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Segregation and Sentiment

The Emotional Practices of Apartheid, 1948-1990

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Segregation and Sentiment: The Emotional Practices of Apartheid, c. 1948-1990

Jagger Andersen Kirkby

Project Outline

Historian Premesh Lalu has argued that South Africa is yet to undergo a 'postcolonial moment' (Lalu 2008). Social and liberation histories of segregation and apartheid that have dominated the historiography from the 1970's onwards, have undoubtedly provided invaluable insights into the material workings of apartheid and the oppressed majority's response to it. Yet, post-apartheid reality has provoked a delicate debate on whether the historiography of South Africa's racial dilemma has been monopolised as a 'struggle history'. Recent studies have instead directed attention towards how the apartheid system managed to survive for 42 years (Dubow 2014). At the same time, historians have become increasingly interested in the role of emotions as social and cultural products in constituting and reconstituting differences between individuals and communities.

My project advocates the introduction of emotions as a historical variable into apartheid histories. In probing the emotional practices shaped by, reflected in, and constituent of apartheid legislation and its application, it examines the role emotions played in constituting and reconstituting notions of race, belonging, and difference throughout the apartheid era. It aims, ultimately, by combining state history and social history, to provide glimpses of a 'postcolonial moment'.

Whilst an abundance of historical studies exist on apartheid at the macro- ('grand apartheid') and meso- (urban apartheid) levels, studies at the micro (personal) level remain remarkably absent.

The project dissertation therefore examines the emotional practices involved in the application of everyday apartheid doctrines, such as residential segregation, miscegenation, and the segregation of public amenities. Such doctrines were codified into law through acts passed and amended on the behest of consecutive apartheid governments from 1949 until their gradual repeal from the early 1980's onwards.

Emotions as Discursive-Material Practices

In a case study outlined below, I conceive of emotions as a form of material-discursive practice, in line with the now common conception among many historians of emotions that the expression and experience of emotions, and culture and the social, are mutually constitutive. The concept of ‘emotional practices’ (Scheer 2012) captures the essence of this conception by suggesting that we ‘do’ emotion as more or less conscious habits emerging from the socially structured body. Emotions thus have historical specificity. While historians, generally, will remain bound by textual sources, this notion broadens the palette of identifiable emotions in that they need not specifically be ‘named’.

I build on this by widening the epistemological space in which emotional practices may play out, based on new materialist theory (Barclay 2017; Barad 2003). In such a worldview, greater attention is paid to material surroundings as co-producers and emotion, as neither language nor materiality is given priority over the other. Emotions may thus ‘do’ things to the world and, as cultural theorist Sara Ahmed has famously argued, ‘work’ to align bodies in collectives against other ‘others’.

Case Study

Pursuing Happiness: Emotional Practices and the Reservation of Separate Amenities in Apartheid-Era South Africa

In 1953, the South African parliament passed the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (RSAA), which provided for the lawful racial segregation of virtually all public amenities throughout the country. The RSAA built on existing traditions of segregation and further confirmed that amenities needed not be provided on an equal basis between the different racial groups, neither in quantity nor in quality.

In this case study, I conduct a reading of correspondence between provincial and municipal authorities and members of the public regarding the establishment and potential segregation of recreational amenities in Cape Town and in the smaller town of Port St. Johns. I identify and analyse the emotional practices involved as well as how these practices ‘worked’.

In both places, authorities and members of the public highlight access to recreational amenities such as playgrounds, beaches and parks, as important to the individual’s general sense of happiness and wellbeing. In letters to the authorities,

however, the rationales on how to secure this differ. An overwhelming majority of the memoranda and complaints written by white individuals reveal segregation as the sole most important issue with regard to their potential use of recreational facilities. People of colour are presented as mobilising happiness in ‘inappropriate’ ways such as bathing in the nude, shouting while playing, or behaving in parks in a ‘swaggering manner’. Such practices of emotion are conceived as obstructs to whites mobilising their own happiness, in effect alienating them from using recreational facilities in which to do so, regardless of the abundance available to them. In other cases, the mere presence of non-whites in and on certain premises is suggested as a threat to the happiness of whites. Examples here are the ‘threat’ of an increased presence of non-whites in coastal areas to (white) domestic tourism, and white children being ‘forced’ to play in unsafe areas, such as car parks, due to coloured (mixed race) children utilising inner-city playgrounds.

The, albeit very few, requests and complaints from non-whites, instead show a lack of amenities in general as their biggest obstacle to mobilising pleasure through recreation.

In Cape Town, the requests for segregation of amenities and complaints about integration were substantially met and resolved by the provincial authorities within a year. In this way, happiness might be read as a perceived reward for an active investment in racist policies (Ahmed 2010; 2014). Port St. Johns’ request for the segregation of the town’s main beach, however, was left unresolved for more than 15 years due to the town’s potential inclusion in the Transkei, an ‘independent’ homeland for South African blacks created by the apartheid government.

The case shows how the provisions of the RSAA encourage perceptions of racial differences when mobilising emotions through the use of public facilities, whether segregated or not. It thus implies an interaction between emotional practices and conceptions of race. More tentatively, the case suggests a cooperativeness on the part of authorities in furthering apartheid at the micro level, based on the racialization of emotional practices, provided that this did not interfere with apartheid policies at the macro-level.

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