

Male
'Coloured'
Thirties
Academic
Originally from the Western Cape

A Road Trip with a *DIFFERENCE*

My earliest recollection of the conscious imprint of race as a form of difference dates back to when I was about six-years old. Upon reflection, I am sure that race and the segregation of apartheid had impacted on me prior to this in many insidious ways, but this is one of the most significant memories of my childhood that I have a more overt awareness of, and to which I can ascribe some of my first visceral responses to my experiences of apartheid segregation.

At the time, the South African economy was in a decline after 40 'fat' years that had commenced prior to the Second World War. Angola and Mozambique had both thrown off the shackles of colonial oppression and the segregationist politics and policies of countries like Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and South Africa were under increasing internal and international pressure. In South Africa, the trade union movement was burgeoning, SACOS (the South African Council on Sport) had been instrumental in organizing boycotts against rebel sports tours from the United Kingdom, the Black Consciousness Movement was on the ascendency, student struggles were mounting against the racialisation of South African education, and the country was about to be thrown into a crisis that would amount to a historical tipping point for the liberatory struggle in South Africa. For many, it was truly a year of living dangerously – it was January 1976.

My world however was reasonably sheltered from all of these seemingly external events. I was more preoccupied with the novelty of being at primary school, and my most serious dilemma was which of our neighbours I would ask to join around supper-time to watch television, which was a relatively new feature in many South African households. My father, an artisan, and my mother, a kindergarten teacher, both had aspirant middle class values. We had moved to an underdeveloped area in the southern suburbs of Cape Town when I was one-year old. It was an area that had no inside ablution facilities, no street lights, and no tarred roads. However, in later years it would become known as a middle class 'coloured' area. Education was valued above all else as a great equalizer, and was actively supported and encouraged by both my parents. So my immediate world was somehow far removed from the events that were happening in the social formation more broadly, as my parents tried to navigate the pernicious system of apartheid and to in turn teach us to navigate it as well – but with as little overt and visible resistance to the system as possible. During my adolescence I was less than generous in my judgements of their apparent capitulation to the apartheid system, but in retrospect, I am perhaps better able to acknowledge their own anxieties, fears and strategic responses to apartheid that shaped these particular responses.

During this year, my parents had been invited to a conference to represent a charitable organisation that they had belonged to (it was the equivalent of the Lions Club, but was the 'coloured' version of it, as integration in charitable organisations such as this was outlawed at the time under apartheid). The conference was in Rhodesia, and we embarked on our first road trip as a family in a second-hand turquoise Beetle. We had travelled along with another family who was white and who had been involved in the Lions Club of South Africa. Our first major stop was in the small town of Laingsburg, and we had planned the trip to reach their by mid-morning. My father had suggested that we stop for brunch. On entering the local Wimpy, we seated ourselves and waited for service. After a short time, the manager approached my father and requested that we leave as the restaurant did not serve non-whites. My father, probably embarrassed, humiliated and publicly shamed about his powerlessness to act in defence of his family, was enraged and furious with the manager and proceeded to 'cause a public scene' to voice a resistance to this practice. Nevertheless, we ended up by leaving the Wimpy, after my mother had tried to calm my father down (she was big on avoiding public shaming). In solidarity, the white family with whom we were travelling also left the Wimpy, but out of politeness, my parents had requested that they stay and eat – which they did. I recall my confusion at what was happening, why we had been asked to leave, and the anxiety of thinking about where we would eat, as well as that my father was likely to be hurt in this conflictual situation. My sense of being protected within and by my family was unhinged by the experience. We ended up eating take-aways on the road that had been obtained from a local 'coloured' café in Laingsburg. The rest of the day was filled with silences from us as children in the car, while my father lamented our plight and cursed "these fucking whites". Several years later the little town of Laingsburg was all but destroyed by a flash flood, and I recall our family chalking it up to poetic cosmic justice (and to this day, I still avoid the Wimpy!).

By the afternoon of that day we had entered Beaufort West. Our white counterparts stopped outside the Royal Hotel (which has since been immortalised in David Kramer's song, "*Hier sit die manne*"). My father entered with them while we stayed in the Volksie. A short while later he returned and we waved them goodbye to find accommodation in a little hotel for non-whites on the outskirts of Beaufort West called the Beaufort Hotel. It was a dingy one-star hotel and in comparison, the Royal seemed palatial. I recall asking why we could not stay in town and was simply told that non-whites could not stay there. There was a taken-for-granted manner in which my parents explained this to us that left me confused as to why this was the case, but asking further questions about this seemed off-limits.

Two days later, we eventually arrived at the border post, and here too, we were asked to pass through customs separately from the white family. At this point the differentiation was less unexpected for me, but my anxiety remained. It was an anxiety about being different, and the less than stellar treatment that could be expected because of this differentiation. My anxiety revolved around basic everyday matters – where were we to eat, to sleep, and how were we to relate to white authority (whether in the form of restaurant managers, hotel clerks, or white policemen at the border)?

Complicating matters even further was the fact that I had heard my parents discussing the 'situation' in Rhodesia, which at the time was itself in the midst of its own civil conflict that revolved around opposition to white minority rule. There was also therefore an ironic fear of leaving the 'safety' of South Africa, and to enter another African country that was at war with itself, and where blacks were implicitly identified as the primary antagonists. This kind of contradiction and tension also in part reflected the racial politics of South Africa, the construction of 'coloured in-betweenity', and perhaps had greater resonance with the racial politics of the Western Cape at the time in particular - a reverent fear of the dominance of whiteness and a simultaneous fear of hostile African blackness.

With hindsight, the road trip was in some ways a snapshot of many of my later experiences growing up in Cape Town. I became aware of the experiences of racial differentiation more acutely while growing up – in the schools we attended, the areas that we lived in, on the segregated railway carriages that we travelled on, in the sports that we were involved in, through our segregated social activities, in the different park benches and drinking fountains of the Cape Town Gardens, and so forth. In addition, my anxieties about white authority and my prejudices pertaining to black hostility remained for many years of my childhood, but it was with the rise of student politics in the 1980s that I found a vehicle for understanding, reconstituting and expressing my experiences. My anxieties were transformed into a form of rage, perhaps partly adolescent, perhaps partly a projection, perhaps very real. The centrality of the Black Consciousness Movement and the more critical politics of leftist organizations in the Western Cape provided me with a scaffold on which I could make sense of the world, understand my anxieties and prejudices, and find mechanisms to alter these constructively and coherently. It was certainly during this period of ferment that my own anti-racist consciousness became more firmly developed, and propelled me into my particular life passage. While the experience that I have reflected on above was clearly not the only underlying historical driver of these processes, it certainly was one of the formative experiences that initially constructed my exposure to issues of race, racism and segregation under apartheid, and in so doing probably contributed to my subsequent worldview.