

<http://somatosphere.net/2018/01/beach.html>

## Beach

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By Meg Samuelson

Beaches are good places to think with about waste and ruination. They were once generically places of waste (in the etymological sense of “unoccupied, uncultivated”) while recognized as actants in processes of ruination—including erosion that produced their defining shingle and sand, the death and decay of what washes up on them, and the shipwrecks they induced. In the industrializing world – and subsequently in its touristic outposts – they were domesticated into leisure zones swept clean of detritus and emptied of fisher-folk. Now enabling what Michael Taussig (2006: 98) describes as a “fantasmatic recovery” of nature by those alienated from it in the “One World Market”, beaches have come to present a prospect invested with value that in turn casts them as the precarious border protecting prime property from the forces that the Anthropocene discharges. Armoured through a paraphernalia of seawalls and promenades, the shoreline is conscripted to the defense of the claims its cultural re-inscription has inflated.

But the cultivation of the beach as an earthly paradise, and thus as outside the ravages of time, is paradoxically laying it waste: left to their own devices, beaches recuperate after sea surges and other ruinous events or retreat landwards; their gravest threats come from the engineering projects that seek to save them from rising seas and shore up the development pressing down upon them that is in turn encouraged by their enforced stability. At the same time, if beaches afford an apprehension of our planetary situation in the rise and fall of the tides, they now alert us also to the extent to which this planet has been trashed in the waste that washes up on their sands (see [Kim de Wolff's blog on the “plastic beach” of Kamilo, Hawaii](#)). While repeatedly stripped of temporal markers, beaches become containers for anxieties around end times: Neville Shute's novel of the nuclear age memorably imagined being “on the beach” as waiting for a disaster that has already happened; in the epoch of the “new human” I am again drawn to this limen of the future anterior tense.



The wasting of the beach, Muizenberg, 2015-2016

The beach I've been thinking with for the past decade or more is in Muizenberg, a seaside suburb of Cape Town in which a dynamic and fluctuant ecotone coincides with the jagged edge between consuming and superfluous populations, and where waste conjugates environmental and social frames in troubled and troubling ways. This coastline was evidently modelled on the beaches invented as leisure-landscapes in the Euro-Atlantic world over the past two centuries (see Corbin, 1994; Gillis 2012) while enfolded in the colonial-apartheid procedures particular to this shore. For much of human history, it sustained gatherers who gainfully scavenged gifts from the sea that are now often encoded as waste (see [Jatin Dua's contribution](#) to this collection for a discussion of "gifts from the sea"). After the Dutch East India Company established a settlement at the Cape, these groups began to be banished from the peninsula. But, due to its marginal position on the outskirts of a nascent Cape Town, Muizenberg continued to accommodate motley and mobile crews of whalers and fisherman along with nomadic gleaners until the late nineteenth century. Its fortunes changed when arch-imperialist Cecil John Rhodes established a holiday cottage there in 1899. Thereafter, it was recast as a reproduction of the Victorian seaside town and become hugely popular with the ascendant Randlords of Johannesburg. Rapid development followed, and Muizenberg was lauded as the Brighton of South Africa. Its sands are today still fringed by the iconic painted beach-boxes that hark back to this heyday, along with the seawall erected to protect a beachfront hotel.

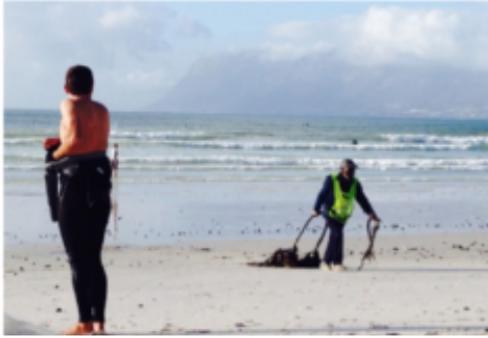


Turn-of-the-century postcards of a beach in the making

For a while the mecca of white South Africa, Muizenberg slipped out of fashion in the latter part of the twentieth century. But, riding the wave of the recent international surfing boom, it is now once again a popular destination and is regularly listed among the world's best surf towns for its gentle beach-break and extensive amenities. Over the past decade, the crumbling buildings fronting the shore were renovated and redeveloped into an extended surf-shop-cum-food-court frequented by Capetonians and tourists seeking to get away from it all or to recharge themselves in nature. Early on weekend mornings the parking lot is packed with SUVs, polyurethane board after board is waxed up, neoprene suit after suit pulled on, all observed by a thriving café culture: a stream of coffee is dispensed in disposable cups and an array of seafood consumed – each part of long trails of ruination that unfurl in the ocean and across the continent.

This consumption and the waste it produces rub up against the cast away populations consigned by apartheid to the wastelands of the Cape Flats that extend north and east across the dunes, and who have again been disposed of or rendered superfluous by the neoliberal city. The informal car-guards who insert themselves in the scene are the subject of constant schemes to “clean up” the beach, and the good people of this suburb-by-the-sea employ security to protect their rubbish from bin-pickers and ensure its successful transfer to the landfill rising above their shacks and which, like the neighboring sewerage works, leaches into the ocean through the fetid river weaving between them.

Maintaining the idyll of the beach and keeping things in their place is an ongoing project, but the leakages are equally relentless. Nutrient-rich, sand-stabilizing kelp washes up attracting flies, and outcast peoples are briefly returned to orders of “usefulness” by being dispatched in the grey mornings before beach-goers arrive to drag it into municipal solid-waste tractors who cart it away to the landfill. Previously an occasional visitor to the beach, an earth-mover took permanent residency this last summer. For days after its exertions the sand was like a dried-out pan offering nothing to the hungry men who harvest white mussels in what is a millennia-old practice along this coast. Spring tides, in turn, reveal an ugly secret beneath the seawall: a thin layer of golden sand covers netted parcels of rocks and other debris that shore up the beach. Ruination lies latent here, like a harbinger of the planetary future itself. Like the plastic pellets that wash up on particular currents and swells, it is a lurking reminder that, while we may dispose of things, nothing is ever thrown “away”. The beach, then, is a sentinel that keeps watch on the Anthropocene, acting as an indicator of “our” malaise while bringing into question the shared nature of the Anthropocenic condition.



Human and non-human waste on the beach, Muizenberg, 2015-2016

While the beach helps me to think about the temporality of waste and ruination in provocative ways, waste on the beach also returns me to the place of things. Muizenberg is among the more desegregated spaces in what is often described as the world's most unequal city. But, like other South African beaches that were designated for white use only under apartheid, it too becomes subject to a moral panic that crystalizes around refuse on the two days of the year when thousands – rather than a few – cross over to these sands from that beneath the shanties which stretch for miles over the dunes. Social media chatter caused a furor in early 2016 when black beachgoers in Durban on New Year's Day were described as “monkeys” for leaving beaches “dirty” and accused of [“destroying the beach”](#). Similar responses meet black crowds at Muizenberg, issuing a salient reminder of how discourses of waste are used to construct entire populations on the beach as “matter out of place” – in short, following, Mary Douglas, as themselves “dirt”.



Keeping matter in place, Muizenberg, 2015-2016

I seek other ways of thinking and writing about this place. Like the photographs discussed in [Sharad Chari's contribution to this series](#), my story of beach is one that dwells in detritus and considers the possibilities that might open out from it. It recognizes how the beach is being wasted, but also how that which is treated as waste can also be received as sustenance. As someone who thinks through literary form, I am mindful of the ways in which genre shapes and contains meaning. What genre, I

wonder, might enable me to think *with* the beach and its intricate and imbricating modes of ruination?

The story I want to tell is one that is able to hold together – in a single fraught frame – a range of competing affects and implications: the abjection I feel when I brush against plastic in the shallows; the guilt when toes curling against this filth are suddenly pinched by a crab and I am forced to recognize that my devastated other place is an other's habitat; the grief on the days in which the water is grey and thick with debris; the heart-stopping beauty of so many mornings; the boundless joy when the sea is translucent and calm or indigo and wild, and seals and dolphins sport with me in the waves; the days when I righteously gather up rubbish as I cross the sand, and those when I feel helpless against its quotidian arrival; the marvelous discoveries after a storm and even the way in which shiny human things nestle among starfish and shells; the irrepressible desire to squish the increasingly ubiquitous blobs of jellyfish through my toes that transforms an apocalyptic sign into a peculiar sensory pleasure; the convenient satisfaction of a post-surf coffee right on the sand before tossing my cup in the overflowing bin; even the grumbling about the kelp removal project that is for some a meal ticket; and, most of all, that moment when – wrapped in my neoprene skin, strapped to my polyurethane foam and epoxy-glassed board by a urethane leash – I turn, dig deep, drop down a dark face and feel myself sea-changed into a flowing, flying assemblage of energy, water, flesh and petrochemicals that feels like life itself.

The romantic comedy of the baby-boomer “beach blanket” movies is no longer available to me after the end of innocence that the Anthropocene spells out, but I also resist the register of the apocalyptic and the tragic: there is no revelation from within my state of implication, nor any catharsis. I find suggestive Timothy Morton's proposal, in *Ecology without Nature*, that the genre appropriate to our condition is *noir*. Like *noir* detectives, we are drawn deeper into a morally ambiguous state of complicity, while the femme fatales who populate the genre are emblematic of the fatal attraction that has drawn a massive wave of humanity to the coast and revised its meanings and values in a mutually ruinous relationship.



My surfboard will survive the ocean, Muizenberg, 2016

Yet, although I may apparently be narrating a crime, I don't want to contain my story of the beach within this frame. I want a genre that will speak not only of implication in wrong-doing and the compromising flash of attraction but of also of an enduring attachment that is damaging not despite but because of the strength of the bonds that bind and undo. Not romance (the latent ruination tells us that it will not end well), it is a story buoyed up by the lyricism of Rachel Carson's sea trilogy, but one which infuses her rapture in the face of fragility with the grim tenacity of "loving our monsters" that Bruno Latour advocates: it strikes a precarious balance between devotion and destruction that the surfer embodies. It is a story of being enlivened by the energy the ocean conveys through polluting, chemically-inert materials that will themselves withstand decomposition, of a "hyperobject" (Morton, 2013) that adheres the ocean-surfer assemblage but which will also stick around after it: it is the toxic love story of a surfboard that brings me to life on the ocean, and which will outlive it.

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