

REMEMBERING “SALISBURY ISLAND”¹

Devarakshanam (Betty) Govinden

Senior Research Associate

University of KwaZulu Natal

herbyg@telkomsa.net

Abstract

Three distinct vignettes on “Salisbury Island”, have been composed for this discussion on the tribal college for Indians inaugurated in 1961 on Salisbury Island, an old naval base at the Durban Harbour. It was prompted by the reunion that took place in 2011 at the Sibaya Complex outside Durban, as part of the 50th anniversary commemoration of its inauguration. I present diverse aspects of life on Salisbury Island, from different, shifting vantage points and perspectives - combining the banal as well as the critical, rhetorical and historical, autobiographical and discursive - in order to re-create a lost world that was experienced during apartheid, the composition “reflects the syntax of memory itself” [Hirson 2004:134]. Remembering the past in South Africa, especially the apartheid past, re-threads both positive and negative experiences, and weaves a varied quilt of personal, institutional and historical memory. For history educators this would provide a creative and critical way of engaging with the past in order to live in the present.

Keywords: Memory; Apartheid; Tribal College; Nostalgia; History; Education; Apartheid; Bush College.

Introduction

Looking back at “Salisbury Island” in 2011, from the vantage point of a new South Africa, is a mixed experience. There have been times when we who were students at Salisbury Island were keen to erase its very memory. The era of separate universities, of tribal colleges or bush colleges, was a blight on our educational landscape, and we all felt it keenly. We were forced to attend these institutions, and never failed to remind everyone that we did so under continual sufferance. We were sometimes tempted to deny this part of our lives, especially when those who went to the prestigious white universities, such as the former University of Natal, or to Fort Hare,

¹ “Salisbury Island” is more than a physical place - it is a symbol.

often treated us as lesser beings. The words, “inferior” and “second class”, were not infrequently used in relation to places such as Salisbury Island.

Yes, there was a certain desolation about Salisbury Island, where the sky was not limitless, and seemed to hover just above you. We never learnt to forget that Salisbury Island was a discarded military barracks, and we were its “discarded people”. Even without the bush, we still called it a “bush college”. It was far away from the centre of the universe. Sailing to the mainland on the ferry boats was no leisurely sea cruise. And if we returned via the long way round, we had to sit in the very last row of the Fynnland whites-only bus. Then the walk back to the campus, on the bare, windswept causeway, with no trees to line it, seemed long and endless. The hub of city life was in the distance. The causeway was a winding road around the western side of the Durban Bay.

Beyond, there was the same bleakness. When I enrolled at Salisbury Island in 1963, the Rivonia Trial was under way, and in my second year Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island. What does it mean to remember Salisbury Island - a place that was the very creation of apartheid, and its instrument? What does it mean to remember, some fifty years later?

I take my cue from Jacob Dlamini who, in *Native Nostalgia* [2009] poses this question:

What does it mean for a Black South African to remember life under apartheid with fondness?

Writing of his growing up and life in Katshehong, Dlamini argues that the master narrative of apartheid blinds us to a richness, a complexity of life among Black South Africans, that not even colonialism and apartheid at their worst could destroy.

Yes. Even the intellectual desert that Salisbury Island was deliberately designed to be, yielded spaces for creativity and growth. I remember learning so many things I had not known before. Emerging out of high school in a small rural town, my world was slowly broadening. The foundations for my later thinking were certainly laid here, even if I were to gradually shake those very foundations, and the edifices I would so studiously construct.

Yes, Salisbury Island was a physical space, a place on the map. But it was so much more.

And so, imitating Denis Hirson's [2004] incantatory book of reminiscences, *I remember King Kong...* In my memories I recall the following:

I remember those enchanting performances of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* – David Horner's signature events on the Island. I was transported.

I remember enjoying intense and convoluted debates with Archie Augustine on DH Lawrence. Surely Lawrence was the greatest free spirit I had ever encountered, and Archie, the English gentleman from Northern Natal, a close second?

I remember the most engaging lectures given by the giant professor, C Ramfol. Coming out of high school, I could not fail to admire the genius of Pavlov and Skinner. I did not have a clue then, that their doctrinaire, positivistic type of thinking, was even remotely connected to the apartheid regime.

I remember Prof Cilliers, whose "philosophy of education" was that we are all different! [This is why we couldn't have a political system that was based on the premise that we are all equal!]

I remember vying with Teddy Naidoo to be Prof Hopwood's most diligent phonetics student. We believed implicitly in the incontestable virtues of Received Pronunciation – the Queen's English, nothing more and nothing less.

I remember that bereft Sunday morning when Teddy drowned in the bay...

I remember reading *The Super Afrikaners* [1980] when I left Salisbury Island. I was not surprised to learn that the Island's smiling rector, SP Olivier, was a member of the Broederbond.

I remember the day I was quite impressed, when my friend, Varda Moodley, showed me the wonders of the latest technology - a photocopier, that had just arrived in the Physics lab. I remember too the passing lectures that his lab assistant would give me on Karl Marx.

I remember Salisbury Island – the place where I grew to love Shakespeare, Milton and Chaucer, Pope and Dryden. George Saintsbury and IA Richards were our gurus, and no one could dispute that (at that time!).

I remember reading, on Salisbury Island, the greatest poems in English

Literature. These must surely include Lawrence's "Bavarian Gentians" (Why did I remember it again when, years later, I read *The Vagina Monologues*?); Keat's "Ode to a Grecian Urn" ("Beauty is truth; truth beauty"); and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" ("If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?").

I remember being devastated when Dennis Pather was named in an article in a weekend paper reporting on student protests on the Island. Were his chances of returning to campus ruined? They were. But every time I pick up the newspaper and read one of his columns today, I think of how his real education continued uninterrupted...

I remember the profound, brooding, Goolam Meeran. He was one who could see right through anything and anyone.

I remember the Reverend Arnott - sweet and likeable, and careful to steer away from controversy. Why, he was generous enough to allow us to listen to his LP's on Shakespeare. I was to realize years later, when I graduated to Achebe and Soyinka, that he never quite got the hang of Conrad's *A Heart of Darkness*.

I remember Munira Lakhi, who chose to wear my blue cross for a play.

I remember Mariam Kariel, the petite girl from Cape Town. She wore the most elegant clothes, and would model her wardrobe in the corridor of our Hall of Residence, late nights.

I remember Dr Ezra Francis. He was more than a man without socks. He was a rare and magnificent spirit, with a voice that could move mountains...

Thinking of some of the personalities on the Island, and recreating these memories of them on Salisbury Island, I am overwhelmed by the many stories and images of the place, long repressed, that come hurtling from the past. The alchemy of memory works its magic, making them palpable, breathing life into them, as they rise up and stride the world again.

Salisbury Island had its quota of intellectuals, activists, run-of-the-mill academics, informers, hangers-on, future leaders, visionaries, gossips, lovers, artists, anarchists, missionaries, Philistines, charlatans, nerds [we did not know the word on the Island then], bankrupts and revolutionaries.

Salisbury Island - one of the explicit inventions of apartheid - will remain a place in the geography of our imagination where it was still possible to dream dreams. A place that vacillated between banality and epiphany...everyday...

In a strange way, I am what I am today because of, and in spite of, Salisbury Island. Learning and unlearning, I continue to this day, to build and break... break and build... on the yesterdays I travelled on *THE ISLAND*...

A day in the life of AN ISLANDER...

The early morning sun - not too strong on the Island – rouses me, peering obliquely into my room from the East.

Delores Govender, my friend from high school, and now my room-mate, is also stirring slowly.

I switch on the radio, and hear that Cassius Clay has won the world heavy weight boxing championship.

I go to the row of washbasins and bathrooms at the end of the corridor. I see my friend, Julie Meeran, scrubbing. She must be the world's best washer – of wash basins, baths, whatever comes in her way. She is meticulously washing her clothes. She also makes sure she irons what she will wear today - a lovely cotton dress with fine floral print, which she launders with a light starch.

Today, I put on my tartan straight skirt and gilet to match, home stitched, and my white frilly blouse. I wear stockings and Baby Louis heels.

I walk down stairs, and the warden's wife, dressed neatly in her sari, kunkum and large bun, gives me my mail. I immediately recognize my mother's hand-writing. It is addressed to me, "c/o Women's Hall of Residence", etc. I had given her this address, and it sounds much better than "girls' hostel". I love reading my Mum's letters. I can hear her speaking, in long breathless sentences, with few stops. She must be the most ardent letter-writer of all time. We always give her gifts of Croxley writing pads.

Breakfast is in the large dining hall, adjacent to the kitchen. There is steaming porridge and, then, fried eggs, though a little cold and oily. I share the same table at every meal time with Rashida Ballim, Premi Singh, Rashida Jamaloodien and Demla Vinden.

I collect my notebooks – there is much note-taking on the Island – and I walk primly across the wide, grassed quadrangle to my lectures.

At the other end, I see Sunita Roopanand, in yellow Punjabi dress, walking towards the Fine Arts Department.

Today, the English Literature lectures are on Chaucer. I am intrigued by

The Wife of Bath's Tale. What a feisty woman! But I am not aware at the time that the word "feminist" is not used once during my entire 5-year-stay on the Island.

History and Psychology lectures follow, and I learn all about the partition of Africa, and the conditioning of rats in laboratories. Nobody tries to extend this into our lives in the present time.

I return a few books at the library, and meet Mamoo Rajab, browsing among the book shelves. He must be the most widely read in English Literature on the campus.

I return to the hostel for lunch, past the cafeteria, which is very noisy and smoke-filled. I notice Zak Yacoob walking leisurely alongside the kerb and, today, I greet him briefly. Zak is clearly a later riser. For lunch, we have a casserole with potatoes.

I am free in the afternoon today, so I decide to slip away to the Island jetty, and take the ferry across the bay for a quick trip into the city. I walk past a street photographer, who hands me a photograph of myself. The Polaroid boycott was still to come. Walking up West Street, I find that shopping offers wonderful freedom from the cloistered Island. There are no places to eat for "non-whites", so I buy ice-cream on a cone, and enjoy this as I walk slowly along the shop windows.

I must not miss the last ferry back to the Island. By the time I reach the hostel again, it is time for dinner. Mildly curried chicken and rice, and custard and jelly.

After dinner, we walk in pairs or groups, rounding the many roads on the Island, speaking of the lectures and lecturers, or of the food in the dining hall. We pass the queues outside the telephone booth.

The wider world seems so far away, and the stars above look vacant.

Salisbury Island: Revisiting the past

When over 400 students from the former University College for Indians, converged on the Sibaya Complex on Saturday 25 June 2011, for the SALISBURY ISLAND REUNION, many met for the first time since they parted company some 45 years ago. Former Islanders came from different parts of the region and the world, and the Reunion was indeed an emotional

one.

This Reunion, occurring fifty years since the formation of the University College in 1961, was one of many events after 1994 where the past unscrolled before South Africans dealing with their history, both personal or public. Indeed, since the first democratic elections, South Africans have been experiencing a prolonged “TIME OF MEMORY”, anxious not to succumb to amnesia, and eager to script the past in their own way in a time of competing truths.

The University College was formed during the heyday of the apartheid era, when the consolidation of “grand apartheid” proceeded inexorably. It was yet another example of the absurdity of a regime that believed itself to be invincible, erecting many elaborate structures and institutions, and commandeering many human resources, to prop up the ideology and practice of separate development.

1961 was the year when the Nationalist Party magnanimously removed the threat of repatriation, which had hung as a sword of Damocles since Indian indentured labourers arrived in 1860. It is significant that the Separate Universities Education Bill was passed in 1957, in direct flouting of the spirit of the Freedom Charter signed two years before that, when the Charter had called for the doors of learning to be open to all.

The apartheid government failed to see the irony of an abandoned prison and naval base such as SALISBURY ISLAND being transformed into a place for higher learning. The Island had a strict dress code, for one, and this reflected the regimentation of the place, which seeped deep into the psyche of the institution. It was an unwritten fact that the institution was run by “Super-Afrikaners”, and that it was part of the panoptic structures of surveillance that constituted the apartheid edifice. It is worth noting that in the same year in which “Salisbury Island” came into being, Franz Fanon, in another world, had published his *Wretched of the Earth* [1961] where he was calling for anti-colonial education.

Much of the curriculum on the Island was narrow and doctrinaire. However, as we moved from the Island to the University of Durban-Westville by the 1970’s, we also had a “hidden” curriculum (literally and metaphorically), where copies of banned material, such as those of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [1950/2000] slowly began to get circulated below the desk tops (When I met Freire years later in the US I was disappointed to see how

the Americans had domesticated him and his revolutionary ideas). It was also at this time that Saths Cooper, the well-known Black Consciousness activist, challenging our timidity, would extol the virtues of Negritude, never mentioned in formal lectures on the Island, and produce plays such as *Antigone*, to prod us to question the immoral state.

Yes, in a bizarre way, the “winds of change” blowing across Africa that the then British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, announced to the Cape Parliament in 1960, reached the nooks and crannies of Salisbury Island. This is not to deny that there were also corners of complicity on the Island.

We need to ask also, in spite of the bleakness of the 1960’s, how we can realize its promise, with the likes of Fanon and Patrice Lumumba then willing a New Africa into being (Pithouse 2011).

Across the city and up on a hill in the distance was the former University of Natal, aloof and alien. We did not meet our counterparts there, except for the occasional generosity of someone like Roy Jithoo, now in Australia, who made a point of visiting us poorer cousins on the Island. When Robert Kennedy visited Durban in 1966, I remember NUSAS inviting a few of us from the Island for this historic event. Years later, when I went to Natal University to read for my Masters and Doctorate, it was good to be embraced with open arms.

In 1966, I was reading for my Honours in English, and recall the ray of hope kindled by Kennedy, who also visited Luthuli in Groutville. Chief Albert Luthuli had received the Nobel Peace Prize for his fearless struggle against apartheid in 1961, again the same year when the institution was inaugurated. We were still pondering over the significance of Kennedy’s visit when Prime Minister Dr Verwoerd was assassinated, a few months later.

Salisbury Island produced a coterie of academics and intellectuals who constituted an important link in the development of tertiary education in South Africa for Blacks in general. Its alumni - many being referred to by the dubious honorific appellation, “*First Indian to...*” - continue to make an impact in the new South Africa and beyond in every field of endeavour – in education, science, the arts and drama, the economy and politics.

In my own career in English Literature, I found that I have constantly dismantled the foundations erected at Salisbury Island, stepping out of its insularity, in a perpetual tide of unlearning and learning anew. From being schooled in “The Great Tradition” of English Literature, with Shakespeare

as its undisputed icon, when I left Salisbury Island, I traversed the world, reading and absorbing literatures of Africa and the African Diaspora, and the postcolonial world in general, as well as women's writings and indigenous literatures from the four corners of the earth.

In spite of the designs of the regime, Salisbury Island spawned many political and community activists who struggled actively for change. It established natural alliances and circuits of solidarity with other bush or tribal colleges, which became, in varying degrees, "homes for the intellectual left" – a description that the University of the Western Cape first created, and deservedly laid claim to at the time.

It was ironic, but entirely predictable, that Salisbury Island, synonymous with the apartheid regime's general penchant for ghettoizing and social and intellectual quarantine refused, in varying degrees, its containment.

Speaking of "Fort Hare" (a British "installation", named after a colonizer), two historians, Morrow and Gxabalashe [2000], have pointed out that, "in one of the paradoxes in which South Africa abounds, Fort Hare has become a shibboleth of modern African nationalism, priding itself on its illustrious alumni, which include many of the great names of the modern black elite in southern Africa". This is true in different ways of other spaces of segregation, such as "Soweto" and "District Six" and, I would argue, of "Salisbury Island".

The Salisbury Island Reunion was therefore more than a casual stroll down memory lane. It constituted, for me, a "powerful act of projection" – onto the past – in order to live in the South Africa of today, and the future...

Against the background of all that Salisbury Island personified at an unsettling time in our history fifty years ago – the determined efforts of the apartheid regime to induce intellectual stunting and emaciation through its tribal colleges on the one hand, and the resistance in varying degrees and forms against such engineering on the other – we now have to take a hard look at ourselves living in the post-colony. At this time of the 50th anniversary of Salisbury Island, we do well to remember that fifty years ago, Fanon predicted the betrayal of the liberation struggle in Africa, of a post-liberation culture that would renege on its very ideals and values. "To read Fanon today means to translate into the language of our times the major questions that forced him to stand up, to break away for his roots and to walk with others, companions on a new road the colonized had to trace on their own, by their own creativity, with their indomitable will" (Mbembe 2011-2012:29).

Conclusion

We have to ask how “Remembering Salisbury Island” would propel us into a new mobilization and critical creativity for the present time. Indeed, Memory is a Weapon – against forgetting, against apathy.

Image 1: On Salisbury Island (the author)



References

- Dlamini, J 2009. *Native Nostalgia*. Jacana Media: Johannesburg.
- Fanon, F 1961. *The Wretched of the Earth – A Negro Psychoanalyst’s Study of the Problems of Racism and Colonialism in the World Today*. [Published in France]
- Freire, P 1950/2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Hirson, D 2004. *I Remember King Kong [The Boxer]*. Jacana Media: Johannesburg.
- Mbembe, A 2011. “Fanon’s nightmare, our reality.” *Mail and Guardian*, December 23, 2011 to January 5, 2012, p. 29.
- Morrow, S and Khayaletu, G 2000. “The Records of the University of Fort Hare.” In: *History in Africa*, Vol. 27, pp. 481-497.
- Pithouse, R Frantz Fanon 50 years on. Prepared for Abahlali base Mjondolo.
- Wilkins, I and Strydom, H 1980. *The Super Afrikaners – Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond*. Penn State University: Jonathan Ball.