Locating littoral settings within the disharmony between humans and nature

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The informal settlements in the Hout Bay high-income residential area were situated along the littoral zones of the Disa River Estuary and the Hout Bay Coast since roughly 1967. The settlements formed part of a fishing collective and over twenty-five years moved to various places on the beach as the natural dynamics of the littoral zone and population fluctuated. The accusation of the settlements being a threat to the river and ocean, led to the relocation of the settlement up to the mountain range in 1992 (Sowman and Gawith 8). Roughly one year later the same area of land became rezoned as a site for the development of a gated community called, Princess Beach (Hout Bay CC n.p.). I argue that the littoral zone being a dynamic, natural space intensifies the conflict that arises from the disharmony between enforced man-made processes and natural space. The disharmony ultimately leads to the ecological, social and economic degradation of the space which became accelerated owing to the dynamism of the littoral zone. The disconnection between humans and nature that often arises through the will to control natural capital is seen in numerous natural settings, yet it is most evident when man-made fixities are imposed on a littoral setting which is in a constant state of flux. The littoral zone of Princess Beach becomes representational of the conflict and corruption as corporisation, legislation and racial legacies reconstruct natural bodies and natural space.

The failure to understand that “[t]he precariousness of nature is our peril, our fragility” (Sen 6) is very often the reason for many of the environmental hazards faced by the Anthropocene. Nature is described as “precarious” while humans become “fragile” when faced with this precariousness. Natural space, therefore, is dynamic and changing – based on uncertainty and chance. This dynamism becomes “our fragility” as humans cope with nature’s fluctuations because of how dependent humans beings are on nature as a means of staying alive. Thus, if humans cannot adapt to changes within natural space then nature is seen as a danger to humans. This implies that although change in natural space is inevitable, for humans to avoid “peril” they must adapt to it. However, humans have rather attempted to engineer nature to suit their lifestyle and leisure – as seen with the engineering of Princess Beach’s natural environment into a constructed gated community. Space is reconstructed with fixed entities of urban planning, legislation and human regulation, which contradicts they dynamics of nature. Human regulation as an effect of Apartheid legislation classified natural bodies into “unnatural” racial profiles. The legislation afforded white classified bodies economic success and freedom of movement, whereas black classified bodies were severely restricted in most aspects of living. This creates disharmony between humans and nature as natural entities and unnatural entities are in physical and representational conflict with each other. The littoral zone of Princess Beach physically represents the dynamism of natural space, its restlessness further contributing to its uncertainty and because of this it intensifies and accelerates issues of disharmony – as seen in the social and biophysical deterioration of Princess Beach.
The geographic and political context of Princess Beach situates it along a complex temporal scale which creates the tensions that arise through disharmony with nature. Being a South African beach space, it was regulated by Apartheid legislation as white space (Colenbrander et al 164-165), the forced removals of the black settlements occurred during the transition to democracy in South Africa and the contamination of the surrounding natural space by the higher-class gated community occurred during the post-transitional phase of South African history. During Apartheid, a disharmony is created between the natural body and natural space as corporisation and control of natural capital creates a wedge between people and nature – disconnecting them from the land itself. Apartheid imposed “unnatural” legislation which governed natural bodies according to a constructed racial profile: white bodies were designated far more privileges than black bodies. Furthermore, central to South African history was the way in which this legislation disconnected black people from the land and framed natural space as a commodity, rather as a means of sustaining one’s life (Colenbrander et al 165). The beach inevitably fell prey to corporisation of space and black people were disconnected from this natural space, as the beach was a setting reserved for the leisure of white people. Princess Bush becomes a repetition of history as the black community is disconnected from the beach to make way for the white upper-class. Thus, the corporisation of natural space is maintained through the corporisation of natural bodies. Black people’s bodies were made to conform to delineations of Apartheid Ideology in the same way that natural space in South Africa, specifically the beach space, was made to conform to man-made laws and construction. The disharmony between the natural body and the constructed racial body led to the contamination of human life of black people in Princess Beach during the transitional phase of South African history. This parallels the disharmony created by the natural space of the littoral zone and man-made alterations as the littoral zone became contaminated to a point where it could no longer support life. The disharmony between natural space or bodies and man-made reconstructions of space leads to contamination and the “fragility” of human being ironically means that we create our own burden in trying to govern natural entities, rather than trying to adapt to the dynamism of natural space.

Before and during the transitional phase of South African history, the informal community successfully lived in harmony with the littoral space by living in temporary homes and carefully utilising its natural capital. The littoral zone remained uncontaminated for the twenty-five years the communities rearranged themselves within the space and were in harmony with the littoral space. The movement of the homes to various locations with the changing tides mimicked the dynamism of the littoral zone. This behaviour indicates an understanding between the community and the littoral space as the community organised themselves within the dynamics of the natural space, rather than trying to alter the space to conform to a man-made ideology. The way in which the black community navigated the space, shows how their harmonisation with nature upheld the integrity of the natural space and allowed them a means of capital on which to sustain themselves. Being in harmony with
the littoral zone allowed both the natural body and natural space to coexist symbiotically, thus the littoral zone was not seen as a threat to human “fragility” because of an indigenous understanding of the uncertainty that comes with nature's benefits. However, because the people within these settlements were classified as black by Apartheid legislation, they were seen as “intruders” of white space and were ultimately relocated. The relocation of the settlement catalysed the deterioration of the littoral space through white corporisation and the deterioration of the displaced settlement as they lost their means of living.

In contrast to this, the fixed, higher-income gated community that was constructed in place of the settlements resulted in the rapid deterioration of the natural environment and the social standards of the displaced informal community (Hout Bay CC n.p.). An immediate physical contrast is noticed between the large, fixed houses and the constant movement of the high-water line and sand within the littoral zone. However, the defined “high water line” is in constant flux and does not follow the reconstructed property borders it has been assigned to comply with. The Princess Beach development became flooded as the high-water line and river flowed in such a way that did not follow its previously defined models. The littoral space represents the rejection of order imposed upon dynamic natural settings – as much as science attempts to predict its movement, it acts independently of these definitions and the only way to understand it is by reacting to its fluctuations and recognising its uncertainty. For the black community, it was easy to move their temporary homes as the water-line changed, but the owners of the townhouses would inevitably have to bear the cost of nature’s uncertainty as their homes lost their economic value. Specialists claim that had the developers “understood the dynamic processes” (Sowman “interview”) of natural settings or discussed with the informal settlements about the space, then they would have known about the inevitable conflict created by attempting to engineer the littoral zone. A physical disharmony exists between the natural space and the man-made space. The alteration of this natural space to try and push back the water-line, toxified the water and strict warning signs were erected to state that the beach was no longer safe for public use. This contamination escalated to a crisis in less than half of the time that the previous community lived there.

Post-transitional creation of legislation contradictions that arise in legislation rejects the legitimacy of human ability to “control” natural space and natural bodies, as well as designing legislation to value corporisation of space over the well-being of natural space and bodies. A structured model of law is superimposed onto the littoral space, an ambiguous space, which tries to classify its components and define them. Section 6 of the Amended Integrated Coastal Management Act of 2008, admits that there is “conflict with other legislation” (8) and that “the act shall not affect the ownership of an immovable structure” (8). The rise of “conflict” between legislations signifies a lack of coherence in the governance of natural and man-made entities. Not only is disharmony created as fixed legislation attempts to reconstruct natural entities, but there is already a pre-existing disharmony within the man-made texts themselves which questions the ability for legislation to bring “order”. Natural space is organised by its own internal relationships that do not follow the structure of legislation, hence,
contradictions arise within the legislation as it cannot account for the dynamism of natural space. Despite the need to “secure the natural functioning of dynamic coastal processes” (Integrated Coastal Management Act of 2008 28)63 the houses were built at the meeting point of the river and ocean which would later be excused owing to the “immovable structure[s]”. Temporary houses were relocated for contamination which had not even yet existed yet permanent house owners were excused for causing contamination to the littoral zone because of the outline of legislation. A double-bias is evident as legislation favours economy to ecology and higher-income residents to lower-income residents. This bias further drove the littoral zone into a zone of contamination and re-lived racial stratification in a post-transitional South Africa. The disharmony imposed by legislation contaminated the dynamism of the littoral zone as well the well-being of the previous settlements who had historically been barred from entering beach space.

This context implies a development driven toward sustaining the consumption of the upper-class, who are mostly constructed white bodies, but it also questions the possibility of development and natural spaces co-existing. Development is seen as growth but Princess Beach questions who and what development is geared toward. Urban expansion and increasing commodification of natural resources and people are framed as a means of growing out of the contamination of the past and present. However, the disharmony between man-made reconstruction and natural space is continually exacerbating the dysfunctional relationship between humans and nature, as well as between humans themselves. The state of natural resources deteriorates and the historically oppressed bear the brunt of this deterioration as modern cities take over land and beaches. It is interesting to notice the apparent “success” to which white inhabitants reconstructed natural terrestrial areas once utilised by indigenous people – which is often overlooked as a dynamic space as it physical appearance is stationary. In contrast, Princess Beach as a terraqueous space displays the difficulty legislation faced maintaining that reconstructed space, as the natural space is under constant spatial and temporal shifts. The disharmony between fixed legislation and dynamic natural space began to erode at these reconstructed elements, contaminating the space itself but also further exacerbating the racial and classist stratification as the space deters public recreation yet homeowners continue to live in the space. Therefore, Princess Beach becomes a representation of the global issue of the disharmony created through the corporisation of natural space and natural bodies, as these issues are not localised to this specific littoral zone. It is impossible to the read disharmony that occurred within the littoral zone without recognising the disharmony of the natural body and the racialised body, the natural space and the reconstructed space, dynamism and fixity.

Historically, legislation was used to control racial access to the beach and encourage white ownership of beach property. However, the very setting that was once desirable for white people (Colenbrander et al 179) is becoming a setting of economic loss and danger, owing to processes such as sea level rise. A space that was originally defined as a space of white entitlement and ownership has become an area of uncertainty and fear for the white
population that lives there. Because the natural space was not understood and was rather conquered through racial stratification, legislation and engineering, it lost its characteristic paradise feel. The littoral was not recognised as a dynamic space. At one point in time it is a paradise for white entitlement and an exploit for capitalist interest, however, its fluctuations have changed these characteristics to a setting of conflict and uncertainty with anthropogenic forces increasing the severity of its change. The desirability of the littoral space to higher-class white communities in South Africa and the scramble to “own it” resulted in the very deterioration of that once desirable setting to a point at which it has lost all economic, biological and social value.

In conclusion, the complexity of the politics of littoral space in South African is created by multiple interactions of the corporisation of natural space, racial and classist stratification and the imposition of man-made legislation on dynamic natural spaces and bodies. Despite the almost disorienting complexity of the relationships at play, their cumulative effect disconnected humans and nature, which must be understood with relation to the historical social injustice of disconnecting indigenous people with their natural spaces. Princess Beach as a littoral setting is representational of the larger issue of the disharmony between natural entities and man-made reconstruction as the dynamic nature of the littoral aggravates the conflict between these processes. Adapting to the uncertainties of nature creates a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, which upholds the integrity of natural pace and provides humans with a means of living and leisure. In contrast to this, the disharmony between man and their attempted reconstruction of natural space to comply with man-made ideologies results in the contamination of both the physical natural space as well as the societies that depend on these spaces. The onset of disharmony is catalysed by the underlying tensions of race, class and corporisation, all of which is upheld by the legislation imposed on natural spaces and natural bodies. Although not inherently obvious on terrestrial space, the littoral zone being an unpredictable setting provides a glimpse into the possible “peril” that will also be faced by upper-class consumers if they continue to live in disharmony with natural space. The desire for people to bring order to Princess Beach and feel entitled to the space, ironically was the reason for the irreversible chaos they now face.
Works Cited


Erf 1530 Hout Bay CC (Hout Bay CC). Application for rezoning from amenity to subdivisional area for separate residential, commercial and public open space purposes: Erf 1530 Hout Bay. 1992.


