

In Search of 1949

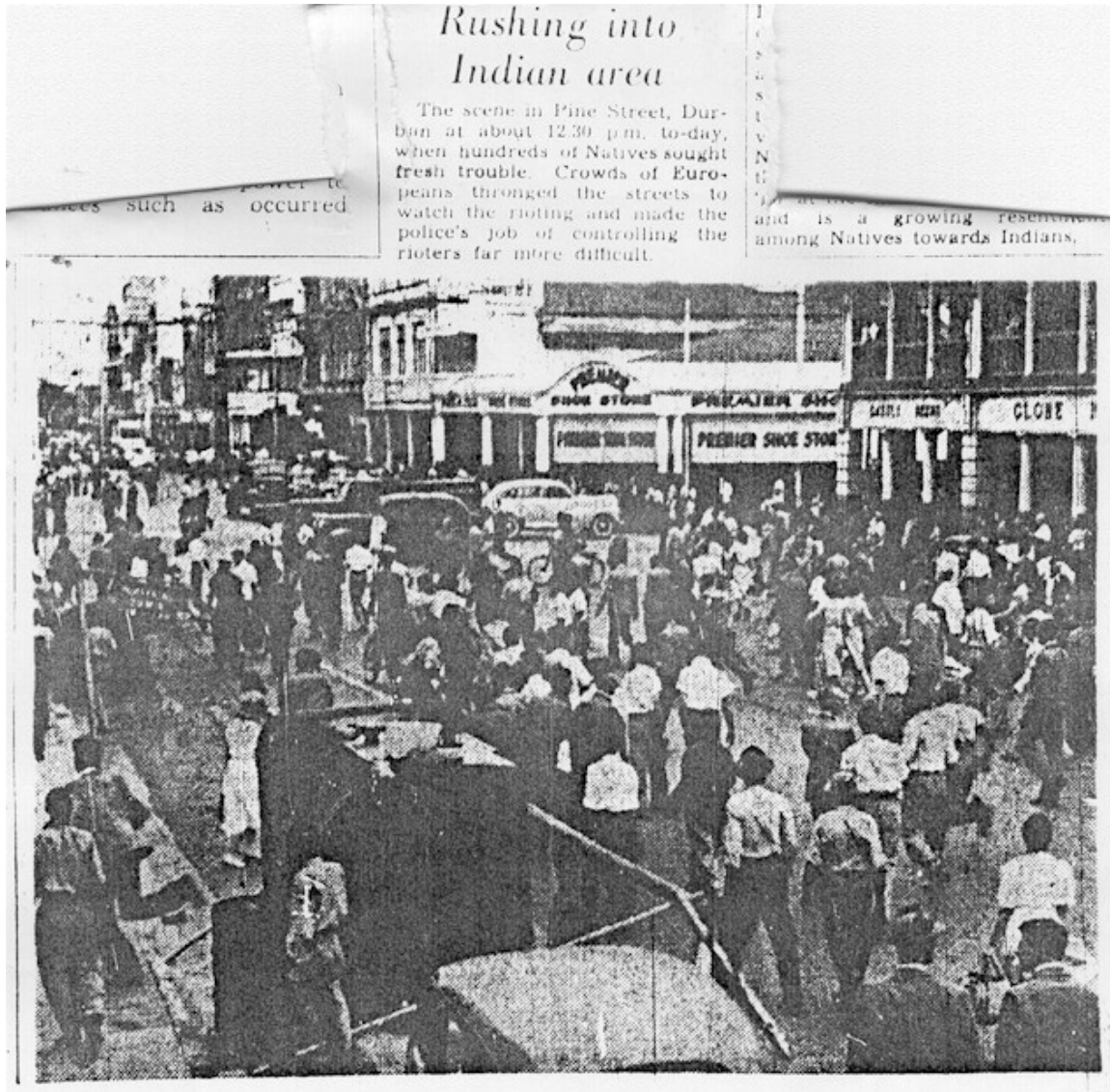
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"Dis poem will not change things:
dis poem *needs* to be changed."

--Mutabaruka.

The Power and Danger of Looking



(From the Natal Daily News, January 14, 1949)

Chronicle of Deaths Not Foretold

(quotations taken from the testimony of Major George Bestford, District Commandant of Durban, to the Riot Commission)

Thursday, January 13

approx. 5:15 p.m.:

Harilal Basanth, a 40 year old Indian shop-owner, smashes 14 year old George Madondo's head into a shop window. A "minor disturbance" breaks out. The Police send a van to investigate.

5:25 p.m.:

In the busy Victoria Street bus rank, the fight has begun to seriously escalate; Africans want to "hit the Indians whom they alleged had either seriously assaulted or killed a Native youth." A large crowd of Indians gathers in Victoria Street and are prevented from marching to the market by the police. The police send re-inforcements.

6:00 p.m.:

Indian men and women throw bricks and other missiles at Africans below.

6:30 p.m.:

Some shop windows have been smashed; there are "large numbers of both Europeans and non-Europeans about." The rioters on the street are mainly African, but include some Indians and Europeans. Still, there is not much damage to property at this point.

7 p.m.:

Accounts of the event have been carried home to barracks and residential areas; in Cato Manor, buses are stoned.

8:30 p.m.:

In Clairwood and the southern part of central Durban, Indian buses are stoned.

11:00 p.m.:

A rain shower breaks out; fighting begins to quell.

Friday, January 14th:

Morning:

news of a general attack against Indians at 5 p.m. reaches the police.

Midday:

Indian assaulted by a group of Africans at the market's Queen street entrance; in Victoria Street, young Africans chase Indians, hitting them with sticks and stones. "Indians retaliated by throwing bricks and bottles from balconies not only at the youngsters but also at working Natives who break for lunch at noon."

12:30 p.m.:

Police re-inforcements arrive.

1:00 p.m.:

Groups of up to 200 Africans begin to congregate near the markets.

2:00 p.m.:

Large groups of Africans march along Berea and Bellair roads, throw stones at Indian shops and dwellings, and "everything 'Indian'". A group of about 400 gathers at the Somtseu Road Native Barracks, and begins to arm itself. Smaller groups in Victoria Street, Greyville, and along Umgeni road. In Victoria Street, one interview subject personally sees an "impi" followed from behind by a European with his face blackened by shoe polish. Unarmed militant Africans in the Stamford Hill and Overport areas. In Clairwood, large groups of armed Indians congregate and begin to clash with African groups. At this point, the weapons

used by both groups seem to be mostly sticks. Groups of Indians begin to attack Africans (some of them innocent) around the city.

3:00 p.m.:

groups of Africans march along Maydon road, West street and Point Road toward town. Some of the armed groups (occasionally being dispersed or disarmed by the police) begin to march toward Cato Manor. In Cato Manor, African women and children throw stones at Indians and their transport.

3:15 p.m.:

About 1,000 residents of the Somtseu Road barracks rush the neighbouring (Indian) Magazine Barracks, but are stopped at the gate, which was generally locked at night.

3:45 p.m.:

Large numbers of Indian stores smashed and looted in Point police area. A militant group from the Somtseu Road barracks begins to clash, for the first time, with the police and are fired upon.

4:00 p.m.:

With the arrival of militant male impi from the barracks and compounds around the city, the fighting in Cato Manor intensifies; large scale destruction of property, assaults and looting. Shortly before 5 p.m.:

News arrives to the police of an Indian who has fired on Africans with a revolver. African accounts tell of many more Indians shooting with revolvers.

6 p.m.:

Fighting spreads as far as Pinetown. In Cato Manor, the situation becomes very serious: Indians are dragged out of their homes. In the area towards Booth Road, Indian men are killed and Indian women raped. Indian refugees begin to stream into camps around the city. Police have begun to fire indiscriminately at groups of Africans, whether they are directly involved in the rioting or not.

7 p.m.:

Situation in Cato Manor reaches its peak: houses are set on fire in addition to being looted.

9 p.m.: Army and Naval regiments arrive in Cato Manor.

11 p.m.:

Fighting in most areas begins to quell. In Cato Manor, it continues through the night.

Saturday, 15th January:

6:00 a.m.:

Fighting in Cato Manor has died down; the dead and wounded are being collected. Further police and military regiments arrive from all over South Africa. All bars and beerhalls are closed. A number of arrests have been made.

Sunday, 16th January:

Isolated rioting. Police begin to receive "numerous reports of assaults by Indians on Natives."

Enter The Puppeteer

"My narrative grows to explain this existence
amidst the harbour lights that remain in the distance."

--Black Star, "Respiration."

Where else can I begin, but here-- with these very words, with the brown fingers that type them by the computer's fluorescent light late one night in my office, in a university that (they tell us) has transformed irrevocably, a simple --but never taken-- night walk away from the unlit expanse of Cato Manor, in this city sprawled out around me, determined, it seems, to keep its secrets ? The cultural historian in me still obstinately wants to believe that he can know, that he can enter the foreign country of the past through excavation and begin to live there, to see the world through the eyes of that past's natives on their own terms, and that he can present that past, exposed or uncovered, an object already there and waiting to be seen, to those that inhabit his world fifty years later. The reality, however, is that the process of scholarship is never innocent. To pursue an event for years, to become obsessed with it as I have, one must have a very serious stake in the meaning of that event. I grew up an Indian boy in Zambia, at the boundaries of cultures and nations, not knowing at all (until I learnt to narrate my self) that I was standing at such an intersection. I confess: like many of the foreigners who came to South Africa in the wake of 1994, I too was here to taste "the dream", the fruit of years of struggle. For me, this meant the hope --nurtured by stories of Gandhi and, later, how Indians and Africans came to participate in a joint struggle-- that I could once again recover a childhood of effortless border crossings. Yes, the struggle did happen; but the reality of struggle, I was to learn, is never as sexy as its narrated counterpart.

Nineteen-forty-nine. I sound the date as I write this, and hear the numbers echo in my head. Historians are perhaps, by definition, numerologists. The number 1949 seems to carry a kind of muti on its own, the way it seems so easy to remember, the way it stops just short of the half-century, containing everything that came before it, the way it seems to wait for the months to pass and for the nine to roll back into a zero, a beginning as well as an end. For many Indian South Africans, still uncertain of whether they truly belong to this country or to another imagined one, it is one of the few dates that have survived in widespread popular memory-- along with "1820 settlers" (a slippage by which they replace the dates of their own arrival with that of Europeans in Natal), "1948" and "1994". It is one of that handful of dates that, for them, ironically, marks their presence in this land. This year we have arrived at another equally resonant number --1999-- and the time seems right to reach back over fifty years and to look, to narrate that earlier number for the various ways it speaks to where we stand today.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, fellow commissioners of enquiry, I need to tell you first that this wasn't an easy task, and that I am not innocent. I have before me, on my desk, a crude photocopy of a photograph, taken from the front page of the Natal Daily News on January 14, 1949 which shows "crowds of Europeans"... "rushing" to the Indian areas to watch the rioting. There is some proof that Europeans were involved in the riots, both as

rioters and as calculating inciters, but now I want to suggest that this photograph points to one very different kind of involvement.

From the photograph, we could say that the Europeans were not participating, but looking, perhaps with a kind of morbid curiosity for what would be a glimpse into closed worlds at the point of their eruption, what --to them-- would be a glimpse into an exotic, primal scene. But looking, as the physicists tell us, is never a merely passive activity. The photograph and the guarded tone of its caption demonstrates to us that by their very presence as spectators, the European crowds could begin to shape the events as they unfolded, that the story would necessarily have to unfold in the context of the colonial gaze. It is because of the shaping quality of this gaze that many Indians and Africans involved in a joint struggle would hesitate to discuss their differences before a European audience today. Looking, in fact, carries with it a tremendous responsibility and, if the voyeurism of those in the photograph troubles us, then we must think very carefully about our own voyeurism as scholars. Many times over the course of my research I have wondered if I myself was looking too far into things that I might shape through that looking and through the process of allowing others to look. There is no riot apart from its telling, and there is no telling which is not structured by ideology. If the story that I'm about to tell is a story of how the riot gets created through multiple readings of its significance, its moral if you will, then the story that I tell will also be a parable, an allegory. Whatever you see here is refracted through my gaze, and if I am to live up to that responsibility, then I must try to write my parable from a new vantage point, one that trumps and interrogates the ethnic fragmentation of the riot and, indeed, much of South African historiography to date. I must try and lift the upheavals out of their place in "Indian history" and try --given the limitations of who I am-- to read against it in a larger context. I pause to wish myself good luck.

The Spark

The various accounts of the 1949 riots that I consider in this essay also have to begin somewhere. In the vast range of narratives (both oral and written) that I have been trying to plumb, they begin -almost universally-with what the Riot Commission Report called "the spark": the altercation between George Madondo and Harilal Basanth on a chaotic, muggy and cloudy Thursday afternoon. In the oral interviews that I have conducted, I have painfully tried to guide people through life histories until the point of the riot to see if I can get them to arrive at the riot at a different point (that of personal experience), but there seems a continual need on the part of the interviewees to return back to "the spark" as a founding event.

Academic accounts to date inevitably begin with the altercation as well, perhaps because it offers the hard residue of names and facts, but move anxiously, like most popular accounts, to explanations of a larger order such as the old saws of class conflict, political differences, and so forth. I don't dispute, of course, that a course of events involving thousands of people would necessarily involve macro-level "causes". Yet, there is a strange tension in this narration, and a very real problem-how do we draw a convincing link between such a small, everyday event and the way it transmutes into something so much larger; and why did none of the numerous fights and arguments that broke out between Indians and Africans through the course of the 1930's and 40's (see Magistrate's records)not suffer the same fate? I can't pretend to answer such questions completely, but the first set of clues must likely begin by piecing together what might have happened in that encounter.

Luckily for us, Harilal Basanth was brought to trial for his assault on the 1st of February. It was a remarkably short trial, and the judge in charge could hardly, at that stage, not convict him-- he was fined £1 or seven days imprisonment, and justice was served. In the trial, we learn from both parties that Madondo knew the shop well, and often went there to buy cigarettes. Earlier that Thursday, Danragh, Basanth's 16 year old shop assistant had been sent to the "Native" market on an errand, and had been stopped by Madondo who asked him for a cigarette. We cannot know from the self-serving court testimonies what exactly Danragh's reply was, but it resulted in him being slapped twice by Madondo. It was as a reply to these slaps that Basanth later accosted Madondo and, without exchanging too many words, ended up pushing him into a shop window.

Madondo denied being a member of a gang in Basanth's trial, but either way he certainly had well-wishers at the scene of his assault. He suffered head wounds from the glass, and did not, it would appear, speak of the pre-history of the event to them. Tunywa Dlamini, perhaps the only rioter to have been interviewed in detail, acknowledged the irony of this when he spoke of Madondo years later. It turns out that Madondo had grown up to be something of a gangster, a "cynical" and "unpleasant" man. Dlamini referred to Madondo as the one who ruined the country (*owaqeda izwe*):

"...he tells you quite calmly because he knows it that it was by the anger of God that though he was injured it ought to have been intervened in and checked, instead of which much damage was done to the country. "

It must have been a shock, especially not knowing the pre-history, to see a large forty year old Indian man suddenly come and push a fairly slight fourteen year old African boy against a shop window. For many Africans at the scene, it may have echoed what they narrated --in their depositions to the commission-- as a longer history of *physical* (not just economic) intimidation by Indians, such as the beatings that Africans sometimes received at the hands of bus conductors and their cronies. At any rate, Madondo, who suffered head wounds from the glass, chose to remain silent at the time about the prehistory of the event, and the encounter, which was as much about age and masculinity as it was race, came to be read in an instant as *senselessly* racial. This seems to have been the most common reading, and was --within minutes-- written back into many of the African male onlookers' practice. They wanted, as they told the police, to set things right.

If the majority of accounts of 1949 refer back to "the spark" as a founding event, what is striking is how they diverge from there. Many Indian accounts of the spark are often vague about the details, and they generally submerge the disturbingly violent nature of Basanth's action-- often reducing it to a beating, or to "a couple of slaps"; in these accounts, the spark serves as a parable of how irrational and "tribal" Africans are. The commission report, which was to consider the detailed list of African grievances expressed in the commission as essentially fictional or irrelevant, said, in its typical sardonic style, that "the spark which caused this tragic explosion was almost ludicrous in its insignificance." African accounts, in interviews and in depositions to the commission, recover some of the event's violence, but also retell it as parable. In most of these accounts, the main action takes place inside the shop, not outside it, where Madondo is engaged in *buying* or *selling*-- variously, zinc, or scent, or newspapers (as in Dlamini's account). Furthermore, the shop assistant frequently disappears from these accounts, and the encounter is reduced to the classic trope of shopkeeper versus customer, or shopkeeper versus rival street vendor. In this simplified

version, the story becomes an easier emblem of the treatment of Africans at the hands of the “arrogant Indian”, marked, paradigmatically, as a shopkeeper.

The accounts of “what really happened”, as can be seen above, had already begun to splinter irrevocably by 5:15 on Thursday. What should be evident here is that this very divergence of readings, the process by which the fight between Basanth, Danragh and Madondo comes to have very different kinds of symbolic and ideological freight for people of different communities is *itself* crucial to the process of how the riots come into being. As these accounts spread through the divided spaces of the city and begin to diverge and consolidate, the stakes involved in what was happening and what should happen next also begin to be raised. The riot becomes irrevocably “racial”, and can increasingly resolve itself only through a violent encounter between divergent epistemologies. This is precisely why, as those who study similar kinds of events around the world have found, riots can only be truly understood in the terms of their fragments (as Gyan Pandey has argued).

At 5:15 on Thursday, however, I would contend that this process was still quite incomplete. None of the parties involved could predict what would unfold over the course of the weekend. In order to gain real force, the riot had to enter a few more cycles of (mis)reading and practice. A crowd of Indians marching towards the market who were increasingly predisposed towards understanding the gathering crowd of Africans as intrinsically violent and an arriving police force who saw the event as a “public disturbance” and not an occasion for conflict resolution both become essential, as do the rioters, to the escalation of the fight. The targets of the rioters in Victoria street on Thursday the 13th, we must remember, were, specifically, Indian *shops*. Thus, at this stage, a grievance against Basanth translated itself into anger against Indian shopkeepers in general.

Indian store owners had a reputation for black-marketeering. Whether this was true or not is, of course, a difficult question to answer when it is framed in purely racial terms. What we know is that between 1946 and 1948, 257 Indians were convicted on violations of price control regulations, as opposed to 78 Europeans and 27 Africans. Black-marketeering was not a purely Indian preserve, but it is certainly possible that the tenuous, breaking-even nature of many Indian businesses (who were also far more generous with credit than their European counterparts) meant that a large number of them *did* resort to such practices.

Working-class Indians were also incensed, at different points, about the black-marketeering of Indian merchants. In a clear but perhaps unintentional echo of Thursday the 13th, a “large crowd” of poor Indians marched to, and laid siege to the store of an Indian merchant who was stockpiling rice and selling it at inflated prices on the very Tuesday (18th January) after the weekend of the riots, as press reports tell us. They forced themselves into the store and began serving themselves, but then paid the controlled prices for the goods. It makes sense, then, that on the first evening of the riots there were a few Indian looters and rioters as well. Yet, the possibility of the riot evolving into pure class conflict was restricted, quite literally, by the fact that Indians did not and could not follow African men back to the barracks and compounds on that Thursday evening.

The future course of the riots, in fact, was to be determined not in Victoria street, by those rioters who continued to wage their battle until late on Thursday night, but in the all-male spaces of the various compounds and barracks in which the majority of young African men lived. An irreversibly racial reading of the riots consolidated itself in those spaces that evening. Various stories of the riot were related, and through the “subversive trigger” of

rumour, the riot was remade to carry new levels of symbolic freight. In one famous account mentioned in the commission report, for instance, Madondo had been killed by the Indians, and his head had been placed in a mosque. Thus, in this tale, the image of the Indian as a cruel shopkeeper was grafted onto another orientalist image, prevalent at least from the 1930's, of the Indians as "amatagata", mystical black-magic men (Indians I have interviewed remember the chant, during the riots, of "Bulala matagata"). If the commission reports and newspapers such as Indian Opinion narrate this story as a thinly disguised parable of African ignorance and gullibility, we must see this as a reminder of the closed spaces (religious and otherwise) to which *Africans* were not admitted, spaces in which Indians, no doubt, consolidated equally ignorant accounts of *their* "others". If we are to understand what happened the next day, we must now turn our less-than-innocent gaze toward the closed circuits of those African male dormitories.

The Tsotsi and The Coolie

"The Indian has nimbler wits than the Native" who "is inclined to assess merit in terms of physical strength." ... "The Zulu is by tradition a warrior... The Native is hostile to strangers merely because they are different." Such "racial characteristics... played an important part in the riots."

--From the report of the Riot Commission, 1949.

To begin to see how the rioters were constructed by the media (Indian as well as European) of the time and by the commission report, we might consider the famous photograph on the next page, which first appeared on the front page of the Natal Daily News on Friday 14th January 1949 and was then reprinted the following Friday in Indian Opinion. The Daily News' initial caption for the photograph was fairly neutral; Indian Opinion, however, which spoke to a more restricted audience, could, in its caption (reproduced here), make explicit what the photograph *already* suggests through its ways of seeing. This was supposed to be the "typical" rioter or, indeed, for some, the "typical" African. We are told that he is young, muscular and barefoot. As his left arm prepares to hurl a missile, there is a grin on his face and a strange, possessed light in his eyes. He is unpredictable, spontaneous, and gleefully violent.

This was the mythical subject known widely to South Africans of all hues as "the tsotsi". If that handful of European liberals and not-so-liberals who gained their cultural capital by promoting themselves as having "an intimate knowledge of native affairs and the native mind" were crucial in cultivating this mythical subject and distinguishing it from that of the "law-abiding Christian native", they could also, when in a more generous mood, suggest the distant possibility of rehabilitation by using the term "loafer". The tsotsi and the loafer were one, but while the tsotsi was beyond redemption, the loafer's problem was more that he did not share the Protestant ethic, and consequently had not very much to do with his time but get drunk and look for trouble. Furthermore, if we look at verdicts in cases before the Durban Magistrate's Court through the course of the 1930's and 40's, we find that "loafers" can be European, Indian or Coloured as well. Generally speaking, the tsotsi or loafer was also defined by the spaces that he was seen to inhabit-- the dangerously liminal and uncontrollable spaces of shack settlements in Cato Manor or Booth Road, or the inter-racial working class rooms and backyards of central Durban. In the testimonies to the Riot Commission of 1949, the riots are blamed --by Indian, European, and African witnesses as well-- on the unruly and spontaneous tsotsi or loafer.

WHAT A SHOT !



A typical pose of an African during the Riots

It seems logical that since the rioting reached its most violent stage in the Cato Manor and Booth road areas that the rioters must have lived in those spaces. To this end, much of the commission's time is devoted to the question of high rents and exploitation in Cato Manor. But where did the driving core of rioters really come from? This is a difficult question because, as I have already suggested, the riot unfolded in expanding circles of reading and practice, drawing in more and more different groups of people into its emerging narrative. We can begin to answer it, however, by looking at the statistical charts compiled by the police on the 93 Africans serving terms of imprisonment in the Durban Central Prison for offences linked to the riots. These were presumably the worst offenders, and a reasonable sample of the 357 Africans convicted in the wake of the events of January 1949.

What emerges from police interviews of these 93 prisoners is that only 15 lived in Indian residential areas or on Indian farms, while 14 lived in *European* residential areas and on European farms. Of those living under Indian landlords, 11 told the police, at least, that they were satisfied with their accommodation, and 4 complained of excessive rental and lack of water or sanitary provisions. Only 2 of the prisoners lived in Indian-owned rooms in Cato Manor, of which one was "satisfied" and one not. The greater majority, 52 prisoners, lived in Durban's various all-male compounds or barracks and so were not jobless at all, but part of the city's incipient working class.

The intricacies of cultural and political organisation among these men were, as far as we can tell, very decentralised, negotiated through oral networks and located in fluid *practices* as opposed to clearly bounded and stable institutions. This is probably why, despite the various mechanisms of discipline and surveillance in place in the barracks, these men were able to keep the nuances of their political discussions away from the colonial gaze. Nevertheless, thanks to the fairly recent work of scholars such as Veit Erlmann, David Hemson, Paul la Hausse, Iain Edwards and Tim Nuttall, and through the process of reading the testimonials to the Riot Commission report, we can begin to imagine the worlds in which they lived.

The men who lived in the barracks were, in theory at least, migrant labourers. They maintained strong links to the rural countryside, and a strong respect and admiration for Zulu royalty. It was for this reason that the authorities arranged, in the wake of the riots, for Chief Cyprian and his uncle Prince Regent Mshiyeni to tour the Corporation barracks and locations, and encourage racial harmony. Their impending arrival, a Native Commissioner was to tell the Daily News, "brought a remarkable change in Natives' hearts". Indeed, Wellington Masuku, the supervisor of the compound of the Coronation Brick and Tile Company, spoke of this excitement and the "great disappointment" those in the compound felt when they learnt that he was only going to tour the Corporation's compounds, and not their own.

The martial traditions and networks of the countryside had also been carried to the town, and preserved in the set of dances that came to be known as the "ngoma" dances, which played themselves out on the streets during the course of the riots (the Durban branch of the Bantu Ministers Association told the commission in its list of "remedies" that African women especially wanted to see the dances stopped.) At the same time, these rural traditions, beliefs and practices were being constantly reworked and re-imagined in a specifically urban context. Erlmann has suggested how the ngoma dance evolved as a specifically urban form, even as it represented itself as the core of rural tradition.

Warfare in the countryside (decimated by colonial policies and natural disasters) played itself out in fierce battles between clans. Before and after the Durban riots, the newspapers also carried reports of a battle between the Mncunu and Mthembu clans which resulted in several deaths. In the city, however, the migrants in the barracks and compounds had long begun to translate their solidarities and conceive of their struggles on much larger levels. In the 1929 riots, it was this same group that had taken on the state as well as Europeans, and African witnesses to the commission did speak of 1949 as the direct successor to 1929. In fact, for them, and for many other Africans (including those I have just begun to interview), January 1949 was not a “riot”, but a *war*, part of the long struggle of Africans for rights in the city. The state had its own reasons for intervening in the riots and brutally demonstrating its military capabilities; it knew that the attacks on Indians might well have been a prelude to the rioters challenging the state or lay Europeans directly on a region-wide or even country-wide level.

If the networks of political and military organisation in the barracks and compounds were informal and decentralised, they certainly were not --as many accounts try to suggest-- chaotic or undisciplined. On the evening of 13th January and through the weekend, a set of “runners” were deputed to reach most of the compounds in Durban, definitely across Natal and perhaps even beyond to mobilise the troops for the war. Two instances where they failed are telling-- on the Natal Estates where the local chief, Ngcobo, intervened at the behest of the estate manager, and the Coronation Brick and Tile barracks where Masuku intervened. Nevertheless, in many compounds, the fact that the runners were able to make a connection and mobilise residents so quickly suggests to me strong evidence of *prior* networks.

The impis from the barracks did not see their problem in class terms, and attacked any Indian, whether poor or rich. It is likely, as I have suggested, that they saw themselves involved in battle, and were willing to do whatever seemed necessary. In this way, the 1949 riots were an odd echo of the anti-German riots in Durban during the first world war, where Europeans attacked what they perceived as German shops and citizens as part of their contribution to the war effort. At the same time, this front of the rioters, as we learn from interviews and testimonials, often did not engage in what might be seen as “undignified” activities such as looting-- they smashed shop windows, for instance, but were followed by *another* group which looted the shops.

The looters, who are perhaps a little more deserving of the title “tsotsi” could well have included those habitual offenders from central Durban who appeared before the Durban magistrate’s court on repeated occasions, and could have been central to the rioting on Thursday evening. This multi-racial criminal world, which both transgressed racial boundaries and was tangled in them (with, for example, one Indian hiring an African to take revenge on another Indian and so on) explains how a handful of working class Europeans, and even one or two Indians, far removed from the ideologies of the barracks, also come to participate in the riots.

Why then did the disciplined front of rioters proceed so deliberately toward Cato Manor on Friday? While most of them did not live in Cato Manor, they probably knew the area well if they went there for their weekend fun. Cato Manor held currency as a symbol: it remained one of the last spaces in the city where Africans owned land. In the testimonies to the Riot Commission, many witnesses express anger at the way --and this is how they see it-- zoning regulations had divided the city into Indian and European areas, leaving nothing for Africans.

It was not the segregation they opposed, but the fact that they were not given their own segregated area within municipal limits. It makes sense that the rioters were specifically concerned with driving Indians out of Cato Manor so that, at the very least, this area could be zoned for Africans, and that they could capture their own legitimate place within the “Durban system.” As Iain Edwards has shown, they were successful to a limited extent, but paid a very high price. The riot was soon to be suppressed brutally, in a case of police and army action never before seen in Durban, where crowds of Africans were fired at almost indiscriminately.

The fury of the attack in Cato Manor, however, meant that Indians there were largely the victims, and a sad stream of thousands of Indian refugees began to pour into emergency camps, where some would remain, homeless, for several months. This was not entirely true elsewhere. The dominant parable of the riots would require for its stability not only the unruly “tsotsi”, but also the submissive and weak “coolie”, who had caused the riot because of his cunning exploitativeness, but could now only lie in wait for the European state to come and save him. This account, perpetuated as much by Indian leaders as by Europeans, is one which still has not met an adequate challenge.

In fact, if we look, at least, at the official statistics (which, of course, by the city officials’ own admission may not have been accurate) on who died in the riots and how, some strange discrepancies arise. More Africans than Indians died by the end of the riots-- 87 (including 6 women) as opposed to 46 Indians. Accounts of police and army action invariably involve the use of revolvers, but only 33 of the 87 deaths are from gunshot wounds. The rest are from head wounds and stab wounds, which also account for most of the Indian deaths. Is it possible that Indians claimed as many lives as they lost?

In Victoria street, Indians would continue to throw missiles at Africans regardless of whether or not they were involved in the riots or not. In Clairwood, however, Indian reprisals took a decidedly more violent turn. Today, I have found in my interviews how many Clairwood Indians speak proudly of their “fighting back”, and the riots have inspired a whole mythology --not yet broached in print-- of those who did the fighting, such as the man nicknamed as “Long Jack”. In these attacks, spearheaded by Clairwood’s own informal networks of gangs, Indians used their own “traditional” weapons, such as the cutlass used for cutting cane, and a few were in possession of guns. It is not clear who their targets were, but it is likely that it included a number of Africans who had never intended to become part of the events.

By the time the riots had been declared officially “over” on Sunday by the authorities, they had pulled into their vortex a whole range of actors who had come to impose an irreversibly “pure” racial reading of the events, and enacted this reading directly into their practice. Apart from the core of rioters from the barracks and compounds, a whole range of other Africans had written themselves into the account. There were those who threw stones, those who looted shops, those who hurled insults, or those who made threats and chased Indians. The riots had come to be imagined as a primal racial conflict and, through this imagining, had become just that.

These readings, and the various stories they engendered had been structured and splintered by the various closed spaces into which they moved. By the time the riot was over, and well after, Indians, Europeans, and Africans had derived completely different meanings from the events. This divergence of meaning had itself been the motor by which the riot unfolded, and ensured that, in a sense, the riot would not actually end on Sunday, but expand underground through memory and telling, multiplying endlessly into the decades that followed. Yet

perhaps the greatest irony was the strange symmetry between the most divergent of accounts. The Indians that lived in Clairwood will today, driven by that special nostalgia that only the Group Areas Act could foster, speak of how the 1949 riots showed that “the Indians in Clairwood were different... they had real unity.” In 1949, Wellington Masuku had echoed this very same idea in his statement to the Riot Commission when he said,

“In a way this fight was like many others between the two sections. The only difference was that, on this occasion, the Africans showed unity and determination.”

The Reading and Writing Continues

After much deliberation over its “terms of reference”, the government appointed a Commission of Enquiry, with F.D. van der Heever as its chair, to begin its hearings a few weeks after the riot had ended. Scholars around the world are learning, the hard way, how such commissions are always more about trying to engineer a catharsis and re-establish the state’s monopoly over truth than anything else. This commission was no different, except that it was frustrated in these ambitions by the boycott of, among other groups, the ANC, NIC and SACP because they were not allowed the right of cross-examination. Nevertheless, it sat through more than a month of hearings, and promptly produced a report that would not honestly have needed most of the testimonials it heard. As Kenneth Kirkwood of the South African Institute of Race Relations commented in his report on the events, “the Commission set aside virtually the whole of the evidence that submitted the riots to social analysis.”

Meanwhile, groups of Indians began to plan and carry out isolated attacks on Africans, and were sometimes intercepted by the police. Out of the fear of such reprisals, a new crisis was created-- about two thousand African refugees, mostly women and children, were made homeless by the riots and began to stream into a new set of camps. Africans began a general boycott of Indian buses that was to last through the year, and P.R. Pather of the Natal Indian Organisation, who argued that the riots proved that non-European unity could not work, met with the Defence minister to ask that Indians in isolated farm areas be issued with guns. Through the year a number of potential riots, such as one in Booth road in June, began to break out, and, on Dingaan’s day 1949, rumours of a fresh set of attacks kept the police busy. The riot had already, in January, moved onto a new, international level of multiple reading. It made the front page of newspapers in England, India and the USA where it was seen as the fruits of apartheid policy. For the South African government, the riot demonstrated the opposite-- that segregation was the only way to solve the problem of racial conflict.

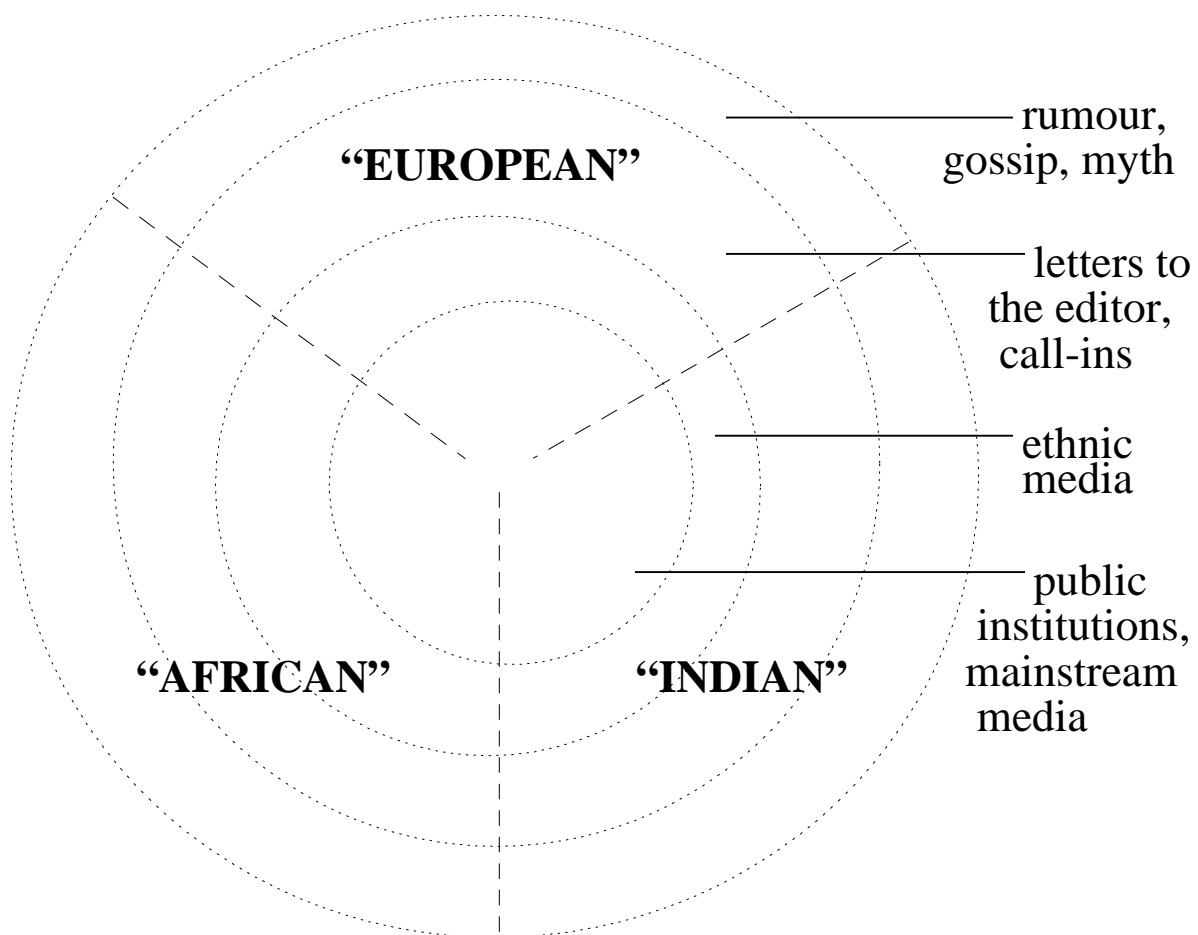
Today, accounts of the 1949 riots have been submerged back into the closed spaces in which they were born. For almost all Indians in Natal, stories of the riot have been fashioned into object lessons learnt in youth from elders, and form a bedrock of folk tales rarely broached in inter-racial spaces. What strikes me, though, is how and why we continue to have an overwhelming silence about the events of January 1949 in the shared South African public space. For an event in which more than two thousand people were killed or injured at a pivotal point in South African history, it has produced little more than a few articles and an honours thesis or two. Where does this overwhelming silence come from, and what is it hiding? I must end by trying to negotiate this rather knotty question.

Conclusion: Speaking In Space, 1949-1999

There is a strange and disturbing resonance between the silences we keep today and the divergent narratives withheld from the public space in and before 1949. How did 1949

happen, and can it happen again? If we look, for a second, not at where the various accounts that emerge within and around the Riot Commission diverge, but what they *share*, we may begin to get an answer.

What almost all the witnesses agree on, truth be told, is the idea of separate development, the idea that too much inter-mixing between the races is a dangerous thing. Today, the history of apartheid makes it hard to defend a discourse of segregation, but if we consider how the idea of segregation becomes re-invented in the discourse of *multi-culturalism* (as opposed to *cross-culturalism*) we might get an idea of how people at the time perceived its liberating possibilities. People turn to the idea of multi-culturalism because they want to preserve the possibilities inherent in difference. For the apartheid government, segregation had to take place in the context of hierarchy. For the African witnesses to the commission, however, segregation implied the chance to have their own space in the city, to run and purchase from their own businesses. For the NIO and even the NIC, segregation allowed Indians to preserve a sense of cultural purity and pride. Thus, like the tale of the 1949 riots, the meaning of segregation comes to have radically different possibilities for different actors, and I would argue that the majority of Durbanites had come to accept the essential, if not the corollary premises of segregation well before the advent of apartheid.



The problems, however, for a non-hierarchical discourse of segregation are three-fold-- first, the very notion of segregation presumes the presence of others; second, in order to make cultural segregation work one has to police various boundaries, the most important of which is the sexual one; and third, in order for segregated cultures to share a common geographical

and political space, one needs to have the presence of a mediating centre. Thus, a solution was found in the organisation of psychic, if not necessarily physical, space, along the lines of the diagram above.

At the centre, we have the shared public sphere à la Habermas, although its boundaries are nebulous, and the journey into private spaces becomes more of a gradual slide than a jump. In the Durban of 1949, this public sphere is mediated by strictly European institutions, but non-Europeans are allowed into this public sphere, as long as what they say remains within the limits of what can be said in the context of colonial logic. As we move slowly toward more private, racialised spaces, a range of accounts emerge which are not admitted into the public space. Importantly, the boundaries are mediated, in the South African context, always through language. To enter fully into the shared central public space, one needs to speak and write English well; in order to enter fully into the African private space in Natal, one needs, at least, to speak Zulu. When I looked for statements about Indians made by Africans prior to the riots for instance, I never found them in English. Yet, as the town clerk, John MacIntyre pointed out, a number of letters to the editor (an in-between space between the oral and the printed word?) had appeared in *Ilanga Lase Natal* in the period before 1949 expressing just the kinds of grievances later aired in the Commission report and elsewhere. And, as we move further into private spaces, there are things one can never come to hear unless one is a cultural insider.

1949, I have suggested, can be read as parable of the flow and divergence of information through these restricted colonial spaces; and apartheid was to complete the process of mapping these spaces onto the geography of the city. Yet, in the post-apartheid city, the integrity of these spatial boundaries are still very much preserved. Consider, for instance, the recent incident where the editor of *Ilanga* was brought to book for making anti-Indian statements in his editorial. In order for this to happen, his statements had to first appear in translation. When this happened, there was a massive outcry by public authorities, and an immediate crackdown, without consideration for the nuances of the sentiment he was trying to express. As I was to learn from friends, a later show of support for Maphumulo in *Ilanga's* letters to the editor never made it to the English press, and the issue was laid to rest.

In 1949, there were individuals who transgressed the racialised spaces of the colonial city such as, for instance, Indian communists. Yet, as Goolam Vahed has shown, Indian communists were able to reconcile their cultural identities as Indians in closed racial spaces, while at the same time being communists in a shared, multi-racial space, and I would argue that they did this by splitting their selves and preserving a whole set of silences in the shared space. The situation in 1999 remains, I want to suggest, much the same, with the possible difference that we are more multiply positioned than ever before. We need to begin to make better use of our multiple positions, and to transgress spaces and silences --carefully-- if we want to build and imagine a truly cross-cultural world.

It's difficult for me to narrate a parable without the possibility of redemption, and, in that spirit, I want to end with an extended quote. The events of 1949 did offer redemption when they forced an emergency meeting between the South African Indian Congress and the ANC. If the issue of non-European unity had continued, despite attempts to the contrary, to be a vexed one, it may also paradoxically have been the event that made necessary a new era of more intense collaboration. George Singh, the veteran activist, told the story for the oral history archive project of the S.A.I.R.R. It may be a suspiciously rosy story, but it remains a good parable for the possibility of transgressed spaces:

“Those were the ‘49 riots..., early 1949. (Pause.) The thing lasted for a whole week, the tension was there for a good week, the whole of Durban was involved. Then there was a joint big meeting of the SAIC...[and the ANC]... at the International club in Pine street, Durban.

...The meeting started off -- this is rather important -- on a sort of discordant note, -- Africans -- leaders thought the Indian leaders -- they had been called by the Indian leaders to try and just merely pacify things in Durban and of one thing and the other but -- ...

I remember there was heated discussion right to the lunch and after lunch some of the members came back and said, “Now I think the question of the Cato Manor riots is merely a temporary issue. There are many other issues facing our communities jointly. We’ll have to, we’ll have to get together from time to time to establish a common platform for our joint activity. More or less along those lines. Anyway that view seems to have held the day.

Then-- after the meeting I remember this little incident... Dr. Dadoo and Champion. It was like a truce meeting in wartime...[they] marched right to the edge of the so-called African line. When they reached the other side they were given a rousing -- reception and welcome in spite of all the anti- Indian tensions. It was a great victory...for the joint leadership”