

**Dolly Rathebe  
photographed by  
Bob Gosani, at  
the Durban beach  
- July 1955 for  
Drum Magazine**



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The ongoing resistance and policing of black seaside leisure is entrenched in the history of the ibhish' laseThekwini (Durban beach) and its archives, which continue to sustain the ideals of leisure. While conducting research on black life and black leisure ebhish' laseThekwini (at the Durban beachfront), I came across the photograph of trailblazing actress and jazz singer Dolly Rathebe<sup>1</sup> photographed by the acclaimed Bob Gosani<sup>2</sup> at the Durban beach, often mistakenly credited to photographer Jürgen Schadeberg. This portrait – the cover of the July 1955 edition of *Drum Magazine* – depicts black seaside leisure, black cosmopolitan life.

*Drum* magazine was established in March 1951 and primarily targeted black readers. The editorials, news articles, and reportage reflected the vibrancy and nuance of black aspirations, struggles, and life and culture. “Cultures”, as Stuart Hall points out, “do not exist outside of how they are represented” and *Drum* played a significant role for a generation of black creative practitioners who shaped the way Black people were represented in society.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Dolly Rathebe (1928 – 2004) was a renowned actress and jazz singer. Rathebe has performed in various television shows and films, in South Africa and beyond. In 1949, she starred in *Jim Comes To Jo'burg* – a film credited with centring Black modernity for primarily black audiences. Rathebe starred in, Zoltán Korda's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1952), Alf Herbert's *African Jazz and Variety Show* (1952), the seminal South African production of *King Kong* (1962) as well as Gibson Kente's *Sikalo* (1966). She was the lead singer of the jazz group the Elite Swingsters and is credited as one of the crucial players in the cultural renaissance. Rathebe contributed significantly to the development of South African Jazz. In 2004, Rathebe was bestowed the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver for her contributions to cultural production in performing arts and her commitment to ideals of justice, freedom, and democracy.

2 Bob Gosani (1934 – 1972) was a pioneering photographer, and arguably one of the key practitioners that captured Black modernity (in the 1950s – 1970s). His contributions to South African photography, photojournalism and visual culture are immeasurable.

3 Hall, S. (2008). “The Missing Chapter – Cultural Identity and the Photographic Archive.” An unpublished lecture recorded by Autograph ABP on 21 May 2008.

Ibhish' laseThekwini, like many beaches across apartheid South Africa, marked a site of the vested interests of colonial and apartheid regimes in control, surveillance, separation, and domination. One of the core functions of the colonial project was to make the intricacies in the daily existence of black life, apart from labour, as invisible as possible to the white ruling class. Between 1950-1980 apartheid maximized invisibility through segregationist legislation. Mainstream popular culture and media exclusively served the white ruling class, and black life and black stories were largely disregarded or misrepresented.<sup>4</sup> The construction of seaside leisure at the Durban beachfront took place within a political ideology that created and maintained rigid ethnic boundaries. Consequently, for white beachgoers, it created and sustained fears between groups that enhanced the “We” of shared identity and exacerbated the perception of “Others” as outsiders.<sup>5</sup>

The history of Durban's first ‘African’ beach (which opened September 1929) can still be located in archival documents. However, visual records are underrepresented in official records. The photograph of starlet Dolly Rathebe by pioneer Bob Gosani reflects a significant archive of black seaside leisure. *Drum* magazine, July 1955, “when the Jazz Parade arrived in Durban, the artists all wanted to go to the beach. And they did too – after rehearsals! It was a singing and swimming afternoon, though it had its exciting moments for Dolly”.<sup>6</sup> Campt writes about vernacular photographs, which hum with a quiet intensity, drawing viewers to listen. The sound which we register, circulates on a lower frequency, a haptic temporality which cannot be heard unless we develop a particular reading practice attuned to feeling the presences and absences that the photograph records.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Maylam, P. (1986). “A History of the African People of South Africa.” Cape Town: David Philip.

5 Crang, M. (1998). *Cultural Geography*. Routledge: London and New York.

6 Aspire Art Auctions. (2020). “BOB GOSANI © BAHA, DOLLY RATHEBE, 1955.” Available at: <https://auctions.aspireart.net/lots/view/1-3OU9M3/bob-gosani-baha-dolly-rathebe-1955>

7 Campt, T. M. (2017). *Listening to Images*. Durham; London: Duke

This live-giving image hums to the contemporary use of the beachfront, specifically by black people during the festive season, anchoring our place in the history of beach archives. It invites us to listen to a melodious song of black joy, black tenderness, black beauty, black leisure scored by Rathebe's infectious smile and Gosani's tender gaze. This ensemble reverberates everytime we visit the beach, "to giggle, to splash in our black tights and Shoprite plastic bags".<sup>8</sup>

Archives directly influence individual and collective memory and are grounded in national identity, which informs our values, norms, and beliefs as a society. Ranci re's argues that the political is always aesthetic, in the sense that regimes of representation and perception delimit "the visible and invisible" and "speech and noise" in ways that shape "the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience".<sup>9</sup>

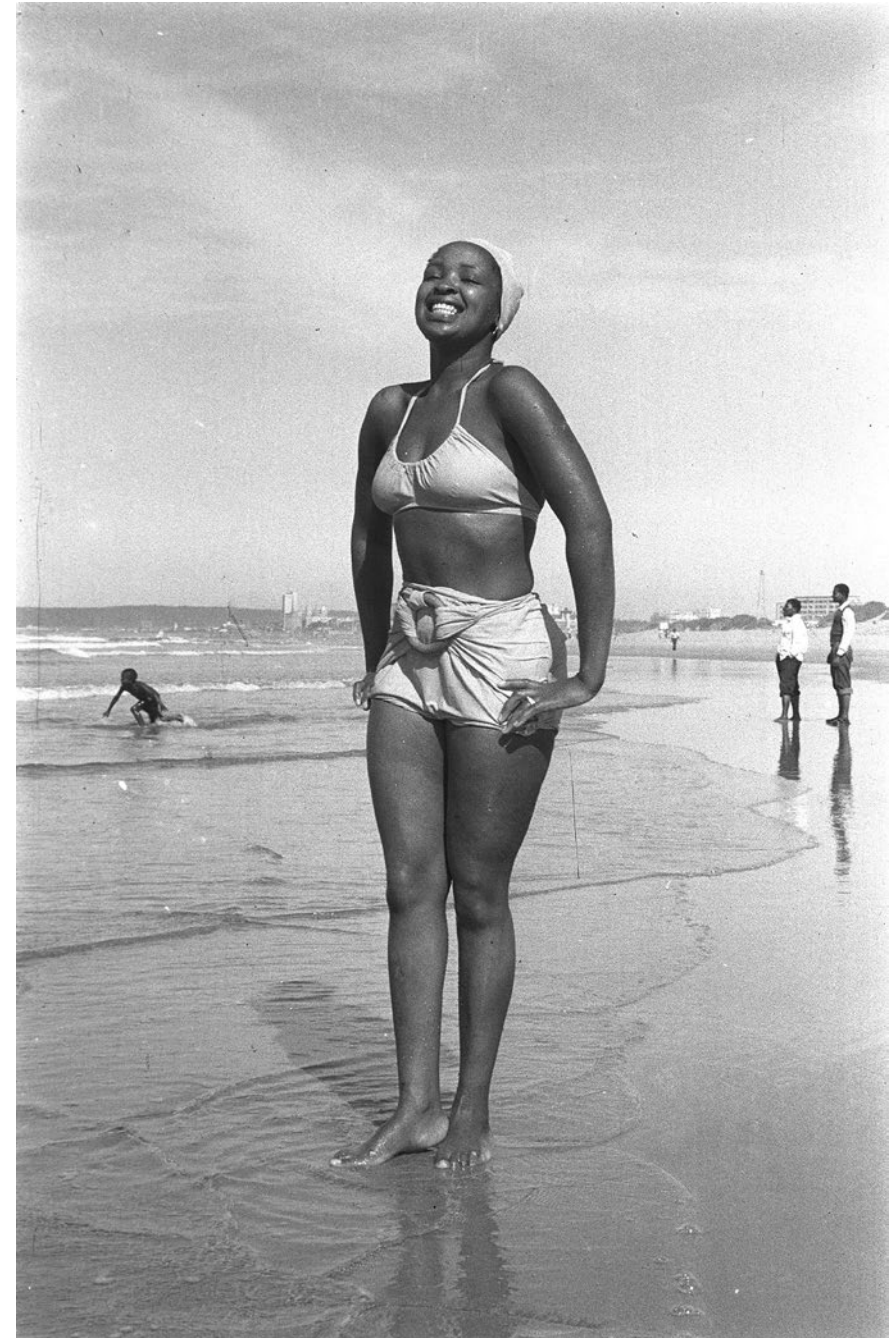
Written by Luvuyo Equiano Nyawose - "a revision of an article that was originally published in in-review."

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University Press. "Listening to Images: An Exercise in Counterintuition" (pp. 1-11) + "Quiet Soundings: The Grammar of Black Futurity." Available at: [https://www.dukeupress.edu/Assets/PubMaterials/978-0-8223-6270-8\\_601.pdf](https://www.dukeupress.edu/Assets/PubMaterials/978-0-8223-6270-8_601.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Putuma, K. (2016). "Water." PEN South Africa Available at <https://pensouthafrica.co.za/water-by-koleka-putuma/>

<sup>9</sup> Ranci re, J. (2004). *The Politics of aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible*. London, UK: Continuum.



Dolly Rathebe photographed by Bob Gosani (1955)