of the past by refusing to view the archive as an 'inert museum of dead works, but a living archive, whose construction must be seen as an ongoing, never completed project'.⁷ Working with and through collected objects, visual materials, and oral histories activates through, sight, sound, touch, and smell, a critical re-interpretation that is, hopefully never complete. Using the Stuart Hall's notion of the living archive that is ongoing, has been used as a template for the creation of an interactive archive Padlet that can be found on the [Anti-Apartheid Legacy](#) website page.

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⁷ Ibid, p. 89-92