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# Four Shades of Whiteness: A History of the White South African Beachgoer

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This chapter recounts a story about settler whiteness. It is set in South Africa and focuses on the thin slice of social life connected to vacationing and beaches. This might seem peripheral to the business of life at work, home, and school, but as Deumert[1] argues, the "beach is central to understanding how settler-colonial spatialities (and affects) are instantiated in public space." Their status as public space makes beaches an ideal site to investigate racial entitlement. Place entitlement is a sense of rights to and ownership of territory you don't own, but nonetheless occupy and possess. Colonialism was an expression of racial entitlement and the beaches in the postcolony exemplify the enactment of racial entitlement to public space.

We look to the beaches to see how settler whiteness has been enacted and defended in South Africa. Whiteness is strongly tied to *privilege* in the popular and political imagination, an invisible knapsack of unearned privileges that bestows untold advantages on white-classified persons and secures persistent systemic inequality[2]. As beaches became spaces of vacationing and leisure, they formed a symbolic and material anchor for White privilege. However, political struggle and antiracism victories have left whiteness in a state of "postcolonial melancholia,"[3] bearing a sense of loss of untrammeled privilege and exclusion. This pervasive condition has also brought into view a second defining element of whiteness, namely, an egocentric sense of *entitlement*.[4] This is a sense of worthiness tied up with entitlement to property and privilege overlaid with sense of loss, rage, and shame when expected benefits or advantages are denied.[5]

We begin centuries after settlers arrived in their ships, disembarked onto foreign shores where they met the native inhabitants and proceeded to occupy and own the whole of the land. Their entitlement was so thoroughgoing, their displacement of the native inhabitants so unrelenting, that settler communities around the world came to see themselves as natives![6]

We take up the story in the 1960s, the postwar period of industrial expansion and capital accumulation in South Africa, and proceed through three further historical periods of the development of whiteness. Each period describes an expression of entitlement that together represent the four shades of whiteness of the title. The first two periods, the White playground and disruption, are premised on the de jure segregation of the apartheid period. The second two, displacement and counterattack, are postapartheid expressions. The shifting sands of whiteness show how privilege and entitlement are reworked in changing social and political contexts, and go some way to explain its stubborn persistence.

## The White Playground

The first shade of whiteness develops in the political context that John Cell[7] described as the "highest stage of white supremacy." This is the context of de jure segregation, where settlers establish political control over natives in a context of urbanization, modernization, and industrialization. The Native Urban Areas Act (1923) and later the Group Areas Act (1950 and 1966) legislated racially demarcated residences in South African cities. Apartheid legislation also prohibited mixed marriages, segregated schools and employment, reserving advanced curricula and professional categories of work for whites.[8] The hope to create a grand White homeland also required the regulation of public space. To this end, the 1953 Reservation of Separate Amenities Act sought to minimize contact between races by racially demarcating public space, creating "Whites only" versus "nonwhite" park benches, public toilets, railway station entrances, beaches, and so on.[9] The best beaches were designated White by law, force, and intimidation.

The transformation of beaches into "vacationscapes"[10] played a major role in their racialization. Beaches at Durban and along the Natal Coast accommodated over a quarter of domestic tourists between 1985 and 2000.[11] Up to the early 1980s, the upcountry holidaymakers were exclusively White. The racial segregation and inequality of apartheid meant that before the 1970s, there was "virtually no Black tourism market."[12] Durban allocated the safest, best resourced, and most central 58% of beaches to Whites, who constituted 22% of the population at the time.[13] Beaches allocated to Black, Indian, and Coloured groups were outside of municipal control and ill-suited to recreational use.

The material order of the highest stage of White supremacy was overlaid with a symbolic order of whiteness. In the early twentieth century, Durban was marketed as "the Brighton of South Africa," self-consciously modelled on the British beaches with promenade, pier, "palatial hotels," and safe swimming.[14] With growing Afrikaner Nationalism in the postwar period, the Britishness of Durban gave way to a "Californication" of South African beach culture.[15] This was modelled on the

> …political economy of race and racism in the beach communities of Southern California and the discursive structures that grew up around it—the cult of California surfside leisure, . . .youth culture, and the intertwined mythos of freedom… and unfettered heteronormative sexuality.[16]

Durban was reconfigured as Surf City, "a symbolic marker for racial exclusivity on the apartheid beach."[17] The racial exclusiveness of surfing, sunbathing, holidaymaking, and the representations of (White) healthy, youthful selves and happy families all provided markers of whiteness and racial privilege.

Claudia Plunkett[18] conducted a comprehensive search of pictures of people on the beach published in the *Natal Mercury* between 1966 and 1996. These open a window to settler entitlement and the mind of apartheid. Almost 50% of the 1446 photographs were highly stylized depictions of White women posing for the camera. Figure 5.1a is

representative of this genre of photograph, heralding the arrival of summer and holidays. These images assume a White readership and do the work of normalizing the White beach and entitlement for White audiences. White men were also depicted in bathing gear, but generally in active stances as lifesavers, surfers and bodybuilders. Black people never featured in representations of Surf City, but they occasionally appeared on the beach as workers, in periphery, as in Figure 1b. This genre represented the symbolic order of apartheid with beaches being fun-in-the-sun playgrounds for Whites along with rugged White masculinity, and Black people either entirely absent or captured as lowly workers servicing the economy of leisure.

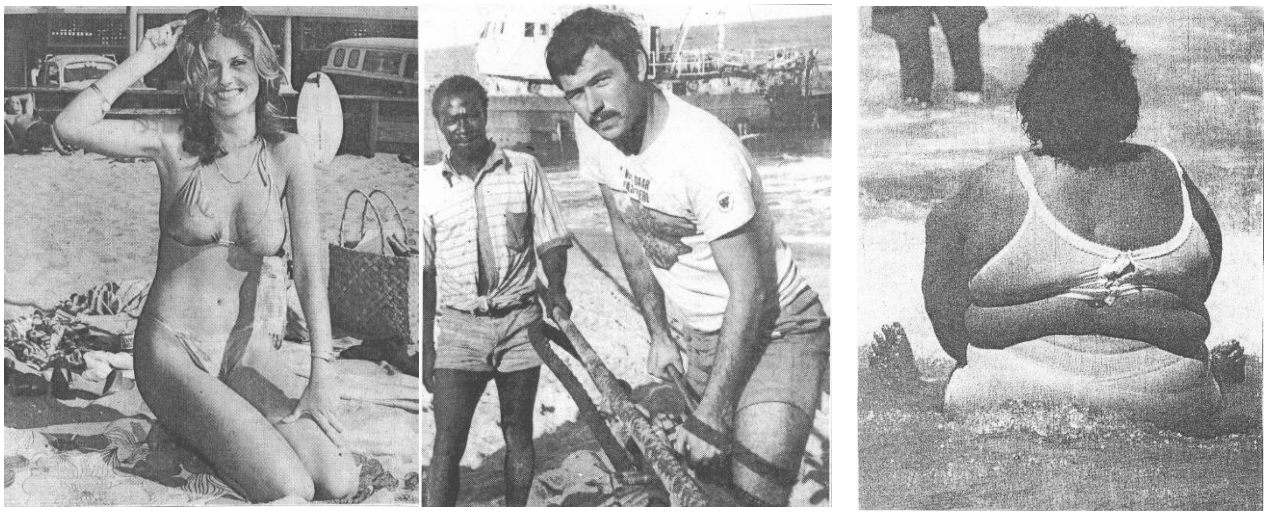

**Figure 1**. Photographs of people on Durban's beaches taken from the *Natal Mercury* between 1966 and 1996.

The individuals in the images appearing in the *Natal Mercury* need not have posed self-consciously as White people. They were doing holidaying, relaxing, suntanning, and so on. So too the persons behind the lens were not necessarily depicting whiteness. Nor were the thronging holidaymakers, surfers, sun tanners, and partygoers on the White playground. Whiteness was the taken for granted premise, an invisible racial position, norm, or standard,[19] upon which these forms of subjectivity and personhood were possible. Of course, this racial

positioning and subjectivity were predicated upon the erasure of Black personhood, autonomy, and ownership of place, which were both taken for granted and enforced.

## Disruption: Awakening to Challenge

Perhaps there was a time, at the apex of White supremacy, when racial exclusivity could be taken for granted on the "Whites only" beaches of apartheid South Africa. However, as Cell[20] argues, to function smoothly, the system of White supremacy required "some degree of accommodation and tacit acceptance on the part of those whom it is designed to control." By the 1980s White South Africa was under siege. Violent and nonviolent struggle against apartheid had gained momentum and the government declared a state of emergency in July 1985 in an increasingly desperate and violent attempt to maintain "peace and order." The summer holidays were a time to escape to the beaches, to free oneself from the stress of politics and the grind of everyday life, but the White playground was under threat by the unwanted intrusion of Black others and the politics of resistance.

During the course of the 1980s, pressure built to accommodate Black holiday makers and tourists. The matter was debated in Parliament and in local government. Protests against "Whites only" signs were met with resistance from residents and holidaymakers who "objected to Blacks on beaches meant for Whites."[21] Durban city created a small section of multiracial beach in 1982, but this did little to quell the protest. Durban resident Morris Fynn repeatedly cut down the apartheid beach signs, for which he was arrested and fined, and the signs were re-erected. In 1987, Allan Hendrikse and 25 members of his Labour Party took a "protest swim" on a "Whites only" beach in Port Elizabeth.[22] State President P. W. Botha forced him to issue an apology, which provoked outrage "because man does not apologize for what God have (sic) given you."[23] Beaches around the country became sites of struggle under the slogan "All God's beaches for all God's People",[24] challenging the racial order and unsettling the White playground.

The disruption of "place identity"[25] helped to make whiteness visible as an ideology of place and a form of subjectivity. Transgression of the racial order of "Whites only" beaches forced a response—"White talk"[26]—that articulated norms and assumptions of White entitlement that could previously exist as unspoken norms and assumptions. Durrheim and Dixon [27] presented an analysis of 400 articles, editorials, and letters about Durban's beaches that appeared in *The Mercury* between 1982 and 1995. The extracts below show two overarching topics of complaint: the sense of being dominated and intimidated by Black beachgoers and disgust at their conduct.

> We invite up-country visitors to enjoy the festive season on our fair (?) beaches (sic) and then subject them to the awful experience of being dominated and intimidated by hordes of largely undisciplined Black people . . . Looking back a few years, one asks what has happened to the happy family groups that one used to see on our beaches. (Letter to Ed., *Mercury*, January 13, 1988, p. 10)
>
> I would like to know if it is allowed to get completely undressed and take a shower, or lift your dress over your head (no pants on) and wash "you know where" in full view of the public? This is the scene at the North Beach showers every weekend. If I were to do this I would be arrested. If these people want to use the North Beach could they do so with decency (Letter to Ed., Mercury, November 9, 1990, p. 9)

Norms of conduct, dress, behavior, and the correct number and kind of people on the beach are described in these letters. These are previously unspoken norms against which the behavior of "undisciplined Black people" or "these people" are judged. The narratives enact forms of White-talk-for-White-hearers just as the images in Figure 5.1 depict a White-gaze-for-White-audiences. The "up-county visitors" and the "happy family groups" are codified refences to White people, as is the anonymous but evidently White letter writer, the "I" who would be arrested for taking an indecent shower.

In all this talk, Black beachgoers are constructed as foreign and out of place. Figure 5.1c shows how this can be done via visual representation of norm violation. The Black woman (shot from behind without permission, no doubt) is presented as a spectacle for the White viewer. The contrast between Figure 5.1a and 5.1c reveals all that is scandalous: It's not proper to be dressed in bra and panties. Latch the bra properly! Don't sit in the water like that. Are you not ashamed to show that body in public? The image of the African woman doesn't fit the genre of sexy-playboy-bunny-style White women on the beach. Its purpose is not to herald the summer but to show White readers the new reality of Black people on White beaches. Like the letters considered above, the picture serves as a reminder of an indecent, unwelcome Black presence that undermines the character of the White place. It shouts out: "You don't belong here!"

It is a remarkable achievement that European settlers could portray African natives as foreign presences who don't belong on African beaches. This speaks volumes about the nature of White entitlement. It is entitlement to a racial preserve, the beaches as the White playground. This entitlement is premised upon an extensive valuation of whiteness: White is beautiful, White is decent/civilized, White is well-behaved, White is well-dressed, White is normal, White is happy, White is family. White is the standard against which everything is judged. This is what is at stake. White supremacy renders a Black presence in the White playground as a violation of the integrity of the place as well as all that is good and valuable and decent, which are the grounds of entitlement.

These representations of Black presence on "Whites only" beaches not only communicate a mourning for the loss of place, it also expresses outrage at the violation of racial entitlement to the place that is lost. All the narratives and the pictures communicate a self-righteous indignation, umbrage, at the impending upending of the racial order of apartheid. The narratives of disgust underpin anger, even outrage, at the violation of place and the displacement of Whites. But this was only the start. There was much more to come.

# Displacement

Beach apartheid legislation was repealed in 1989 and the remaining "Whites only" signs were removed. This was a period of massive change in the country as Nelson Mandela was released from prison, the Black liberation parties were unbanned, and multiparty negotiations culminated in the first democratic election in South Africa in April 1994. The newly elected Black majority ANC-government would ensure public access to public spaces and would criminalize racism. How could White entitlement be expressed in this context?

A number of high-profile cases of racism on the beaches showed the fate of those who would repeat the supremacist views from the past. In January 2016, Durban estate agent Penny Sparrow tweeted her indignation, describing Black beachgoers as "monkeys" let loose on public beaches, "inviting huge dirt and troubles and discomfort to others."[28] Two years later Adam Catzavelos posted a video of himself on holiday on a beach in Greece, reveling in whiteness: "Not one k***r in sight, f**king heaven on earth. . .You cannot beat this!"[29] Both were convicted of racism and were sentenced to hefty fines of R150,000 each [approximately $11 000 at the time]. Times had changed and the explicit racism of the past was now a criminal offence. White entitlement required new forms of expression.

During the summer holidays of 1999 and 2000, John Dixon and I interviewed White beachgoers at the holiday resort of Scottburgh, 60 km south of Durban. We asked them how their holidays had changed since the repeal of apartheid legislation and to share their experiences of intergroup contact and their opinions about the desegregation of the beaches.[30] The extracts below show the evolution of White entitlement and indignation in the postapartheid context.

> **Peter**: I'm not a racist. . .It's not about Black or White or something like that. It's like if someone can behave themselves like humans, you know, you'll give them your respect. . .but if someone—White, Black, don't know, it doesn't matter what color—. . .if they behave like animals then I mean I'm against that.[31]

**Simon**: I don't mind. If it's safe, I don't mind if we have a toot or two, look after our place. But in a case like yesterday, I mean if you just ride back now, you look at the streets, the streets is full of shit. That, I don't feel comfortable like that, I don't care if Black families is all around us, as long as they keep their space clean, it's fine. If you act like savages then no. Yesterday, where was it? Doonside, you had a guy over there, telling you, he's in the sea, brushing his toothbrush, er, brushing his teeth. I mean that's so stupid.[32]

**Anna**: I mean mainly they they've taken over Durban. I don't think that will ever change that's definitely now their little town whatever, beaches, it's theirs. Let them have it, but I think in a couple of years' time Durban is going to be in such a mess. I don't know, that's my opinion. I mean for a holiday I will never ever book any holiday accommodation in Durban itself, forget it, never.[33]

**Jack**: We do have different ways of doing things you know, let's call it Black and White.

**Merle**: Like wearing proper bathing costumes.

**Jack**: We come here as four people, as a family, whereas bus loads (inaudible) taken over. . .So I'd rather just move away. . .When I was younger, when I was their age we used to holiday in Durban, it was a pleasure, and then it started changing. Eventually we moved further South.[34]

The first two extracts show the continuation of the theme of the indecent presence of Black people on the beach and incredulity at their behavior and appearance. As discussed in the previous section, the spectacle appears as such against the backcloth of assumptions about how beaches "should be" and the norms and assumed entitlements of whiteness. Now these are prefaced with denials of racism: "I'm not a racist," "I don't mind" and avowals of being color-blind, "it doesn't matter what color [they are]." "White talk"[35] accommodates

antiracism as it articulates entitlement to the (mythical) White playground of colonialism and apartheid.

Mourning loss and displacement are now accompanied by rhetorical moves to adapt to the new political reality. The second two extracts repeat a well-worn refrain of postapartheid whiteness: "They've taken over. If they want it, they can have it. We will find someplace new." We documented racial patterns of beach occupation for 12 days in 1999/2000 and 7 days in 2001/2002 and observed repeated patterns of racial segregation and "White flight."[36] The experience of loss of place, the sentiment of "they can have it," and the withdrawal and migration this sets up have helped to create the South Africa we see today. New sites of whiteness have been carved out in almost every sphere of life, from the beaches of Ballito to those of Paternoster, wine farm tourism, edge cities, exclusive clubs, high-end malls, gated communities, equestrian estates, Umhlanga and Sandton, and so on. Whites insulated themselves from political change by talk geared to denial of racism and "semigration" to new enclaves of white privilege.

The postapartheid architecture and preserve of whiteness need not be racially exclusive. The White spaces accommodate qualified entry of "decent" Black people who know how to behave. In this way, the norms and standards and other trappings of whiteness are preserved in the present. Apartheid might be gone but whiteness persists in the norms of ("civilized") conduct and ideals of personhood communicated by Californicated, tanned, happy, youthful White bodies along with exclusive holidays and other signifiers of wealth and luxury. A "colonial mentality" of whiteness persists as "residues, appropriations, subconscious reproductions and disguises [which] are diffused in society through subtle and not-so-subtle gestures, attitudes, and informal rules of social relations."[37] These provide a home for whiteness and a place to satisfy and affirm White entitlement in the postcolony. In the process of displacement and semigration, the beach is reconfigured as a retreat for a

threatened and threatening deracialized whiteness, an object of contemporary attack and counterattack.

## Counterattack

White South Africans have always seen themselves as victims or potential victims. Concerns about the *Die Swart Gevaar* (the Black Peril/threat) are condensed in the nightmare of being individually slaughtered in your bed, as depicted by Anton Kannemeyer's print "N is for Nightmare (house)", or collectively being "pushed into the sea."[38] The existential fear of racial violence forms the backcloth to whiteness in settler society.

Elemental anxieties of the nightmare played themselves out on the exclusive Clifton 4th Beach in Cape Town in December 2018. To remove a "bad element" from their wealthy neighborhoods, residents around the beach commissioned a local security company to chase beachgoers off the beach on the afternoon of December 23, 2018. It was a multiracial crowd, but the eviction had all the hallmarks of White entitlement and conveyed reminders of the "forced removals" of apartheid. Black activists responded by conducting a ritual slaughter of a sheep on Clifton Beach on December 29, calling on ancestors to "help us to really cleanse our beaches of racist White people."[39] Spiegel reports the transcript of an eyewitness account from an unnamed White student:

> [T]he absolute savagery that I. . .saw today. . .They dragged [the sheep] by the ears into the sea, symbolizing how they are going to drive White people into the sea. . . .They dripped the blood all over the beach. . .to symbolize that "this beach is ours" and they will do anything to claim this land which they call their land, even though their people are not indigenous in this part of the world. They. . .sprayed [the sheep's] blood all over the beaches to mark that this is now their territory and they are going to drive White people from Clifton into the sea and they're going to come and expropriate and take all the land, all the houses. . .here.[40]

All the elements of the nightmare are there: the savagery, the violence, the blood and sacrifice, and the driving of Whites into the sea. The nightmare is itself permeated with entitlements of whiteness, which it expresses as much as consoles. The old themes of desecration of White space, incredulity, savagery, and the sense of self-righteous indignation attend these narratives of victimhood.

Another recent incident, also in Cape Town, shows how White victimhood is evolving. We pick up the story of whiteness on the beaches in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emergency Level 5 Lockdown rules saw all beaches in the country closed from March 26 to 1 May 1, 2020; beach gatherings were banned from until May 31; and a nighttime curfew on beaches was imposed until August 18, 2020. After the first wave of the pandemic, beaches were opened and then closed again during the second and third waves, especially over the peak holiday season in December/January 2020 and 2021. There was pushback against the government's lockdown restrictions throughout the pandemic, especially the ban on alcohol and tobacco sales, and this spilled onto beaches in January 2021.


**Figure 2**. We Are More protest at Fish Hoek beach, January 2021[41]

Activist groups going by names such as Woke Nation and We Are More (W.A.M) organized protest gatherings on the beaches in violation of the lockdown. The rationale behind the protests is explained by an organizer, Clay Wilson:

> We want beaches opened because they belong to the people. People are starving. They can't earn a living because of COVID-19. The government must open beaches and drop the liquor ban. These COVID-19 laws are only serving a few, who are politically connected, and affect those who earn a living through tourism.[42]

This is a new incarnation of White talk. Under apartheid and into the postapartheid context, White people have often stood against "the people," objected to the presence of Black people on "their" beaches, and withdrawn into new White enclaves rather than integrate. Multiracial beaches, which are now acknowledged to belong to "the people" become places to speak on behalf of "the people" against the government. It is "White talk," reiterating familiar themes of "decay, corruption, greed and incompetence" in government.[43] Freshly rehabilitated by their perceived victimhood, the supporters and defenders of apartheid now position themselves in the vanguard of the struggle for justice. The carefully deracialized language is careful to communicate the entitlements of victims, repeating the self-righteous indignation of the master's voice.

The privilege and entitlements of whiteness were apparent to Black commentators, including EFF [Economic Freedom Fighters, political party] provincial chairperson, Melikhaya Xego, who contrasted the policing of the beach gathering and a gathering of Black "pensioners and people with special needs" a week earlier:

> Based on the previous experiences, it is clear to us that if the majority of these protesters were Black they would have been arrested and shot at with stun grenades and water cannons by the police and law enforcement, but because the majority are White the police did nothing.[44]

The story ends with pictures of a W.A.M. leader, Craig Peiser, being arrested and the report of his disruptive court appearance and his subsequent admission to Valkenburg hospital to where he was declared unfit to stand trial, being unable to "distinguish between right and wrong."[45] As with the well-publicized arrests of and fines imposed on Penny Sparrow and Adam Catzavelos, this is a cautionary tale that sets limits for White entitlement.

## An Adaptable, Intersectional Palette of Whiteness

The story of settler whiteness has been recounted here as a geographically located historical narrative. Both the geography and history require qualification. Fixing attention on the beach has helped to contain the narrative, to tell a big history in a few pages. Although beaches might appear peripheral to the big questions of land and urban justice, they teach us much about the morphing persistence of white supremacy. The framing of civilization versus savagery, the desire for exclusion, and the self-righteous indignation that define White entitlement across all four historical contexts considered here also find expression in other spheres of life. Whiteness is enormously adaptable. No doubt, similar kinds of "White talk" can be found off South African shores, in postcolonial contexts which are now controlled by European settlers (e.g., in the United States, Australia, Europe) and those which are not (e.g., in Africa and Asia).

The historical narrative gives the impression that the shades of whiteness are stages of whiteness, beginning at the highest stage of White supremacy and then following its fall. However, this is not a developmental account of whiteness. All four shades of whiteness can occur together in any particular context. They blend together as a palette of whiteness with all expressions occurring at once at this point in history. Segregation ensures that White playgrounds continue to proliferate in postapartheid South Africa. Qualified Black people can have entry and so there is always the threat of disruption, the wrong type, the threat of violence, the experience of displacement, and the need to fight back to make South Africa great (or White) again.

The focus on entitlement helps us appreciate the adaptability and intersectionality of whiteness. The metaphor of the "invisible knapsack" reminds us that whiteness owns privilege.[46] Semiotic privilege links desirability and value to whiteness, making whiteness an aspirational standard. This privilege can also be cashed in for favorable treatment—for example, by policing the White crowd with kid gloves. However, this is not always the case. White talk loves the consolation of victimhood precisely because this points to sites and instances of loss of privilege and occasions where Whites are special targets of attack. At these "intersections of whiteness,"[47] where being White can be a liability as much as an asset, the entitlements of whiteness may trump its privileges in mapping the way forward. The entitlements of whiteness are an adaptable, intersectional palette.

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