

UNDERSTANDING RACE AND POLITICS IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTHERN AFRICA

JESSIE-LEIGH SEAGO



For two years leading up to my research trip to Southern Africa, I had studied the politicization of race in post-apartheid South Africa and had interviewed many white South African immigrants living in Florida about their motivations for leaving the country. I knew the stories and opinions of this group were colored by their experience as the “losers” of the liberation, and I wanted to understand why their perceptions were so different from the realities I was reading about. I was therefore interested in comparing the realities of race relations in South Africa with white perceptions of them.

Initially I planned to spend six weeks traveling from Cape Town to Durban to Johannesburg. South Africa’s provinces are quite different in terms of their politics, population and culture, and I wanted as well-rounded an experience as possible. My work ended up taking me to Windhoek, Namibia also and I began forming the plan for a comparative project. During my trip, I conducted formal and informal interviews with students, academics, journalists, business owners, lawyers, activists, and township dwellers. I spent time in the archives in Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria and Windhoek to familiarize myself with the types of materials available at each. Though I cannot recount the full range of my experiences in the space allotted here, I will highlight two research interests that resulted

from my time abroad.

The first thing I noticed during my trip was the way race determined space. The physical separation between groups was evident everywhere; white neighborhoods were separated from black neighborhoods. Whites used high walls and fences, often with electric razor wire for protection; they had large, comfortable homes with back yards and front porches. The majority of black townships consisted of small make-shift homes piled on top of one another; portable toilets on the outskirts, shared by several families, served as the only sanitary facilities. The situation was the same in both urban and rural areas throughout the country. In Windhoek, the differences remained, but were not as stark; townships had more space and better sanitation, several middle-class non-whites lived in gated communities as well. Based on these observations and the conversations I had with both white and black subjects, I wondered about the impact of space on structuring the perceptions of self and other in racially divided societies. It was one avenue for possible exploration.

Another important observation I made was the correlation between race and political party preferences. I was fortunate to be in South Africa in the month preceding local elections, so I spoke with everyone I interviewed about their views and opinions of the competing parties (primarily the ANC, the DA, and the EFF). The whites I spoke to (ranging from wealthy business owner to academic to township-dweller) were decidedly against the EFF and ANC, but supportive of the DA; non-whites seemed to vary in their support of the parties according to region and income-level/occupation. There were also many pessimistic comments made by both sides about Zuma’s government. In Windhoek, the situation was not as evident. Some whites supported the dominant SWAPO party (which was supported by a majority of non-whites) while others vehemently opposed it. There was no



Photo:

Ntando Mbatsha discussing the state of black-white political relations today versus the apartheid era.

obvious explanation for such trends, but I noted that racialized discourses, plans for wealth redistribution, policy effectiveness and corruption were mentioned in justifications of party preferences. Political parties and attitudes thus presented another area to explore for future research.

It is this latter topic that I have chosen to pursue for my dissertation project. Comparing South Africa and Namibia, I will explore the factors that influence white party preferences and white political mobilization. Though whites comprise only a fraction of the population in both countries (less than 10 percent), they currently own a majority of the wealth; their perceptions and the decisions resulting from them could thus have an enormous impact on the economies, societies and politics of Southern Africa. Since returning, I have applied for a Fulbright grant to Namibia in the hopes of conducting fieldwork there next year. I also plan to return to South Africa next summer to carry out formal interviews that will be included in my dissertation. The opportunity afforded me by the Center for African Studies Pre-Dissertation Research Award was critical in helping me to narrow the focus of my research and to lay the groundwork for future fieldwork.

Jessie-Leigh Seago is a doctoral student in political science.