

The Beach - A Frontier of Nostalgia

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The beach is a place of waste and ruin. Rotting seaweed, stinking dead seals, cracked and crushed shells, deflated bluebottles, fat blobs of translucent jellyfish melting away in the sun. All the finished, broken things spewed out by the ocean.

In early January, estate agent, [Penny Sparrow's comments](#) about Durban's beaches surfaced in the muck and foam of social media. In a choppy Facebook post, she complained bitterly about black South Africans who swamped the city's beaches over the festive season break. Allowing these "monkeys" access to the beach 'invited huge dirt and trouble and discomfort to others' she cawed. They only "pick drop and litter". A mob of animalistic black bodies on the beach soiled Penny Sparrow's romantic ideas of a pristine public space of white leisure. Her racist comments were nauseating, as repulsive as the sappy mess wasting away on the beach.

What lies beneath Sparrow's comments, analyst Sisonke Msimang points out, is a white nostalgia for an apartheid past, for that safe space of fantasy where "whites could retreat from the reality of Africa: that it was a land inhabited by black people". During apartheid, whites could escape to the beach and 'find respite from the reality that despite apartheid, they could not escape black people'. Black South Africans rushed into Sparrow's turquoise memories of the beach as a haven of safety. While Sparrow's comments convey a sense of fear of being overwhelmed, marginalised and pushed out, Msimang points out, hard data shows that white South Africans flourish economically in post-apartheid era. Sparrow's coarse nostalgia is a wash of threatened material privilege.

It is easy to see why the beach accumulates such fond memories. The mess and debris strewn on the shore are like reminders of the things we hope to remember, and things we'd rather forget. Situated between land and sea its materiality is a convenient metaphor for structures of recollection. "The beach is a place of strong magic", notes Robert Preston-Whyte. But it is also a potent site of memory.

Penny Sparrow's comments triggered a flood of bitter memories about the beach, about being black, about the apartheid past. It made Bulelwa Makalima-Ngewana recall her childhood visits to the beach of adults and children piling on to the back of the pickup truck, 'jostling for space amongst the blankets and cooler bags' (i). And Andiswa Makanda was moved to recall her grandfather, Tat Coff Bay, hauling community members in his van over the festive season to the eponymously named beach in the Eastern Cape.

The material conditions of being black and poor made the trip special a way that Sparrow would

never be able to understand. “For many, going to the beach is a luxury, a privilege”. It meant having a brief, liberating encounter with a vast, compelling wilderness. “It is the next best thing that God has given us; for many, its mystic, ineffable beauty makes the whole experience surreal” (ii).

Yet for black South Africans to remember their crowded, noisily joyous trips to the beach during apartheid is also a complicated affair. For as Jacob Dlamini puts it “What does it mean for a black South African to remember life under apartheid with fondness?” (2009, 13). Memories of apartheid beach going are tinged with the murkiness of nostalgia.

The beach is a liminal space, an in-between place of memory and forgetting. As a free and open space of leisure and recreation, it is also a frontier, to invoke Mary Louise Pratt, a place of contestation about the meaning of the apartheid past, blackness, whiteness, privilege and power in the present. Indeed, these divisions resonate in the present, as a survey suggests, some white beaches are still self-segregating, largely due to access (iii). As we have seen this nostalgia is intimately tied to and articulated through the material conditions of different race groups in South Africa. Soaked in the salty history of the apartheid past, in South Africa, the beach remains a place of material memory.

Notes:

(i) <http://www.capetownpartnership.co.za/2016/01/using-public-space-to-bridge-divides/>

(ii) <http://www.iol.co.za/news/you-dont-know-about-us-1.1968013>

(iii) <http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2015/01/05/apartheid-ways-die-hard-on-sa-beaches>

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