

Their City, Our Terms: The Livelihood and Political Strategies of
African Migrant Labourers in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal c. 1874-1906

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ABSTRACT

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The second half of the nineteenth century was an age of confusion for a great many of the Africans who lived in the Southeastern area of the African continent then called the Colony of Natal. In addition to enacting brutal and violent occupation, British settlers also intentionally impoverished African communities so as to render their agricultural and pastoral practices insufficient for survival. These factors caused many Africans to enter into the largest city of the colony, Durban, to find work as wage labourers. This thesis explores how African migrant labourers in Durban navigated the urban space, colonial-capitalist political economy, and indigenous African political economy to develop new livelihood strategies that allowed them to survive and prosper. In particular, this thesis is interested in understanding how dynamics of job seeking, urban housing, and urban labour action affected the self-conceptions and group identities of young migrant labouring men, and how these altered categories of identity fostered challenges toward the settler colonial state and generation-based patriarchal African power structures. I argue that migrant labourers reformed indigenous African ontologies, renegotiated ideas of maturation and masculinity, and developed labour-based political organizing strategies to confront the specific urban challenges of heightened intercourse with the colonial state and dislocation from old African lifeways. In doing so, migrant labourers in Durban both expressed new senses of individual agency and developed durable social identities with other labourers from disparate rural origins. Over time, these labourers constructed a political and social infrastructure which substantially shifted the power in African politics toward the young and the landless; and leveraged this power to pose a genuine challenge to colonial-capitalist domination by acting on their new senses of individual power and collective potential. By focusing on the site of the city, I highlight how urban challenges combined with rural-informed life practices to forge new capabilities for social organizing and expanded political imaginations which could not have found root anywhere else in the colony.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late Guka, Joseph Kihara Njoroge, and my late Cucu, Margaret Wambui Njoroge, whose grace and determination in navigating the late British occupation of Kenya are the reason I am able to draw breath and write about the history of Africa.

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Introduction

In late November of 1895, a large group of African labourers in the city of Durban grew fed up with their working conditions and decided to take direct action to change them. According to a regional newspaper, they absconded from their workstations at the port in the middle of the day and marched, “led by one six feet high,” to the home of the local agent of one of the largest shipping companies operating in the city. Upon arrival, they demanded from him an increase in pay from 4s per day to 6s per day. The agent deflected their demands and told them to raise concerns to representatives of the company at the docks. The newspaper, while assessing the events of the day, summarized the meaning of this action in fearful and resentful terms, saying: “It is evident that the Natives [Africans] are fully alive to the scarcity of labour and want to take advantage of it.” In the weeks and months following, the local magistrates of Durban responded to the demands of the workers by cracking down even more harshly on labourers who refused to comply with the wage rates set by labour regulations.¹

The scene of the workers on that November day – weaving through the streets of the city in a show of strength in numbers, manifesting their workplace grievances at the location of their employment, and then in the public roadways to all who passed their procession, and then outside the home of the company officer in the white enclave – was simultaneously a familiar occurrence and an extraordinary one. It was “familiar” because African workers, and especially those who found employment on the docks of Durban, were particularly strike prone, and had been leveraging their labour power to demand better working conditions since at least 1874.² In the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century there were a

¹ Natal Witness, 25 November 1895, summarized and quoted in David Hemson, “Class consciousness and migrant workers: Dock workers of Durban,” Diss. University of Warwick, 1979, p. 63

² Ralph Callebort, *On Durban's Docks: Zulu Workers, Rural Households, Global Labor*. Vol. 76. Boydell & Brewer, 2017, p. 1

multitude of strikes, walk outs, and clashes with local police led by African labourers in Durban: the dockworkers were renowned for their forceful and frequent action, but other types of workers such as laundry washers and ricksha pullers led action at various points as well.

However, this strike in particular was also extraordinary for the way that it captured the imagination and fear of the white settlers who saw it unfold. The local newspaper which reported on it was the *Natal Witness*. The paper was not written or printed in Durban, but rather in Pietermaritzburg – the capital of the colony – some one hundred kilometers west. Strikes and walkouts were rarely reported in white newspapers: their memory survives mainly because of the police reports from dispatchers and constables who were sent to break them.³ This scene, however, frightened the white people of Durban, the economic center of the colony, and Pietermaritzburg, the political center of the colony. It frightened them such that a newspaper of record not only printed an account the of event but also suggested that it might be a harbinger of things to come if African workers had become “alive” to the fact of their importance to the economic activity of the colony.

The settlers had many reasons to be afraid. Firstly, African solidarity and concerted action could, under the right circumstances, spell ruin for their segregationist system and colonial profiteering on the back of African labour if workers continued to put upward pressure on wages. Moreover, only two years earlier in 1893, the colony had been granted responsible government by the British empire, meaning that internal affairs – and internal defense – were the sole responsibility of the whites living there. The empire would no longer come to their rescue in the

³ The Superintendent of Police Report Book(s) for Durban are located in the archives at Pietermaritzburg. Unfortunately, it was unavailable for consultation while writing this thesis, but it is richly cited in previous studies of Durban, and some evidence was found therein from the work of authors who were able to read the volumes in the course of their research. Where applicable, both the reference to the Report Book and to the work which used evidence or quotations from the Report Book are noted

event of an uprising. But there is one more reason, far more visceral and intriguing yet unconfirmable from the sources, which probably weighed in their minds as well. The strike of 1895 was a show of force that made visible to the white settlers of Durban that Africans were well capable of organizing despite the abuse, segregation, and restrictions placed upon them by the colonial state. It showed that Africans were willing to tread on turf where laws forbade them to go, and demand restitution that the settlers saw them as having no right to demand. It challenged preconceived notions of “Native” docility, simplicity, and servility. Above all, those two hundred men walking together as a unit made physically and discursively recognizable to all, African and white alike, that there were simply *more* Black people in the colony than whites by a large margin. Organized and in numbers, Africans could wield enough strength to pose a genuine threat to the white regime. The strike of 1895 is one point of flare in a grand story about the development of an urban crucible in the city of Durban during the industrial revolution of the southern African subcontinent.

Race, Labour, and Industrial Development in Durban

Durban⁴ is a city on the Indian Ocean coast of Southern Africa located in a region that was called, between 1843 and 1994, Natal. The region, a British colony until 1893, a British dominion until 1910, and a province of South Africa until 1994, Natal extended inland from the Drakensberg Mountains in the west to the Indian Ocean coast in the east and from the Umzimkulu river in the south to the Tugela river in north. The land was for millennia home to native African communities with rich histories and complex relationships among them who variously lived as agriculturalists and pastoralists. The largest among those communities in the

⁴ The area surrounding the harbour which in English is called Durban is known as *eThwini* in isiZulu, the language of its Zulu inhabitants prior to British conquest. The isiZulu noun translates to “at the bay.”

nineteenth century was the Zulu, who retained an independent kingdom north of Natal across the Tugela river until 1879.⁵ The British empire came into possession of the land by means of brutal conquest of the Native population, as with much of the Southern African subcontinent, and some negotiation with the African communities living there.

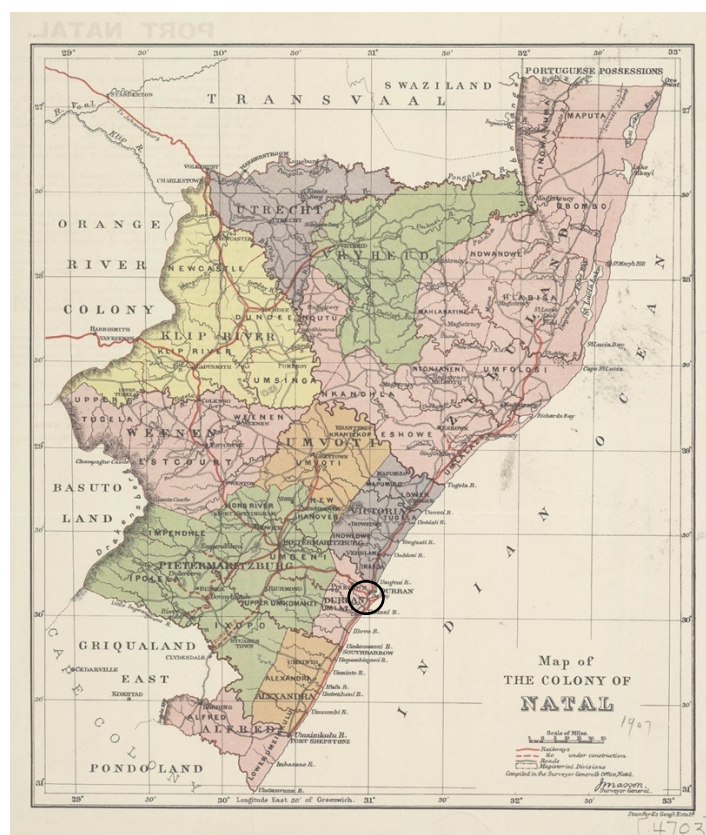


Figure 1. Map of the Colony of Natal in 1907, with the city of Durban circled in Black.⁶

Durban was, owing to its location on a bay, an important trade location which developed rapidly in colonial Natal into South Africa's main harbour and a crucial node of the British empire for shipping, industry, and travel.⁷ White settlers discovered gold deposits in the

⁵ Bill Guest and John M. Sellers, eds. *Enterprise and exploitation in a Victorian Colony: aspects of the economic and social history of colonial Natal*, University of Natal Press, 1985, pp. 1-2

⁶ Colony of Natal, "Map of the Colony of Natal," Scale not given, 1907, Maps of Africa collection at Stanford University, Special Collections Reading Room, Stanford, W7 historic small box

⁷ Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, p. 1

Witwatersrand, west of Natal, in the 1870s, and developed sugar plantations and coal mining in the colony throughout the nineteenth century. These activities created wealth for the white people living in the colony, spurred the development of transport networks to connect inland resources with the shipping port, and dramatically increased the demand for cheap labor to satisfy the upkeep of the city and functioning of the port.⁸ To satisfy the demand for labour, the government and private companies began to import persons from the Asian vestiges of the British empire as indentured labourers starting in 1858, the vast majority of whom were from India.⁹ More significantly, the white residents and profiteers of the city looked inward to Natal, and beseeched Africans to come to the town and work for cash wages. Between 1874 and 1906, the period of interest in this study, the number of Africans working in the city increased dramatically.

Early African migrants ventured to the town and into wage work due to a combination of opportunities for enrichment and crises in the rural areas which caused a need for new streams of income. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, due to a colonial regime that intentionally impoverished the countryside through taxation and land dispossession – and a series of natural calamities to crops and livestock – Africans began to seek work in Durban primarily out of socioeconomic compulsion.¹⁰

However strong their desire for a cheap labour reserve, white settlers in Durban also retained racist and paternalistic views of Africans which created a need to strictly control the movements of workers and prevent them from settling in the city permanently. Thus developed a system of *labour migrancy*, in which Africans (the vast majority of whom were men) were

⁸ Guest and Sellers eds., *Enterprise and exploitation*, pp. 3-4, 10

⁹ Ibid. p. 10

¹⁰ Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, p. 23

allowed into the city only to work for finite spells of time after which they returned to their homes in the rural areas. The wages paid to Africans for city work were paltry, and so the survival of African migrant labourers' households depended on a combination of wages, produce from rural subsistence farming, and sometimes small-scale commerce in agricultural goods produced in the countryside.¹¹ Most workers who went to Durban were from rural Natal and from Zululand, to the north of Natal. They were mostly young, landless, and generally without property but rather belonging to their fathers' homesteads. Because of the constant movement of workers in and out of the city, the African population fluctuated a great deal and is difficult to accurately estimate. However, in 1904, the census listed the total African population in the city at 18 236 men and 18 929 persons in total.¹² This total still represented a small fraction of the nearly one million Africans living in the colony.

There were four main markets of work for Africans in Durban by the turn of the twentieth century: togt, ricksha pulling, washing, and monthly contract arrangements.¹³ Togat is a term of Afrikaner language origin which means labour hired-by-day. The practice was most common among the dock workers of Durban, however sometimes it was used to describe washermen and ricksha pullers as well, the former hiring themselves out to launder clothes by the day and the latter hiring themselves out to pull white Durbanites in rickshas across the bustling city. Monthly contract workers were primarily domestic servants in white households.¹⁴ These categories are useful demarcations for the general level of labour power enjoyed by each group – togt workers

¹¹ Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, p. 23

¹² "Census of the Colony of Natal 1904," Pietermaritzburg: P. Davis & Sons Government Printers, 1905, p. 73

¹³ David Hemson, "Class consciousness and migrant workers: Dock workers of Durban," Diss. University of Warwick, 1979, p. 59

¹⁴ Ibid.

generally possessed greater leverage and wielded it as such against employers.¹⁵ Still, they should not be confused to imply that any of the arrangements were more or less familiar to the labourers who entered into them. Nor do they suggest that there was no cross communication and support among the labourers within them. The global capitalist economy, and its frontier in the labour center of Durban, was a marked departure point for all migrant labourers coming from indigenous African economies. This study will seek to analyze how these workers navigated this moment of socioeconomic stress at home and exploitation in the city to produce new livelihood strategies for their mutual and individual benefit.

Historiographical Context

The negotiation of livelihood strategies among Natal Africans has been interrogated throughout literature on the Southern African subcontinent with density and richness since the 1970s. The authors who have studied these phenomena can broadly be sorted into categories of Marxist scholars and structuralist scholars, with some overlap of theory and intertextuality among them.

The most influential Marxist text in the tradition of Natal African history is the work of Shula Marks, whose monograph *Reluctant rebellion* interrogates the possible causes of the 1906-1908 African “rebellion” in Natal. Marks argues that the defining feature of African life in Natal was impoverishment and that the grand-scale act of resistance which bookended the period of rapid industrial growth was a last-gasp effort of desperate people to display their discontent with dispossession and excessive taxation. Despite a deep commitment to materialist analysis, Marks

¹⁵ Shula Marks, “Class, Culture, and Consciousness in South Africa, 1880-1890,” in Ross, Mager, and Nasson eds. *The Cambridge History of South Africa Volume 2: 1885-1994*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 136

argues that the failure of the rebellion to produce coordinated efforts or tangible results attests that the workers in the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg failed to produce “widespread African urban organization” in the antecedent period.¹⁶ Her contentions are partly well received and partly refuted by David Hemson, whose contemporary and unpublished PhD dissertation remains perhaps the most impressive class analysis of Durban’s workers produced to date. Hemson argues that “the growth of nationalism and class consciousness arose in response to the specific forms of capitalist domination.”¹⁷ He, however, emphasizes the multiplicity of labour action in Durban, and especially among dock workers, to be evidence of a widespread proletarian movement developing steam and expressing its earliest forms in the actions of tog workers between 1874 and 1917, the period in which the “Durban System” of racial segregation and labour control was developed. Hemson, himself an active union organizer in Durban during the 1960s, retains an impressive closeness to the ground-level manifestations of African disquietude. This Marxian tradition of labour-oriented history focuses on class and economic frustration as causes and motivations for African action. It captures well the influence of material conditions in Durban on worker movements, but largely fails to offer specific accounts of the interpersonal and social technologies of organizing which were endemic to the complication of class distinctions. It positions African actions as reactions to colonial rule rather than internally generated responses to specific conditions and life histories, and in doing so fails to assess the place of African pre-colonial and non-colonial dynamics as they play out in African political organizing.

The bridge between the Marxist and structuralist schools is captured most recently in the post-structuralist work of Ralph Callebert. His study of Durban’s dock workers attempts to

¹⁶ Shula Marks, *Reluctant rebellion: the 1906-8 disturbances in Natal*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 310

¹⁷ Hemson, “Class consciousness,” p. 46

excavate the dynamics of the multi-nodal African household, constructed between the city workplace, the rural homestead, and later still the urban township. He emphasizes the identities other than wage labour which contributed to the making of African life strategies.¹⁸ His conception of “livelihood strategies” as a category injects a much-needed nuance into the reading of life at Durban as a conversation between town and country. So too does his complication of the category “proletarian” placed over southern African lives by Marxian scholarship, which he contends is an artificially imported Western conception of wage labour relationships.¹⁹ Still, Callebert’s analysis conceives of workers in relation to mostly economic identities, and analyzes all phenomena on near-exclusively economic terms, such as the tension between young Africans’ challenge toward rural patriarchies and their desire to gain status and rank within that very institution of African patriarchy.

The structuralist school of Southeastern African history is dominated by the work of Keletso Atkins. Her analysis of the *Amawasha* guild in Durban, and later her book on the reconstruction of Natal African life in a world of “confusion,” both occupy crucial niches within African sociocultural studies. Atkins argues that, due to the various stressors on Natal African life which predated the turn to urban wage labour, workers in the cities renegotiated a pre-existing “northern Nguni work ethic,” which mapped cultural norms and agreements of African life onto the city.²⁰ These norms, she argues, were dictated by the necessity of cooperation and specific conceptions of mutuality found in rural African life. Atkins writes with a refreshing, “African centered perspective” on the lives of Africans throughout Natal.²¹ Michael Mahoney, in

¹⁸ Callebert, *On Durban’s Docks*, pp. 8-14

¹⁹ Callebert, *On Durban’s Docks*, p. 16

²⁰ Keletso Atkins, *The Moon is Dead, Give us our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900*, London: James Curry, 1993, p. 7

²¹ Ibid.

his analysis of the spread of Zulu ethnicity as an organizing category, similarly privileges cultural categories such as ethnicity and lineage to understand how Africans interacted in the urban moment. He argues that Natal Africans adopted and reformed the category of “Zuluness” in order to find strength in numbers and solidarity as colonial contradictions intensified.²² Many scholars who wrote before Mahoney also focused on Zulu identity as an organizing logic for African resistance to white settler regimes. Curiously, though, Mahoney argues that Durban’s workers failed to achieve widespread Zulu or Black consciousness because of the prevalence of “interchiefdom conflict,” in which migrant labourers tended to self-organize along the lines of and fight between factions from different rural areas. He contrasts this phenomenon in Durban directly with the dynamics of Johannesburg, where he argues that Zulu paramountcy took root and led to more effective mutual help and resistance to colonial imposition.²³ Both authors correctly identify the importance of adaptation of pre-existing structures from life history in Natal to the development of African dynamics in the city. However, in doing so, they tend to ignore the spontaneous, urban-specific conformations of such organization which both co-opted and rejected familiar notions of togetherness and belonging. Structuralist historians add valuable commentary on the role of rural affinities, but a more complicated analysis of novel urban stressors and strategies is required to gain a complete picture of the city dynamic.

As with most writing in African studies, looming large over both the Marxian and structuralist historiographies is the problem of what Terence Ranger called the invention of tradition.²⁴ Hobsbawm and Ranger, in their edited volume, catalogue the ways in which novel

²² Michael Mahoney, *The other Zulus: the spread of Zulu ethnicity in colonial South Africa*, Duke University Press, 2012, p. 9

²³ Mahoney, *The other Zulus*, pp. 118-125

²⁴ Terence Ranger, "The invention of tradition in colonial Africa," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The invention of tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 211-262

encounters produce new cultural traditions the world over, and specifically in African encounters. Ranger emphasizes that historians must be cautious to understand that African action in ages of encounter are not perfect transmutations of an African past. Rather, most African life strategies at moments of stress are the result of social arguments made by various actors from their particular positionality about the way that African life should be organized during the encounter; and that while those arguments drew legitimacy from overtures to tradition they often reshape the story of those traditions simultaneously.²⁵ Their warning is both well taken advice for the reading of sources and a valuable point of departure for understanding “Africanness” during colonial moments as a combination of tradition and reflexive or reactive action in a colonial superstructure. This paper is not concerned with the fidelity or continuation of African practice over time. However, Ranger’s appeal to read African sources with complexity and skepticism, especially when confronting appeals to “tradition,” is a valuable principle for helping to identify phenomena that *are* inventions and treat them as such: syntheses of specific African collective memories and specific African life circumstances.

The goal of this study, in contrast to and within a niche of the wider literature, is to receive African migrant labourers “as they were,” and understand how they redefined categories including the self, collective identity, and belonging in response to their encounters with one another and the various other actors at Durban during the urban moment. This is not to claim that the study is a totally faithful recovery of migrant labourers’ lives and dynamics. In the absence of being at Durban and living this moment, such a recollection is impossible. However, in contrast to the preceding literature which analyzes African urban dynamics as reactions to external structures, cultural or economic, this study looks primarily inward from the city limits, onto the

²⁵ Ranger, "The invention of tradition in colonial Africa," p. 262

people that lived there. By understanding the specific stressors, ideas, and actions incumbent upon migrant labourers in the city, this study seeks to analyze how and why they organized life in the ways that they chose to. The study also looks outward, to analyze how these new categories of identity and mutual interest affected the lives of all Natal Africans, but still privileges a deep understanding of the city-dwellers in and of themselves, with all of the different influences on their lives taken into account.

Sources and Ghosts

Necessary for an understanding of this study is a brief meta-analysis of the sources at a historian's disposal in the study of this time and Natal. As with most studies of colonial encounters in Africa, the sources are simultaneously voluminous from the perspective of white settlers and frustratingly paltry from the perspective of Africans. However, an intimate understanding of *how* sources can be instructive is worth its metaphorical weight in gold. The documents at play in this study can be broadly sorted into three categories.

The first and highest level of these categories – in the sense that they offer a bird's eye view of the colony – are reports issued by the colonial governments which presided over Natal and the rest of Britain's Southern African holdings. The most important of the kind appear at the beginning and end of this study's period of interest: the reports of the Natal Native Commission of 1882 and the Natal Native Commission of 1906-7. Both commissions were comprised of magistrates in the Natal government dispatched to survey the state and concerns of the native African population. The questions posed by the magistrates are crafted to provide the state with better information to enforce their regime of segregation and domination, but the reports are largely based on the responses of whites and elder or otherwise powerful African interlocutors

such as chiefs. These sources, as government documents, must be read with due caution for the pre-conceived notions of the settlers about African life. In fact, the points at which they are most instructive are the ones where those settlers overtly or inadvertently admit that their aims and expectations have been subverted: where settlers *complain* about Africans. White complaints reveal two key phenomena: the actions of Africans which actively frustrate the aims of white settlers and the actions of Africans which refute the stereotypes of those settlers. It is precisely these points of tension – small breaks in the operation of state from the perspective of magistrates – which provide windows into the effective and sometimes intentional efforts of Africans to subvert the expectations placed upon them. They serve as a valuable starting point for probing the motifs of African life which are oriented to undermine colonial exploitation – African life strategies.

The second category of these sources are the oral histories. Perhaps peculiar to Natal in the nineteenth century, the surviving oral accounts of Africans are also mediated by the lens of a white settler. James Stuart, a colonial magistrate in Natal who was the secretary to the Native Affairs Commission in 1906, transcribed a series of interviews with African chiefs which he conducted in order to better understand “native custom” for the purpose of administration.²⁶ His interlocutors – African elders, chiefs, and fathers – held themselves a positionality in the power structure of Natal which makes their complaints instructive tension points as well. Very few of the men who gave testimony to James Stuart went to Durban or any city to work. What they retained still was interaction with young men who did so, and experience with the reverberations and echoes of the ideologies developed in Durban as they manifested in the workers who returned home. The proximity of Stuart’s interviewees to the subjects of this study, and their

²⁶ John B Wright and Colin de B. Webb, eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence relating to the history of the Zulu and neighbouring peoples* vol. 1, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1976, p. xiv

grievances about how those subjects behaved in contravention of “traditional” expectation, sheds further light on the techniques of migrant labourers to carve out new space for themselves in Natal.

The third and final category of sources is those closest to the ground in Durban: the narrative newspapers and the statistical censuses which captured static pictures of life in the city. Both newspapers and censuses still lack the vital component of words from the actual workers themselves, however they allow migrant labourers to communicate *through* silence. Anecdotes and statistics reveal the texture of the city. They breathe animation of life into the grand ideas illuminated in the colonial reports and elders’ accounts. Anecdotes and static shots of demography are not history. But they are windows into the daily realities of the subjects who shaped and were shaped by history: how they moved, how they behaved, and what they read or heard through local publications.

Taken together, the task of recovering stories from this particular colonial encounter is akin to speaking with ghosts. Durban’s migrant labourers in this period were largely invisible. Their voices were unheard by the state, and their chants went un-recorded. They appear to the historian mediated by contemporaries, reflected in mirrors, and peering through cracks in the historical superstructure which encloses them. And like a ghost interpreter, the historian is tasked with listening closely enough to whispers to string together sentences.

The Argument

The questions which this study seeks to answer are: how and to what extent did African migrant workers at Durban, as individuals and as a group at a site of colonial encroachment, develop new conceptions and practices of self-assertion and collectivism based on the challenges

of urban work? And how did the morphology of these self-conceptions reverberate to the politics of resistance against African power structures and the colonial state in Natal? In a sense it is the excavation of an African city which existed within Durban's municipal limits in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is an African history that privileges Africans and an urban history which privileges the city by speaking with Africans and walking the streets of town. This study aims to do the groundwork that other studies neglect in their pursuit of a relational understanding of Durban with reference to the Natal countryside, the white settler regime, and the global capitalist economy. Instead, this thesis interrogates the city and the people who lived there to understand how they developed strategies which went onto contend with those structures. The thesis will proceed to answer these questions in three parts.

The first chapter both excavates the racial politics of the city of Durban and works to contend that African migrant labourers made concerted efforts to self-organize across ethnic and tribal lines in a way that was only possible at the city of Durban. In doing so, not only does the chapter advance an argument about the development of urban life strategies in response to urban stressors, but it also carries weight to prove that Durban's African migrants built a social infrastructure to facilitate innovations at intimate and large scales which could carry over as a basis for broader political organizing. The main argument of the chapter is that African Durbanites reached both within and across traditional ethnic boundaries to negotiate dignified living space and collaborative material economies in Durban as a response to segregationist policies of the Government of Natal, and to discursive threats from the presence of Indians as a rival labour pool and racial group enjoying "heightened" status in the city despite their foreign status to the land.

The second chapter explores the burgeoning generational conflict between African elders and African “youth” in the late nineteenth century. Youth is a generalizing term which was not strictly demarcated by age in Natal, but rather is a combination of age, marital status, and wealth. A youth could be aged anywhere from fifteen to forty years, but typically was unmarried, worked the land of their father’s homestead instead of having their own, and sacrificed the products of their agricultural, pastoral, and domestic labour to their father. Male youths formed the vast majority of Durban’s African population. Several scholars have interrogated the generational and gender conflict among Natal’s Africans in this time period, but most give only passing acknowledgement to the labour centers such as Durban as places where the young earned money which served as a means to financial independence. This chapter argues that the experience of migrant labour in Durban among young men was an integral site of production for anti-patriarch politics in the conflict among generations. Urban work both provided young men with the capital to reinvest in their own aspirations to become landed elders and altered African practices of masculinity and maturation. Youths accumulated cultural power, positioning themselves as providers, and made urban work into a legitimate avenue for becoming a “man.” In doing so, they asserted their individuality. The key difference between this analysis and that of preceding scholars is a deeper excavation of the mechanics of wealth accumulation and deployment by urban workers and the connection forged between material wealth and cultural power.

The third chapter explores the dynamics of relationships between workers-as-individuals and the colonial state of Natal. The chapter expands on the concept of a conflict between generations to show how the rising power of young workers coincided with heightened, direct abrasion between the colonial state and workers in the city, unseating the paradigm of “indirect

rule” of whites over young Africans for brief periods of time in the geography of Durban. Upon these bases, the chapter analyzes in tandem the co-development among African labourers of a novel proletarian political consciousness and spiritual consciousness which replicated and reformed traditional African practices of healing to express resistance to state sanctioned biopolitical control. The chapter ultimately argues that these connected expressions of resistance – to settler control over economic relations and settler control over bodies – coalesced into a broader anti-colonial politics led by the younger generation which aimed toward African emancipation. The key insight of this chapter is that the interdependent forms of social and economic intercourse between settlers and Africans in Durban, the African sociopolitical infrastructure discussed in the first two chapters, and the specific weaknesses of Natal as a colonial regime facilitated the rise of an emancipatory African politics which could not have found as potent a genesis anywhere else in the colony.

As the long arm of global capital swept across Southeastern Africa, coaxing young men of diverse origin into the port city, lives and social structures were uprooted. Migrant labourers from as far south as Pondoland and as far north as Zanzibar found themselves dislocated from their strong familial and kinship bonds, interacting with other young Africans from all over Natal and Zululand, and facing new challenges from bosses and authorities in closer proximity than likely ever before in their lives. The thesis ultimately argues that Durban’s African migrant labouring population leveraged the specific circumstances of heightened racial tension with Durban’s white and Indian populations, dislocation from traditional African power structures, and economic entanglement with the colonial-capitalist state to emphasize their place in the colony as individual agents and forge new kinship identities for mutual uplift. Furthermore, the development of these life strategies contributed to an anti-colonial and anti-African patriarch

politics. As much as rural African life cast its shadow over Durban, the developments at Durban in turn changed Natal by shifting the generative political power among Natal Africans from elders to young wage earners, engendering a heightened emphasis on resistance to the colonial state, and serving as a key catalyst in the genesis of the *Bambatha Rebellion* of 1906.

Under a regime of extraction, Durban's Africans sought and devised new ways to thrive. The city of Durban was a space of African becoming: becoming friends, becoming breadwinners, becoming men, becoming elders, and becoming liberators; but above all else becoming the constellations of millennia of African life history put to task on the busy streets and sun-beaten wharves of a port city looking out over the Indian Ocean.

Chapter 1

African Moral Economies in the Marginal Space of Durban, 1882-1906

An African Sense of Belonging

It is regarded as essential to the future of the native that he should to recognize that, if he is to live, he must work. His heritage is being stripped away from him, and the place he should occupy in the industrial colony is being taken by aliens, the indentured Indians – Natal Native Commission, 1907.²⁷

African migrant labourers in Durban, in many ways, encountered their experience of urban work an age of loneliness. A large number of Natal Africans in the middle and late nineteenth century, at the beginning of the period which saw a rapid ascent in urban work by African peasants, were in fact refugees or children of refugees who had been displaced throughout Natal and Zululand during the early nineteenth-century *Mfecane*.²⁸ Official government records estimate that more than 10 978 African refugees entered Natal between 1856 and 1881,²⁹ many of them finding refuge with local African headmen who had managed to gain some land in an attempt to rebuild their chiefdoms.³⁰ Families, space, place, and security were profoundly uprooted for many of the inhabitants of Natal. These rapidly changing communities, coupled with the general landlessness, poverty, and transience of young men going to work at urban locations posed a challenge to

²⁷ Colony of Natal, "Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7," Pietermaritzburg: P. David & Sons Government Printers, pp. 37

²⁸ *Mfecane*, as it was known at the time and is referred to today, is a word of disputed origin (likely either isiZulu or Sotho) which means "crushing," "scattering," or "forced migration," referring to a period of heightened Zulu warfare and subsequent refugee crisis in Southeastern Africa in the early to middle nineteenth century

²⁹ "Report of the Natal Native Commission 1881-2," Pietermaritzburg: Vause, Slatter & Co., Government Printers, 1882, Appendix G p. 39.

N.B. The actual number of refugees who entered Natal in this period is impossible to know and government estimates vary greatly. This statistic from Appendix G omits, for unknown reasons, two large immigration events caused by heightened Zulu Kingdom warfare. Another statistic from an annexure in the same report ("Memorandum of the Speaker," Ann. p. 19) estimates one hundred thousand refugees during the same period.

³⁰ "Report of the Natal Native Commission 1881-2," p. 14

African inhabitants. The conditions demanded that Africans reform and renew life strategies in such a way that those strategies could work for people who were beset by uncertainty.

Amid the confusion of this time in Natal African history, there remained a common grammar which held widespread relevance to African lives, and on which Africans might pin efforts to rebuild. This grammar was the ideological substance of their Africanness: the ideas and practices of *indigeneity* in southeastern Africa. Indigeneity is by necessity a generalizing term. Africa, contrary to common orientalist narratives and nineteenth century anthropological “scholarship,” is a continent rich with cultural and political dynamism. Southeastern Africa was no different at this time. In fact, as will be explored below, the dynamism of African societies was a major reason that indigenous traditions could be carried forward and transposed during a time of dislocation and in the city of Durban. The Africans who navigated this colonial moment in Natal were diverse of constitution, origin, culture, and religion. However, the grand narratives of Southern African precolonial history offer some clues as to the common ontologies with which these actors organized the world. This chapter will argue that by deploying select ideas and practices of African indigeneity in Durban, migrant labourers redefined their marginal space in the city to foster an African culture and political economy across ethnic and geographic boundaries. They devised new ways to conceive of the self and of kinship which revolved around specific African ideals. Simultaneously these workers projected the ideas and substance of this collectivism onto the wider experience, politics, and economy of Natal Africans.

Before mapping the lines of indigenous ideology onto Durban, the grand contours of African indigeneity must be outlined. This section will endeavor to illuminate those contours within Southeast African society from prominent secondary literature and select examples of testimony from Africans in Natal expressing similar ideas.

For the purpose of this chapter, three themes of indigenous ontologies are important to understand. The first is mutual obligation, or in some cases reciprocal charity to fellow Africans. Although British and local officials incessantly described Natal Africans as savage, one quality which they were quick to note was “mutuality of interest and reciprocity of assistance,” describing it as “a very real and active principle” in pre-colonial life.³¹ Keletso Atkins offers a specific example of this idea, describing a “Law of Hospitality to Travellers,” in which the provision of food and lodging to visiting strangers was expected from the wives and children of a rural African household.³² Even the British who first voyaged to Port Natal, later Durban, described the Zulu people they found nearby (at that time under King Shaka) as pleasant and generous hosts.³³ Africans tended to be kind to strangers before being hostile, and expected their kindness to be reciprocated if they ever found themselves in need.

The second idea of African ideology relevant to this chapter is the logic of wealth in bodies. Atkins argues that, apart from any magnanimous spirit, a perennial desire among African headmen and patriarchs to build wealth by building a following of newcomers was a time-honoured tradition because it worked well.³⁴ Similarly, in his treatise on the origins of the 1906 disturbances in Natal, Benedict Carton demonstrates that African male elders and chiefs acted as patrons to their wives, children, and followers, offering land and leadership to maturing young men and to meandering newcomers in exchange for their loyalty and tribute.³⁵ Because land was traditionally plentiful in southern Africa, communities gained wealth by adding labour power in the form of new people. Therefore, a penchant to incorporate newcomers was a mutually

³¹ Colony of Natal, “Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7,” p. 43

³² Atkins, *The Moon is Dead*, p. 43

³³ Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific majesty: the powers of Shaka Zulu and the limits of historical invention*, Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 40

³⁴ Atkins, *The Moon is Dead*, pp. 22-24

³⁵ Benedict Carton, *Blood from your children: The colonial origins of generational conflict in South Africa*. University of Virginia Press, 2000, p. 38

advantageous philosophy for client and patron alike. This concept – of some as patron and others as clients – could be transported across geographies, and see clients become patrons and vice versa as conditions demanded.

The third and final concept of indigenous practice relevant to this chapter is a tendency to negotiate place and space by customs which eschewed violence or conflict where possible. This tradition is difficult to place, especially amid the expansionary wars of the Zulu kingdom which defined the nineteenth for so many Africans, but its antecedents are clear. One of the few Africans whose words we have direct access to, an interviewee of James Stuart, is Mbovu ka Mtshumayeli, a Qwabe refugee who lived on a mission station in Natal in the early twentieth century. He tells us, of Natal African practices, that “[when resources are scarce] the proper process is to leave the main body in a peaceful way and go and build on a fresh site.”³⁶ Similarly, an African named Mavandhla who worked at Durban while the surveyors of the 1906 Natal Native Commission were collecting evidence explained that he “did not liked the way in which he was being governed” on a location under a chief named Gobizembe, so he moved sometime between his urban work stints to another chiefdom situated on a private farm.³⁷ Carton notes that chiefdoms were negotiated space, and dependent inhabitants were free to withdraw from the main body if they were unhappy, rather than try to supplant the chief or remain perpetually subjugated.³⁸ Atkins describes how, in the early period of the *Mfecane*, “indigent people had little difficulty finding a person willing to receive them” despite a burgeoning scarcity of arable and safe land, because of the incorporative attitudes described above.³⁹ Despite white

³⁶ John B Wright and Colin de B. Webb, eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 3, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1982, p. 42

³⁷ Colony of Natal, “Natal Native Commission, 1906-7, Evidence” Pietermaritzburg: P. David & Sons Government Printers, 1907, p. 697

³⁸ Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 38

³⁹ Atkins, *The moon is dead*, p. 50

conceptions of unmitigated African violence under Shaka, most Natal Africans retained the ability to negotiate life strategies on the basis of common understandings about movement and incorporation.

The key implication of these three African customary categories and the amassed evidence is that there was an overwhelming norm among Africans of fluidity. Natal Africans, in the time of confusion, made ways to incorporate, accommodate, and support one another *as politically convenient* for all parties. Underlying the ability to move between and thrive within diverse geographies despite possible barriers of familiarity, language, and conflict was a common African ontology. Though these traditions may have become harder to practice in an age of scarcity, when colonial rule starved most of material security, their appearance and reformation in the practices of migrant labourers at Durban were a key feature of survival and the promulgation of new African politics of collectivity. This chapter will explore how migrant workers among themselves and through the substance of Africanness developed new senses of belonging to make urban life and work dignified.

Indian “Usurpers” and African Racial Politics in Durban

While pressure from white colonizers physically and politically atomized African communities in the countryside to compete for increasingly sparse parcels of land, the scene at Durban had an opposite effect: the demographics and racial dynamics of the city fostered a renewal of reciprocity among Africans. The driving factor of this revival was a new “enemy,” hyper concentrated in the city relative to the rest of Natal populations: the presence of indentured Indians. Although Indians featured prominently in rural sugar plantations throughout the colony, their presence in Durban was constant, interpersonal, and often on terms of direct competition

with Africans. Mahoney argues that racial animus between Africans and Indians was the result of competition over jobs and legal status within the colony.⁴⁰ However, there was a second reason, more phenomenological, which drove a racial wedge between Indians and Africans, and eventually motivated Africans to extend practices of collectivity in new ways over the shared space of Durban: the perception of a right to “belong” in Southern Africa.

Indians were brought to Natal by the British out of necessity to supplement labour supply in both rural sugarcane planting and urban manual labour as early as 1860.⁴¹ By 1883, the permanent Indian population in Durban was 4 169 compared to 3 312 Africans.⁴² By 1904, the populations grew to 15 531 Indians and 18 929 Africans.⁴³ Indian immigration kept pace with African migrant labour, and Africans felt the economic pressure. John Kumalo, an African headman from Rosboom, a division close to Durban which likely sent many young men to work there, complained that Indians were “displacing” young African men from jobs and “sending money away from South Africa.”⁴⁴ Even African Christians, who occupied a limbo social status of not-quite-African to most other Africans and not-quite-civilized to white people, complained that Indians supplanted their sons for employment opportunities.⁴⁵

A further concern for Africans was the status of Indians as merchants in Durban, from whom migrant labourers were forced to buy food and other goods while in the city. Dinya, an elderly African man from the Ifafa Mission location, complained to James Stuart that “Indians can keep stores, but natives have no similar rights,”⁴⁶ probably reflecting his own experiences

⁴⁰ Mahoney, *The other Zulus*, pp. 123-124

⁴¹ Ibid. 123

⁴² “Blue Book for the Colony of Natal, 1883,” Pietermaritzburg: Vause, Slaughter & Co. Government Printers,” 1883 p. T-8

⁴³ “Census of the Colony of Natal 1904,” p. 262

⁴⁴ John B Wright and Colin de B. Webb, eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence relating to the history of the Zulu and neighbouring peoples* vol. 1, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1976, p. 222

⁴⁵ Colony of Natal, “Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7,” p. 42

⁴⁶ Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 1, p. 103

and the complaints of the young men from his homestead who went to cities. One unnamed but self-described “native” op-ed contributor in the 31 May 1907 edition of *Ilanga Lase Natal* went so far as to say that “Asiatic trading is as much to the disadvantage of natives as the poll tax,” a famously onerous government imposition which was levied against unmarried African men in 1906.⁴⁷ Africans decried Indian petty landowners for charging high rates of interest for capital advances to travel for work in Durban.⁴⁸ Amidst the market forces of supply and demand, the presence of Indians was clearly a bother to the young men who went to work in Durban, so much so that the old men to whom they reported at home noted these complaints and lamented the competition. To some extent, Indians did pose a threat to African profiteering in Durban, undercutting efforts to take value from the urban labour market and support the increasingly precarious rural life at home.

What is far more compelling, though, is what these racialized stereotypes about Indians as market competitors reveal about grand-scheme racial attitudes at this time. Many Africans believed that Indians had no right to take jobs because Africans *belonged* in Durban in a way that Indians could not. Jon Soske provides a valuable lens through which to read the racialized lamentations of Natal Africans within the sources: “racial stereotypes serve largely as evidence of the imaginations, desires, and resentment of the individual or group deploying the image, rather than the actual content of racialized interactions.”⁴⁹ Although he writes about the post-WWI landscape of Durban, which he argues was the real “African industrial revolution” of migration patterns,⁵⁰ his framing is still valuable in the antecedent period of the late nineteenth

⁴⁷ “Native Trading.” *Ilanga Lase Natal*. 31 May 1907, p. 4. Accessed via Readex World Newspaper Archives. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>

⁴⁸ Colony of Natal, “Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7,” p. 3

⁴⁹ Jon Soske, *Internal Frontiers: African nationalism and the Indian diaspora in twentieth-century South Africa*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017, p. 41

⁵⁰ Soske, *Internal Frontiers*, p. 38

and early twentieth centuries. Vital indicators of Natal African imaginations about Durban Indians reside in the qualifying comments which the prior group made about the latter.

In his same op-ed as described above, the unnamed *Ilanga Lase Natal* contributor concludes by stating that not only is the Indian “taking the Native’s livelihood,” but that he is also “ousting [Natal Africans] from [their] *legitimate position*” (italics added).⁵¹ Dinya, when complaining about Indian shopkeepers, lamented their advancement for the specific reason that “[Indians] [were] newcomers” to Natal.⁵² As late as 1949, pioneering African fiction author and middle class African National Congress member Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo expressed African grievance against Natal Indians in striking, place-based terms:

Africans would be less than human not to feel humiliated, frustrated and outraged to find what to some of them are foreigners... who came here as slaves, lording over them in the land of their birth.⁵³

The invocation of an African “land of birth” in this passage, coupled with the invocation of an “alien” race in the quotation which opened this chapter, shows that there was a deeper resentment against Indians in Durban than a simple increase in labour supply. Economic anxiety was parallel for Natal Africans to another grievance: the fact that a foreign population which was imported as indentured labour could claim so much economic power and cultural space in Durban when the Indians, as Africans perceived it, had fundamentally no *right* to the land. Africans simply believed that they belonged – and thus were entitled to the fruits of the land –

⁵¹ “Native Trading.” *Ilanga Lase Natal*. 31 May 1907, p. 4. Accessed via Readex World Newspaper Archives. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>

⁵² John B Wright and Colin de B. Webb, eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence relating to the history of the Zulu and neighbouring peoples* vol. 1, University of Natal Press, p. 103

⁵³ Quoted in Soske, *Internal Frontiers*, p. 60

differently. Soske demonstrates that most Indians were in fact either workers for sugar planters in rural Natal or petty labourers in Durban, roughly living in the same socioeconomic conditions of Natal Africans well into the twentieth century.⁵⁴ Still the volume, patterns, and nature of vitriol directed toward Indians reveals that African animus was rooted in part in a resentment of the Indians for their perceived illegitimacy to be and thrive at Durban, when so many Africans were abused and underpaid. Whether this attitude accurately reflected Indian economic circumstances or obfuscated blame to their common colonial exploiter, the British, is immaterial. Cultural and communal ideas about belonging-in-space, animated by racial stereotypes, drove conformational changes among Africans in the workplace and rest houses of African Durbanites.

What this racialized discourse reveals is a belief among Natal Africans that their collective belonging in the marginal space of Durban – land which their ancestors had occupied, land on which they had always found a place to exist – was both materially and discursively threatened by the presence of a racially “middle-tier” Indian labour class. These conditions in Durban, and the anti-Indian consciousness which they fomented, moved Africans of all stripes who worked in the city to mobilize their culturally acquired, indigenous ontologies over the shared space of the city. With these strategies, African migrant labourers augmented their collective power and staked an *African* home in the city. They sought community. In the practice of finding community, African Durbanites and their new negotiated solidarity exerted influence onto the entire African politics of Natal.

⁵⁴ Soske, *Internal Frontiers*, p. 60

Togt Labour and African Reciprocity

In A.T. Bryant's revised 1905 edition of the *Zulu-English dictionary*, a new isiZulu noun appeared for the first in a contemporary Zulu-English translator.⁵⁵ The noun is *iToho*, which translates as "togt, day-labour."⁵⁶ Two years later, the white magistrates writing the report for the Natal Native Commission of 1907 lamented that togt workers in the Durban magistracy were "a class of labour which is under very little or loose control."⁵⁷ The same Natal Native Commission, writing in 1882, had not included a single sentence on togt or day-labour. Yet the 1907 edition included a whole paragraph on the issues of togt and recommendations to control it among the topline administrative issues for the white overseers of Natal. This appearance of a new, distinctly labour related noun in the record – and apparent silence between the reports – indicates two realities. First, an urban market for African day-labour emerged during the period of rapid industrialization. Second, those labourers operated in such a way that it frustrated the white people who tried to extract value from it. The contours of this market – and the persistent frustration of white bosses – offer a vivid picture of the operations of African migrant labourers in the marginal workplaces of the city. It was the very act of collaboration among Africans, partly in reaction to the abuses of bosses and partly a counterstrategy to Indian power and access, which frustrated and bemused those bosses and fostered a communal identity among African migrant labourers.

The most common practices of African cooperation over marginal space in Durban can be seen in the records which comment on job searching, lodging, and labour flow control among

⁵⁵ The noun does not appear in the earlier dictionaries of Bryant, nor the contemporary dictionaries of John William Colenso and James Perrin

⁵⁶ Alfred Thomas Bryant, *Zulu-English Dictionary: With a Synopsis of Zulu Grammar and a Concise History of the Zulu People*, Mariannhill Mission Press, 1905, p. 639

⁵⁷ Colony of Natal, "Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7," p. 38

migrant labourers. Not only did African migrant labourers lean on kin and family to secure jobs, they also negotiated a new moral economy in which “strangers” could communicate with and support one another to confront the challenge of urban labour. Many scholars have commented on the transfiguration of generational labour organization into Durban, especially among the *Amawasha* guild and domestic service employment.⁵⁸ But, in addition to the deployment of useful, recognizable orders as seen at home, African labourers in Durban constructed new agreements of mutuality which made city going possible – even contravening rivalries or exclusivities that may have been found at rural homes. Durban became a crucible for an African togetherness on much the same terms that Africans traditionally formed relationships: in the interest of mutual beneficence.

The act of seeking and obtaining a job in Durban was both restricted and facilitated for new coming African workers by Africans already at Durban. These networks of mutualistic exchange reduced the friction for finding employment and made arrival to the city possible without prior connection. At the docks, where labourers found a relatively higher paying and stable form of casual employment from the late nineteenth century until the middle twentieth century, newcomers relied on the beneficence of older men to obtain work through mutualistic relationships. There were many strategies for gaining the favor of an African overseer who hired on behalf of the shipping companies. Chief among them was familiarity or kinship, but bribery, patronage, and favoritism also found their place in labour negotiation.⁵⁹ One indicator of just how spontaneous these systems of patronage were to Africans at Durban were the terms which they used to describe them. Veterans of dock work reported that African overseers who hired labourers on behalf of the company were called *izinduna* (sing. *duna*), which translated from

⁵⁸ Atkins, *The moon is dead*, Chapter 3

⁵⁹ Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, p. 29

isiZulu in 1905 as “[a] person of consequence having people or land under him.”⁶⁰ The term also had official, chiefly power structure implications, being used to designate local headmen who administered people on behalf of the chiefs in rural Natal. Much like in rural homes, city *izinduna* came to be patrons who took on workers as clients; in the countryside, groups of people might move between chiefs and *izinduna* within reasonable distance from their home if they were unhappy with leadership. In Durban the *izinduna* were managing and hiring young men from as far away as Mozambique and Zanzibar.⁶¹ The success of young men from far away communities with little to no representation in the city attests that kin was not the only axis of intelligibility and help between Africans. Rather, this very concept of the *duna*, to dockworkers especially, allowed Africans to expand the definition of “insiderhood” to include even more Africans. The terms of African commerce and cooperation changed to meet the challenges of the Durban moment, and common lineage was de-emphasized for access to these cooperation networks.

In addition to the relationship networks which helped Africans gain jobs in the city, workers exhibited a cultural kindness and solidarity to ensure that collective working conditions were as dignified as possible. There were well developed whisper and communication networks in Durban which connected workers over common concerns. This phenomenon is illustrated well by the complaint of one white Durbanite writing in 1910 about the troubles of hiring a kitchen boy. He reported in *Ilang Lase Natal* that:

“I was without a kitchen boy, and one of my good old boys turned up... what was my surprise (sic) was when he told me I was the only man in the neighbourhood who wanted to register [his

⁶⁰ Rev. John William Colenso, *Zulu-English Dictionary*, Fourth Edition, Messrs. Vause, Slatter & Co., Natal, 1905, p. 118

⁶¹ Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, p. 28

kitchen boy]; he said ‘I would like to come back but I will not be the only kitchen boy in this part that is registered.’”⁶²

The anonymous homeowner’s message betrays two realities about the young men living at the margins as kitchen boys in his neighbourhood. The first is that they took active measures to evade the onerous imposition of colonial law which would put them under undue stress or surveillance while at work. Judging by the fact that few to none of the kitchen boys in the neighbourhood were registered, it seems that they evaded colonial supervision effectively enough to bring their employers into the scheme with tacit permission using what little leverage they had. The second is that these workers negotiated conditions by hearing from and communicating with one another. There was a common expectation to escape registration because the “neighbourhood kitchen boys” decided that it would be a precondition for their service, and presumably none was willing to undercut the others to make his service more attractive. The vast majority of city-working Africans were domestic servants,⁶³ and domestic service was frequently the first line of work which was accessible on entry to the city. Even these, the most unprotected workers, maintained such networks for the purpose of mutual support.

Labouring in the city was one daunting, ever-morphing challenge for African Durbanites, but finding a place to sleep between bouts of wage labour was another challenge unto its own. As late as 1907, the Natal Native Commission lamented the lack of safe and clean rest houses for African labourers in both Durban and Piteremaritzburg.⁶⁴ Officials, paradoxically, did little to make living in the urban areas desirable for the Africans they so beseeched to come into town from any sort of distance. Coming regularly, as some workers did, from as far as northern

⁶² “Native Affairs Report No. 3,” *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 12 August 1910.

⁶³ “Census of the Colony of Natal 1904,” p. 678

⁶⁴ Colony of Natal, “Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7,” pp. 38

Zululand – several days walk – lodging was an existential question of comfort and safety which confronted migrant labourers.

African collective living space strategies in Durban are apparent in the various white complaints levied against African workers for their off-time habits. Monthly contract labourers were provided with housing the late nineteenth century, pursuant to the Masters and Servants Act of 1850, but daily togt labourers were not.⁶⁵ As such there was a chronic housing shortage for day labourers around the turn of the century.⁶⁶ Moreover, the South African Native Affairs Commission Report of 1905 raised great concern over the use of urban housing by “surplus or idle Natives... who will not work.”⁶⁷ This entry suggests two prevailing realities: that urban housing for Africans was a serious point of concern for white Durbanites at the turn of the century, and that those Africans were obtaining housing in a manner that the white settlers found undesirable. Most notably, the entry indicates that casually employed Africans were finding and staying in lodging agreements even *without* labour contracts, which was technically illegal following the togt labour regulations of 1874. Hemson goes so far as to suggest that the “togt question” posed by settlers was essentially a housing question, such that “the history of togt labour from the inception of togt regulations [in 1874] to the turn of the century was one of growing determination by employers and the municipality to squeeze the togt workers into the compounds, and an equal determination by these workers to defy, wriggle out, or look for alternative housing in the town.”⁶⁸ While he correctly identifies the overwhelming settler imperative to confine Africans to controlled locations, his classification of African housing-ways

⁶⁵ Atkins, *The moon is dead*, p. 120

⁶⁶ Ibid. 135

⁶⁷ “South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5: Report with Annexures Nos. 1 to 9,” Cape Town: Cape Times Limited Printer, 1905, p. 46

⁶⁸ Hemson, “Class consciousness and migrant workers,” p. 28

as outward political resistance is stretched, and fails to consider the spontaneous, human, internally generative purposes of securing housing outside of the observation of bosses and magistrates.

The political technology which facilitated housing cooperation among Africans was the principle of mutual reciprocity, familiar to rural Africans, renegotiated and remade to make sense in the moment at Durban.

Africans in Durban used cultural notions of mutual obligation to transform public and private areas, to which they had only marginal, insecure access, into a rich commons which was shared among them. Again, a key window into this phenomenon comes from the complaints of white settlers who deplored them. The Durban magistrate complained in 1901, for example, that dock workers would sleep anywhere and everywhere.⁶⁹ Veterans of the docks reported that, when they slept rough, they kept each other company to stave off the dangers of police and share cooking duties.⁷⁰ Out of the sheerest necessity, verandahs, parks, and wharves were made into temporary bedrooms playing host to diverse cohabitants united by their profession.

Others, however, found solace through lodging with other Africans already at Durban. Keletso Atkins explicates well the phenomenon of “kitchen associations” formed in the backyards of white landlords, in which domestic servants would use their small outhouse to host their family and friends coming through town or returning from day work.⁷¹ Entries to *Ilanga Lase Natal* from white administrators and African Christians, both generally staunch moralists and advocates for African social conservatism, portray fears of young women lodging in or

⁶⁹ Ibid. pp. 83-84

⁷⁰ Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, p. 34

⁷¹ Atkins, *The moon is dead*, pp. 122-129

hosting these *kiya* (cohabitation spaces)⁷² in the backyards of white homeowners because they were sites of possible fraternization and corruption.⁷³ Evidently, these backyard co-habitation arrangements were both practical, for the purpose of living, but also probably desirable to stave off the loneliness endemic to city life. For their various purposes, demographic evidence suggests that this method of housing in Durban was extremely effective. As of 1910, there were nearly seven thousand Africans residing in Durban at any given time, but “very few [rented] houses directly for themselves,” rather “the great mass... [were] under the tender mercies of the people who let out rooms or parts of houses,” including Indians.⁷⁴ Yet still, Africans managed to live and work with some level of choice within these arrangements, most notably avoiding city barracks. Indigenous traditions of mutual obligation mapped onto the urban environment and played a large part in sustaining African life despite hostile colonial control schemes.

Atkins argues that these associations were organized along lineage or tribal lines, with “brothers” playing host to clan or lineage mates.⁷⁵ However, this restrictive conception of cohabitation is complicated by contemporary evidence. As early as 1882, magistrates of Natal expressed a fear of cross-tribe African solidarity in the cities as a result of heightened intercourse and common interests.⁷⁶ Later on, James Stuart and similar white administrators of Natal parroted this fear – specifically citing housing arrangements as cauldrons of African togetherness. Stuart, ruminating on the origins of the 1906 disturbances in rural Natal, estimated that young men had dared to express resentment to the colonial states because they had “come into contact with Natives from all parts of South Africa,” and among themselves developed a

⁷² *Kiya* is an isiZulu vernacular word which is not defined in either Bryant or Colenso Zulu-English dictionaries from the nineteenth century. From context, it roughly means “cottage” or “lodging space.”

⁷³ See: “His Honour the Administrator’s Address,” published in 2 March 1919 issue; “Broken Homes,” published in 2 January 1920 issue.

⁷⁴ “Durban’s Native Population,” *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 17 June 1910

⁷⁵ Atkins, *The moon is dead*, p. 123

⁷⁶ “Report, Natal Native Commission 1881-82,” para. 47

deeper “deeply-rooted antagonism toward the white man.”⁷⁷ Stuart’s latter estimation, of deep racial hatred emanating from young African men, should be viewed with caution, especially because his text functions to explain why grievances boiled over into armed conflict in 1906. His observation, however, that young men of different lineages were keen to mix, is probably more trustworthy. It is known that colonial authorities “imported” African labourers from as far as Zanzibar in the earliest years of the twentieth century.⁷⁸ It is also known that Stuart, as an executor of Theophilus Shepstone’s colonial management philosophy, was fixated with maintaining tribal divides between Africans to encourage obedience.⁷⁹ Stuart, by the time he wrote these concerns, was a magistrate of Durban. He possessed both the motivation and access to investigate African interaction in the city. His dismay at cross-tribal cooperation is, like many other white complaints, a valuable window into the lives of the surveilled: to publish his words he had to admit that his command-and-control strategies had failed to some extent. They failed because Africans worked through a sense of collective identity to contravene them by sharing marginal living space with one another.

Contemporary commentary on the urban housing problem indicates that lodging conformations specifically were a source of magistrates’ concerns about sedition developing in Durban. The 1905 Native Affairs Commission called for the construction and maintenance by municipalities of “urban locations” with “thorough registration and constant control” to discourage political or labour agitation.⁸⁰ Moreover, a 1910 op-ed in *Ilanga Lase Natal*, probably written by a white observer, decries the Transvaal and Cape urban locations as “hotbeds for

⁷⁷ James Stuart, *A history of the Zulu rebellion of 1906 and of Dinuzulu’s arrest, trial, and repatriation*, London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1913, pp. 97-98

⁷⁸ Hemson, “Class consciousness,” p. 86 Table 2.6

⁷⁹ Hamilton, *Terrific majesty*, chapter 4

⁸⁰ “South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5,” pp. 45-46

vice,” and advocates in their stead for heavily monitored barracks following “‘divide and rule’” strategy for the housing of migrant labourers, lest they find common ground with others of their race.⁸¹ The organization of African living space at Durban was evidently undesirable to white overseers, in part because it fostered an urban black consciousness which overcame the dominant dividing identities of lineage or rural home. This conformation of living space, and the underlying ethic of mutual support which made it possible, would go onto be a powerful catalyst for both the integration of the African urban economy with rural economies and African political action of Durban origins.

Collaborative Economies from Durban to Tongaland

As demonstrated above, African Durbanites exercised traditional forms of mutual obligation, such as patron (*izinduna*)-client relationships, to make the city hospitable. The heightened integrability of people within Durban also facilitated novel exchanges of capital among lineages and homes, changing the trajectory of capital, wealth, and cooperation in the countryside.

In some areas, it was migrant labourers themselves who won and introduced new forms of capital into their rural homes, probably influenced by the commerce and consumer habits of their urban colleagues. Mahangune, a man from the royal house of Tongaland who worked as a jewelry maker in Durban and Port Elizabeth reported that “[t]here were few or no cattle in Tongaland in the early days,” but that “two important types of property were brought into Tongaland by the workboys: cattle and money.”⁸² This cross pollination indicates that

⁸¹ “Durban’s Project,” *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 1 July 1910.

⁸² John B Wright and Colin de B. Webb, eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence relating to the history of the Zulu and neighbouring peoples* vol. 2, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1979, p. 149

“workboys” were concerned with earning, maintaining, and spending the types of liquid capital which could facilitate their commerce with urban colleagues. Their wages might be used to purchase pilfered and hawked goods from *shebeen* beer shops or fellow workers in the town. Cattle, however, were a common form of stable capital and bride payment in other communities close to Tongaland, but evidently not Tongaland itself prior to the return of young men from the cities. The choices of the young men from Mahangune’s home to hold forms of capital with no prior value in their lives indicates that their idea of what was desirable to hold – and who was desirable to trade with – was changing. They developed a sense of kinship with people from other communities which emanated from their practices of kinship in the city. It is tempting to imagine such a young man marrying a woman from another community with his earned cattle or purchasing an iron hoe to till a small plot of land more efficiently than his forebears. But the evidentiary record stops short of providing such specific anecdotes. What is certain, though, is that this city-oriented or originated commerce had novel effects on rural home economies, including the influx of new forms of capital.

This change in African political economy was not always welcomed by African elders. Mbovu, the aforementioned interlocutor of James Stuart, reported an extreme antipathy to money as the property of “Europeans and coolies” that had no use in African society.⁸³ Another headman stated plainly his thoughts on cash wages as a means of discursively tearing children away from the culture of their fathers: he lamented the young men who “[left] home of their own accord,” lured by food and city attractions, “[spent their pay] on clothes and drink in order to become white men.”⁸⁴ The epithet at the end of his comments – that the young men are trying to

⁸³ Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 3, p. 29

⁸⁴ John B Wright and Colin de B. Webb, eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence relating to the history of the Zulu and neighbouring peoples* vol. 4, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1986, p. 208

become white – is a scathing polemic against his sons. It also betrays a deep insecurity harboured by African elders: that the terms of trade and economic power were shifting away from their hands and toward an urban-born interdependence and intercommunity cooperation.

It is probably untrue that young men squandered all of their wages. The 1905 Native Affairs Commission reported that, in fact, those workers “prefer in general to [stay at urban locations] for short periods... and return to look after the interests of family and welfare of the livestock” with what little they could save.⁸⁵ On balance, young men maintained a strong rural orientation. Their desire was, for the most part, to build their own status such that they could become rural patriarchs themselves. However, they took alternative means – through collaborative economies, and by using new kinds of capital – to accumulate wealth. In 1897, Mahungane reported that the *imvulamlomo*⁸⁶ gift given to a bride’s father by a young man to open up talks of marriage, which was once exclusively in the form of a cow, could by that time “be in the form of a beast, or £1, or a flask of gin.”⁸⁷ The addition of two markedly foreign forms of capital to this ritual indicate that the currency which young men repatriated from the city gained enough purchase in rural economies to be a legitimate medium of exchange. These changes were rooted in the collaborative spirit necessary for work at Durban.

Conclusion: Separated Together

The framing of “marginal space” is important to this chapter, and worth revisiting to conclude. African migrant labourers occupied marginal space because they were actively marginalized by the white settlers who arrived at Port Natal, wantonly declared it their own, and

⁸⁵ “South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5,” p. 52

⁸⁶ isiZulu noun, roughly translating to “food” or “consumption item”

⁸⁷ Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 2, p. 145

brutalized the Native inhabitants who lived there in the early nineteenth century. Africans were, as the evidence suggests, both beseeched by those white invaders to provide cheap labour and at the same time treated with suspicion and hostility when they tried to find employment. They had to make life, space, and working relationships function in the city at the very margins of official recognition. In those marginal spaces – backyard *kiyas*, verandahs, and the like – they avoided unwanted detection and seized the opportunity to make an African home.

African Durbanites co-opted familiar traditions of home, such as mutual obligation, intra-familial cooperation, and the practice of commerce, but transformed them in such a way as to resist the challenges posed by the threat of Indians and white settlers in a place they regarded as a home. They developed and practised new ideas of what it meant to be familiar, or kin, or desirable to collaborate with. They did so because they were separated from familiar surroundings but found themselves separated together: deploying and transforming familiar practices of kinship was an effective and understandable means to make city work and living possible and dignified.

These practices certainly re-constituted familiar patterns of family and association. However, they also expanded into a proto pan-Africanism, in which Black African people found belonging in the very notion of indigeneity to Africa. This sense of differential belonging was mobilized to defend their common interests. This racial consciousness has variously been downplayed in the previous literature or cast as a purely labour-based proletarian consciousness.⁸⁸ The evidence presented in this chapter, largely from complaints levied by white invaders and traces of African evasion tactics, illuminates a more complicated story. The

⁸⁸ For arguments about ethnic separation Among African migrant labourers see Mahoney's *The other Zulus*, especially chapter 4. For arguments about a proletarian consciousness see Shula Marks, *Reluctant rebellion: the 1906-8 disturbances in Natal*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970..

development of an African Durbanite work ethic, remarkably well sustained despite the transience of the actual workers who carried it out, was made possible by an African trans-ethnic racial consciousness. The next chapter will explore how, having transfigured strategies for the development of a group identity into the marginal space they held, Durban's workers turned their efforts against a class of African patriarchs whom they perceived as too weak to love.

Chapter 2

Bread and Respect: The Renegotiation of Individuality, Social Mobility, and Masculinity by

African Migrant Workers in Durban

Introduction

According to Native ideas, these young people who had no wives were looked upon as mere nonentities, and not worth considering. [The chief] thought the government should, therefore, have imposed the responsibility of paying [the Poll Tax] on the krall-head, because it was to him that all these children belonged – Evidence for the Natal Native Commission, 1907⁸⁹

African migrant labourers confronted both alienating space and an alienating political economy – each built to serve the interests of white residents and profiteers – when they entered Durban to find work. African production in Natal and Zululand was, as discussed in the previous chapter, largely agro-pastoral. Before the 1890s, most Natal Africans lived on rapidly deteriorating “locations” for farming set aside by the colonial government, while approximately 250 000 of them resided as squatters or labour tenants on privately owned white farms and 20 000 lived as squatters on crown land.⁹⁰ This is not to say that the African economy was dogmatically noncapitalist, or that Africans were sluggish to adapt to change: African Christians made themselves into a peasant community by selling agricultural excess from mission lands in urban markets and leveraging trade skills to operate small enterprises, for example.⁹¹ All Africans had

⁸⁹ Colony of Natal, “Natal Native Commission, 1906-7, Evidence,” p. 705

⁹⁰ John Lambert, “Impoverishment of the Natal Peasantry, 1893-1910,” in Bill Guest and John M. Sellers, eds. *Enterprise and exploitation in a Victorian Colony: aspects of the economic and social history of colonial Natal*, University of Natal Press, 1985, pp. 289-293

⁹¹ Norman Etherington, “Economic Experiments in Natal,” in Bill Guest and John M. Sellers, eds. *Enterprise and exploitation in a Victorian Colony: aspects of the economic and social history of colonial Natal*, University of Natal Press, 1985, pp.265-266

to make at least enough liquid cash to pay the various taxes imposed upon them by selling labour or produce to white settlers.

Still, power and production were centralized for most Africans in the homestead, where land was the principal means of subsistence and belonging to lineage was the main means to access land and productive economies.⁹² African patriarchs and chiefs benefitted tremendously from this conformation of wealth and opportunity, and sought through their actions to protect their status as much as to protect the overall wellbeing of African communities. The project of the white settlers during the period of rapid economic development in Natal, on the other hand, was to accelerate African economies toward capitalist existence and wage labour.

The urban African labouring population, as compared to contemporary rural African chiefdoms, was also vastly different in the demographics of power. Most of the men who went to work for wages in Durban were young, between 15 and 40 years of age,⁹³ and many were for the first time in their lives separated from the demands of their fathers and earning their own capital. The autonomy and negotiating power of women also increased profoundly in the cities such as Durban. Women, once at the age of majority in their particular province or colony, “[went] in large numbers into domestic and other service,” away from their parents’ homestead.⁹⁴ John Kumalo, one of the African interlocutors of John Stewart, termed this combination of migration, competing economies, and disparate work patterns as a “struggle” between the imperatives of the Government of Natal (presumably for labour supply and ideological aims) and the traditional householder.⁹⁵ The fundamental implication of the demography of Durban for the workers living

⁹² Lambert, “Impoverishment of the Natal Peasantry,” p. 288

⁹³ “South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5,” p. 76

⁹⁴ Ibid. 45

⁹⁵ Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 1, p. 236

there was that the African economy which took shape in the city would be negotiated by different actors than the economies of rural homesteads.

It is additionally important to note that the fundamental condition of working life in Durban at this time was alienation.⁹⁶ The transience of labour activity and social separation between the urban migrant worker and his boss and coworkers was an atypical social structure for Natal Africans. African production and family life were intimately connected in the nineteenth century: homesteads were organized around the extended family unit and productive work was done with the expectation for mutual reciprocity between young and old, men and women.⁹⁷ Urban labour was much different. Africans were not working to produce a product that they would reap in common with people close to them, but rather for wages. There were no innate reciprocal social bonds in the act of labour at the city, rather there was an inherent tension between bosses and labourers, and even between labourers competing for daily employment.

Traditional African organization of labour and family, as opposed to wage labour arrangements, generally ensured survival and fostered strong reciprocal bonds. But these bonds weren't without discord along lines of generation. Reciprocity did not necessarily translate to equal footing: the quotation at the beginning of this chapter attests as much. One unidentified chief whose words made it into the evidentiary annals for the Natal Native Commission, probably recorded sometime between 1906 and 1907, referred to the young and landless boys beneath him as *nonentities*, serving a functional role in the African economy but not existing as individuals, let alone influential forces or decision makers. Therefore, while alienation was endemic to work in urban areas, the city was also a respite from existence as a "nonentity" in the

⁹⁶ For the purpose of this chapter, *alienation* will be used in a strictly Marxian sense of alienation-from-labour-product and alienation-from-labour-process. For a summary of these ideas, see Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959, pp. 70-74

⁹⁷ Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 38

eyes of rural power holders. Urban workers therefore faced an opportunity in the city which ran parallel to the challenge of alienation: to earn individual wealth as a labourer could afford one heightened status as an individual and offer him the chance to ascend into some position of influence within Natal African power structures which may not have been so easy in the countryside. The pressures on the shoulders of migrant labourers came from both white bosses and African power holders. To be sure, the racial abuse and labour exploitation of white bosses was often more violent and outward, but the prospect for self-determined advancement was severely stunted in rural economies by age and family structure as well. When in Durban, separated from old power structures by distance and to some extent by material independence, successful navigation of the alienating terrain of urban work could actually present as an opportunity to those workers.

The preceding section of this thesis have emphasized the dynamism of African internal politics. The case of how African labourers encountered and endured within the alienating political economy – and used it as a counter-opportunity against minimization and subjugation in the countryside – was no different. This chapter will explore how the political economy of Durban challenged migrant labourers in ways different and similar to the patriarchal political economies of rural Natal, how migrant labourers made urban work possible, how they used it for social mobility, and how they defended their common interests as a class of their own against the *izinduna*, chiefs, and patriarchs of the countryside. Specifically, it will explore how migrant labourers developed sociopolitical technology – new senses of individuality and new conceptions of group belonging – to develop methods of social mobility and cultural power in explicit refutation to the power of African chiefs and fathers.

This chapter will proceed in three parts. The first section will focus on how migrant labourers, specifically young men, made the jarring experience of urban labour into an opportunity for social mobility. In particular, this section will explore changing arrangements of *lobola* payments, wage remittances, and capital investment, as avenues by which migrant labourers elevated themselves into empowered, individual actors in the Natal African political economy. The second section will focus on the evolving notions of masculinity and defined by a relationship to urban work and urban association as an explanatory phenomenon for the shifting conceptions of group identity and belonging among the younger generations. This section will examine the extent to which the growing cultural and political power of young men, forged both in the city, changed the contours of political imagination and political organizing capabilities among the African population of Natal. The third section will analyze how a particular conformation of labour, the *Amawasha* guild, altered notions of maturation to provide new avenues of social development alongside the potential for capital advancement.

This chapter as a whole will argue that the late nineteenth century African migrant labourers of Durban developed identities as individual, social and economic centers of power within African politics and new group conceptions of African masculinity which were defined in opposition to traditional African power holders. These self-conceptions emphasized both the individual power of young wage-earners and their potential to form potent, meaningful units of power through different group identities. Through these processes of re-identification of themselves and in relation to other Africans, urban workers formulated strategies for and expressed resistance toward chiefs and the increasingly untenable African patriarchy. These burgeoning identities affected the entire trajectory of Natal African politics toward trans-ethnic,

trans-geographic collaborative economies among workers which would later facilitate the rise of a popular politics against the colonial state.

Fathers who Can't Pay and Sons who Don't Want To

In 1904, a Zulu Christian chief named Mbovu complained to James Stuart that the “old habits and customs of the Zulus are dying out.” His primary metric for the disintegration of a “Zulu” way of living – the canary in the coal mine – was that “the country [belonged] to the new generation – *abatsha*.”⁹⁸ Mbovu was not alone in his lamentations. The James Stuart Archive, consisting mostly of interviews with African chiefs and headmen, is littered with like grievances: there was a visceral fear among African patriarchs that they were losing hold of the hierarchical economy and social structure which propped up their status as revered patrons.⁹⁹

The precolonial moral economy which bound Natal Africans, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, was rich with reciprocal social bonds that were intimately tied to the act of production. Within these rural arrangements, older men inspired awe and loyalty by providing land, leadership, and protection to the families under their auspices, and even by invoking the specter of ancestral spirits, to whom the elders had the most access.¹⁰⁰ The industrial boom of South Africa changed material relationships for a great many Africans. It also changed the social bonds which were inextricably tied to production. The isiZulu noun *abatsha*, invoked by Mbovu to describe the young usurpers, is not included in either the A.T. Bryant dictionary of 1905 nor the John William Colenso dictionary of the same year. However, it appears at least seventeen times in the isiZulu language articles published by *Ilanga Lase Natal*

⁹⁸ Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 3, p. 34

⁹⁹ See especially the testimony of John Kumalo, another mission-Christian African chief in the first volume of the Archive.

¹⁰⁰ Carton, *Blood from your children*, Chapter 2

between 1906 and 1910.¹⁰¹ The concept was thus probably vernacular among isiZulu speaking Natal Africans but not interesting enough to white people for anyone to translate. It was a term of African political contempt, but never truly percolated into the lexicon of the colonial state. This indicates that in addition to navigating life among white and Indian city dwellers, African labourers were also posing explicit challenges to African chiefly and patriarchal notions of power.

The contempt with which Mbovu and his fellow Natal African chiefs speak of their children's rising status signals a cultural wind carrying over the province: that young people were gaining power, and it was at the expense of African patriarchs. This power, economic, social, and political, was made possible by urban opportunity. Wage labouring youth resisted the control of African patriarchs by self-proclaiming as the "true" protectors of their families, accumulating their own wealth, and reinvesting it into homesteads on their own terms.

The accumulation of wealth and power are interlocked in societies the world over, and the generational challenge of Natal Africans witnessed a similar phenomenon. One recurring strategy of young men who went to work in cities was to use earned wealth to skip ahead in the "generational line" and build a family independent of their father's ability to pay *lobola*, the traditional bride price. Mahungane, a visitor to Durban from Tongaland, gave an account of just such a phenomenon gripping his home. He reported to James Stuart in 1897 that the age of marriage for women was getting younger and younger than in previous years because suitors would "go off to work when (sic) we acquired property," which then "was available for and was used as lobola."¹⁰² This was in lieu of waiting for their fathers' assent and material support. In

¹⁰¹ This tally is derived from the results of a text-search in the World Newspaper Archive depository of *Ilanga* between 1906 and 1910

¹⁰² Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 2, p. 146

fact, Mahungane reported that these migrant labourers had come back to Tongaland with cash in hand and forced older men to accept it as *lobola* payment, as opposed to traditional forms.¹⁰³ This strategy was eminently successful for a lucky few. Stuart interviewed another man, Ntshingwayo ka Nomakebe, who at the time of their conversation was “particularly young.” Despite his youth, Ntshingwayo told Stuart a remarkable life story: he had been “working at Durban for some European,” and a few years later “became an induna, [at] Court House.”¹⁰⁴ This young man, already an *induna* with people under him, had earned his money and status working at Durban – probably as a lowly kitchen boy, judging by his age and qualifying description of work as “for some European.” He evidently invested wisely and gained enough wealth to acquire status as a headman. This story is remarkable both for its substance and for the clarity in which it survives. Ntshingwayo is the prototype of a young African worker who skipped steps in the generational line of succession. His story suggests that not only was work a legitimate means for gaining status back within rural African economies, but that it was an explicit aim of young African workers. Rather than electing to stay at urban work until some age, the young worker retired when his aims were achieved.

Another phenomenon which attests to the social maneuvering of young men is that they refused to give their wages to their fathers, but still managed to reinvest in or close to their father’s homes. The colonial state and African patriarchs held two diametrically opposed notions about what young men did with their earned money. A common complaint of African patriarchs was that young migrant labourers would squander their earnings in town and have nothing to show for their time away from the homestead. Many fathers had to begrudgingly sell cattle in order to pay the state taxes for which they were liable – including taxes on the heads of those

¹⁰³ Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 2, p. 146

¹⁰⁴ Wright and Webb, eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 4, p. 239

sons whom they claimed as property.¹⁰⁵ African chiefs reported en masse to the Natal Native Affairs commission that, by 1906, their sons were contravening traditions of reciprocity by not remitting any wages at all.¹⁰⁶ However, white authorities, from their perch in urban centers and panoptic view of the larger Natal economy, saw capital flows differently. In 1905, the South African Native Affairs Commission wrote of African urban labourers across the colonies that, “they are attached to their homes and even when they go away to labour centres... prefer to do so for short periods... and return to look after the interests of the family and welfare of the livestock.”¹⁰⁷ As late as the mid 20th century, the Durban dock-working veterans interviewed by Ralph Callebert for his landmark study reported that their motivation was to earn enough to return to the countryside: they would invest in agricultural technology, build networks of communication with the people still in the countryside, and remain committed to a “return to the land” despite long spells away.¹⁰⁸ Still, fathers who depended on them for monies to pay taxes and rents were “often in difficulties” because they did not see that reinvestment or backflow of capital for themselves.¹⁰⁹

The logical conclusion is thus not that young men would wantonly spend the money earned to spite their parents and indulge in urban pleasures, but rather made calculated decisions to improve their own lot because they could not see the benefit for maintaining relationships of patronage with their fathers. The abundance of complaints from African patriarchs to colonial officials indicates that many fathers couldn’t pay their taxes because their sons didn’t want to pay them. The paranoia African patriarchs is captured well in a comment made by a Natal chief

¹⁰⁵ Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 93

¹⁰⁶ Colony of Natal, “Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7,” p. 43

¹⁰⁷ “South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5,” p. 52

¹⁰⁸ Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, p. 54

¹⁰⁹ Colony of Natal, “Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7,” p. 37

named Matingo: “[their] wives deliberately [stared] at [them], look on, and therefore [backed] up [their] own sons to [defy] them.”¹¹⁰ Paranoia seems an unfair polemic to levy against Natal African patriarchs in this period, because they feared not what was unreal but rather what they saw before them: an alliance among those sons who once depended on them fashioned to decentralize their levers of power within the system which granted them power.

From the docks, kitchens, and ricksha saddles of Durban, African workers seized their marginal space in both African society and the colonial state to create within it a new social mobility. By redefining the terms of success in Natal African life, urban workers shifted power away from their fathers and toward the pull of their own patronage. They asserted themselves as individuals by fashioning the trajectory of their own lives, bringing new purchase to their position as entities within the Natal African social structure. The next section will explore one motivation and mechanism by which workers made this transfer of power culturally intelligible: by transforming masculinity itself.

Boys in Natal, “Men” in Durban

In 1902, James Stuart interviewed a man named Ndhlovu ka Timuni, a Zulu descended from a lineage proximate to the old royal house. Ndhlovu, as a young man, had gone to work in the Kimberly diamond mines on the Rand, one province west of Natal. By 1902, he had assumed a position as younger-than-usual chief, forty-five years of age, in the Mapumulo division, just south of Zululand and north of Durban. In his conversations with Stuart, he lamented deeply the moral ruin which met young men when they left the homestead to find work on the Rand or in the city. He reported that many of the boys he had gone to the mines with fell prey to European

¹¹⁰ Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 92

liquor and never returned. He complained, probably with some merit, that the physical dispersion of Natal Africans across lands owned by the crown, plots owned by private farmers, and the distant throes of the city made it more difficult to organize a chiefdom, which starved African patriarchs of political organizing power.¹¹¹ One of his complaints, though, stands out from the background as different from the others. Amid a solid cache of real, material complaints about the decline of traditional Natal African life and economy, he also noted the following with a dismay so vehement that Stuart underlined most of it:

The fact of the matter is that children leave home of their own accord; they like they like the food, and are lured by the attractions. Nobody actually beckoned or called him or her. After getting their pay, children will spend it on drink and clothes in order for themselves to become white men.¹¹²

There are a few operative ideas in Ndhlovu's lamentation, which both fall in line with and apart from his other complaints. As discussed in the previous section, it's no secret that young workers were reluctant to remit their wages to their fathers. However, what this chief seems to be particularly disgusted by is that the young men and women who left for Kimberly's mines and Durban's kitchens did so *on their own accord* – not at the prompting of the colonial state or their fathers – and that they spent their money on themselves to “become white,” which is more likely a metaphor about proximity to power. He saw children circumnavigating the will of their fathers, in marriage and in access to capital, and recognized that his power as a patriarch was threatened. Ndhlovu was equally as frustrated with youth autonomy as he was with the material decline of his chiefdom. He saw, at the core of an increasingly unsustainable way of material production, the inversion of maturation and subversion of the African patriarchy as

¹¹¹ Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 4, pp. 198-208

¹¹² Ibid. p. 208

equally dire issues in the time of his reign. Ndhlovu's fears are required in the record, which suggests changes in conceptions of masculinity throughout Natal African social life.

A key locus of the shifting experience of maturation in Durban, which both adhered to and adapted from Natal African moral economies, were the organizations which fostered coming of age at margins of legality: the youth gangs of *amalaita*. Charles van Onselen has excavated at length the conformation of youth organized crime on the Rand in his landmark social history.¹¹³ However, the contours of *amalaita* in Durban are ill defined aside from the attempts of Paul La Hausse.¹¹⁴ *Amalaita* in Durban was, in no uncertain terms, tied to expressions of labour power among migrant labourers and another microform of client-patron phenomena in urban workspace that redefined collective identities and masculinity among migrant labourers.

Amalaita first appeared in the vocabulary of Durban officials in 1900, when the magistrate complained of marauding neighbourhood youths who broke the city curfew.¹¹⁵ From its inception, the term was ambiguous and never demarcated an identifiable organization. It was applied to urban criminality in general. The only reliable identifiers for the demographics of *amalaita* gang members in Durban are suggestions from local officials that the criminals such described skewed young and tended to be domestic servants.¹¹⁶ The focus by these officials on one of the four previously outlined main markets of labour in the city – monthly employed domestic servants – offers important hints as to the purpose and genesis of the youth bands described as *amalaita*. The evidence suggests that their existence was intricately tied to labour

¹¹³ See Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, Vol 2., New Nineveh*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982

¹¹⁴ Paul La Hausse, "'The cows of Nongoloza': youth, crime and amalaita gangs in Durban, 1900–1936," *Journal of Southern African Studies* vol. 16 no. 1 (1990): 79–111

¹¹⁵ Superintendent of Police Report Books, (PRB) 6, 6 March 1900 cited in La Hausse, "'The cows of Nongoloza'," p. 83

¹¹⁶ La Hausse, "'The cows of Nongoloza'," p. 84

grievance and the desire to seize the same social capital as their togt labouring counterparts working at the docks and washing linens at the rivers.

The spontaneous labour organization of “kitchen boys” was described earlier in this thesis to note how the youngest migrant labourers secured beneficial working conditions. Criminality, however, reflects as a way in which these monthly workers could buy into networks of mutual exchange parallel to those of togt and guild (washermen) labourers to express social, masculinized power over the marginal space in Durban. They formed groups with some traits of a clan, some traits of *impi* (Zulu military detachment), and other traits still of a labour guild. Jon Soske notes that servants organized *amalaita* gangs around “stickfighting, crime, defending territory, and distinctive modes of dress.”¹¹⁷ La Hausse notes that white magistrates most often complained about their pitch battles, the *playing of mouth organs*, and attacks on African police officers.¹¹⁸ The substance of these young men’s extracurricular activities was centered around intentional disruption: making noise, defying laws, and fighting under the noses of police. The nature of these activities indicates that their purpose was to provide a space of social association where kinship social associations from rural areas or traditional outlets of masculinity were lacking. From the controlled quotidian, they would emerge after hours to literally lay physical claim to the territory in which the laboured throughout the city.

Aesthetic though their main activities may have been, the development of youth gangs also had material antecedent and effect. In 1907, the Natal Native Affairs Commission blamed youth criminal activity on the freedom of togt labour, especially among Durban’s ricksha boys who the white overseers perceived as the unruliest.¹¹⁹ The attendant white bosses anticipated that

¹¹⁷ Soske, *Internal Frontiers*, p. 47

¹¹⁸ La Hausse, “‘The cows of Nongoloza’,” p. 84

¹¹⁹ Colony of Natal, “Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7,” p. 38

criminality followed material and moral looseness. They were vindicated by the more spectacular crimes which groups of young men sometimes engaged with – crimes which certainly captured the imagination of early twentieth century South Africa.¹²⁰ An editorial in *Ilanga Lase Natal* dated 10 April 1903 records with horror a house robbery committed by three boys “employed in [Durban]” alongside their fourth accomplice, a young Christian librarian from Eshowe.¹²¹ Though less common than their show-off acts of machismo, youth gangs did in fact commit crimes of poverty and clash directly with the colonial state.

The combination of this anecdotal appearance of *amalaita* in the historical record with the received notions of the city administrators about their identities offers several key inferences about the nature and import of youth urban criminality. The first is that among the atomization of monthly domestic service contracts, and even the degrading ricksha-puller line of work, young labourers still sought and found organic sources of community within their workspaces – if after hours. The second is that, both politically and materially, the belonging bestowed by these shared spaces helped to facilitate the mutual agreements of working at the margins. Much like a fresh-faced boy may have approached a senior dock worker for a job on Monday morning at Durban’s point, or another approached the washers for an opportunity to beat linen at the Umgeni river north of town, young men who entered domestic service found and participated a moral economy which offered manhood at the margins of labour spaces. Agreements of cooperation on workers’ terms facilitated and promulgated those industries. Young boys in coercive master-servant relationships with white Durbanites turned to the physical and political margins – backyards, late nights, and outside the law – to recreate such fundamental senses of individuality. They

¹²⁰ For a robust set of examples of *amalaita* crime in South African imagination, see Napier Devitt, *Famous South African Trials*, Pretoria: JL van Schaik Limited, 1930

¹²¹ *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 10 April 1903, p. 4 Accessed via Readex World Newspaper Archives. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>

expressed this individuality and power by acting out as “men,” laying claim to space and securing their wealth, as they saw many of their fathers fail to do. Their self-organization was an expression of discontent with traditional forms of African organization around rural chiefs, and an expression of masculinity forged outside the gaze of those traditional powers.

City-bound conceptions of masculinity also manifested in the changing experience of patriarchal relationships of rural Natal. One anonymous isiZulu letter writer to *Ilanga Lase Natal*, probably a migrant labourer, summed this change by arguing, in no uncertain terms, that the elders “could not be said to be men at all unless there was something to show for it.”¹²² This idea is key: that young men formed associations and invested on their own accords because their fathers failed in stewardship. They failed to provide as an African man was proscribed to. Concurrent with the changing conformations of *lobola* and reluctance of young men to remit wages to their fathers, discussed in the preceding sections, was the youthful masculine posturing of Durban’s workers: they asserted themselves as truer African men through their newfound individuality and built social infrastructure to express their manliness. Several African chiefs complained to the 1906 Natal Native Commission reporters about the groups of young men who would drink without parental supervision and arrive to weddings in *amaviyo* (Zulu military-like formations), and the young women they would bring along with them.¹²³ The same commission also took notice of “faction fights” between groups of belligerent young men in the countryside, though downplaying their significance.¹²⁴ Laduma, a chief from the Umgeni division just north of Durban, even complained that women were able to establish their own *shebeens* (beer vending stalls) throughout the rural district where such scenes could take place.¹²⁵ The patrons of such

¹²² Quoted and translated in Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 135

¹²³ Colony of Natal, “Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7,” p. 45

¹²⁴ Ibid. 8

¹²⁵ Colony of Natal, “Natal Native Commission, 1906-7, Evidence,” p. 703

establishments were probably young people evading official channels of alcohol procurement and enjoying themselves outside of the gaze of the patriarchs who had traditionally controlled social interaction. It was a space, then, not only of performed masculinity, but also performed and gender-inclusive socialization that stood against and outside of the prescriptions of elders. These spaces replicated the social forms acted out in the city among the gangs of *amalaita*.

The development of an anti-patriarch attitude among workers in Durban influenced behaviour throughout Natal. Causality from a city to a rural location is difficult to trace. However, the purchasing power to access beer outside of the homestead brewer's purview, and the aesthetics of *amailaita* behaviour lamented by the chiefs and white commissions, have clear roots in Durban. The money, free time, and free association novel to the city changed the self-perception of these rebellious youth. And they exerted their power over their fathers in due course.

These combined phenomena – from Ndhlovu's emasculation anxiety, to the payment of bride price in flasks of gin or wads cash, to the chiefs' failed restrictions on drinking at weddings – are bellwethers for wider trends which gripped Natal African politics during this time. Ideas of maturation shifted in the period of industrial boom, and along with them the substance of masculinity. As young workers made the workplace at Durban a formative site for maturation, they developed a sense that they eclipsed their weak fathers as providers and protectors. Like Derek Peterson describes in his volume on the politics of religious revivalism in eastern Africa, the contravention of African ethnic patriarchy can be as subtle as trans-geographic cooperation

and as bombastic as public feuding.¹²⁶ Natal politics played host to both, where the actors were young men who developed the ideas and practices of contravention in the margins of Durban.

Guilds, Gate Keepers, and African Mutual Aid

Most Africans in the region of Natal had persisted for millennia on agro-pastoral production in which labour responsibilities were closely tied to seniority. The Durban experience did not eliminate this cultural script, but rather proliferated the possibilities within it. Practices of African cosmopolitanism in Durban facilitated the rise of labour guilds and labour flows which fundamentally changed the exchange of capital and experience of maturation for many Natal Africans. The most visible example of this phenomenon is the *Amawasha* guild of Zulu washermen, which from the 1850s to around 1900 was the city's premier syndicate of laundrymen.

In their time at Durban, the guild not only informally controlled all laundry washing employment, much to the annoyance of white residents, but they also resisted concerted efforts to dismantle their internal monopoly.¹²⁷ As a mostly Zulu guild, one might imagine that their ethnic-exclusionary practices were indicative of persisting tribalism which precluded inter-African cooperation. In fact, scholarship on Durban and the *Amawasha* takes the "Zulu" designation of guildsmen largely uncritically, as a sign that it was exclusionary.¹²⁸ However, the "Zulu ethnicity" in the late nineteenth century, after the unseating of the Zulu monarchy in 1879, was a tremendously inchoate "body" of people. Individuals often identified with their specific

¹²⁶ See Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, C.1935-1972*, Cambridge University Press, 2012

¹²⁷ Keletso Atkins, "Origins of the Amawasha: the Zulu washermen's Guild in Natal, 1850-1910." *The Journal of African History* 27.1 (1986): 41-57

¹²⁸ See Mahoney, *The other Zulus*, Chapter 4 and Atkins, "Origins of the Amawasha," pp. 41-57

lineage before the wider net of Zuluness.¹²⁹ The decentralized knowledge of hide beating, on which the *Amawasha* professional techniques were based, was known to the myriad lineages throughout Zululand whose ranks ended up at Durban.¹³⁰ Little is known about the composition of the *Amawasha* in Durban other than the fact that the white people who hired them called them Zulu. It is impossible to know how many different “Zulu” lineages were involved in the guild. However, the consistent size of the syndicate at about one hundred individuals¹³¹ suggests that it was multiple families. Therefore, it is something of a testament to African mutualism in Durban that the guild was able to centralize laundry labour control despite the likely presence of multiple families and geographies, and differences or conflicts among those lineages. They practiced inclusion in order to build their own durable, economic and social labour infrastructure which could benefit them in their urban surroundings.

The *Amawasha* are difficult to track on their own terms, seldom even appearing in local papers of record. One trace in the evidentiary record attests to the power which urban labour monopolies could hold over wider Zulu life. Atkins, in her pioneering article on the *Amawasha* in Durban, draws a quote recorded by a white man in the Natal Mercury about a Zulu man engaged in urban labour. The Zulu labourer attempted to make his profession into a hereditary affair. It is not known whether the man was a washer, but his comments mimic the attitudes of those in the washer guild. The report from the white observer, noted in 1910, is as follows:

Who says that the native is not ambitious? This week I was told by a member of a big Durban firm employing many natives of one of them who is aiming at dominion. This native has already married four wives, and has many - I forget the number - children. As his boys come to a working age he gets them work

¹²⁹ Mahoney, *The other Zulus*, Chapter 3

¹³⁰ Atkins, “Origins of the Amawasha,” p. 41

¹³¹ Paul La Hausse, “The struggle for the city: alcohol, the ematsheni and popular culture in Durban, 1902-193,” MS thesis. University of Cape Town, 1984, p. 33

with the same firm. He has mentioned to the firm that he is adding to his wives as rapidly as he can, and is looking forward to the day when he will be in a position to supply the whole of the native labour required by the firm from his own family. 'Then,' he adds with pride, 'I will myself stop working, and become their Induna.'¹³²

Similar values of professional heredity are suspected of the *Amawasha* because skilled trades in rural Zululand were typically also passed down from fathers to sons and the knowledge kept from others. This rare snapshot of the motivations of an African migrant labourer offers a few key insights into the ideas discussed in this section. The first is that, obviously, pure familial nepotism was an important means of attaining employment, especially if one's family members were particularly well situated in the city labour market. Second, it shows the slow and steady subsidence of cultural and economic barriers between the city and the countryside. Preceding scholars have described the "urban subsidy" of wages from employment as a supporting node of African economies because of declining rural wealth and crop returns.¹³³ But this particular "ambitious" African has determined to make urban wages the central axis of familial wealth and live on the remittances of his children so far as it is possible. He aspires to bring his sons to the city to engage in the same work once they are "of age." Passage to work in Durban, for this family, was quite literally a coming-of-age event. Whereas prior, the same sons may have earned cattle, taken a wife, or moved away to find land, they were directed to become productive members of their family and lineage in Durban's throes.

One must consider this entry to the *Natal Mercury*, a white newspaper, with caution. It is impossible to verify the truth of this white man's story about the "ambitious Native" he claimed to hear about. Still, the tale he propagates probably represents some thought of Durban's white

¹³² "Echoes of the Week," *Natal Advertiser*, 15 January 1910, quoted in Atkins, "Origins of the Amawasha," p. 41

¹³³ See Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, Introduction pp. 1-19

residents – be it fear of the African population or hope that they will move into the city as labourers more often – in some conventional light. It is similarly impossible to know if the African patriarch's plan came to fruition. But his stated ambition tells just as compelling a story: capital remittances to the countryside from the city and the idea of Durban as a site of productive labour for young men experiencing the pressure of land scarcity in the countryside grew in prominence as Durban's economy grew in prominence for Natal African life. Maturation and masculinity could be defined by Durban, and often were due to the life strategies of the African workers who lived and worked there.

From practices of movement and job seeking, to the very mechanics of earning and remitting between Durban and rural Natal, African Durbanites co-opted familiar notions of masculinity and maturation to make the city work for them. These practices made it possible – and even sometimes desirable – to reconfigure entire life strategies toward an urban wage-labour orientation. In a political economy defined by alienation, and a city which withheld in the strongest terms even basic living space, the survival of African migrant labourers in Durban came down to their ability to self-assert as individuals and self-organize as a class of powerful providers who could eclipse traditional forms of power. Akin to practices of lodging elaborated in the first chapter, practices of work and social navigation in the city mobilized indigenous notions of kinship and belonging to make sense. These conformations of familiarity also, like lodging arrangements, helped develop a self-conscious ethic of resistance toward a colonial state of heightened contradictions and an African patriarchy which they thought impotent and outdated. Migrant labourers made Durban's marginal spaces into training grounds for reclaiming the power they felt that patriarchs had relinquished in their poverty and political impotence.

Conclusion

The social experience of work at the margins, like the social experience of living and lodging, proved a cauldron of change in Natal African politics. As young men became more and more independent from their fathers in seeking and finding opportunities, many among them cultivated a self-identity as a class of rightful protectors and providers. From guilds to gangs, pathways to material security and forms of masculine expression shifted in Durban such that *abatsha* gained an edge over their patriarchs. The outcome of migrant labour experience for most was not a desire to abandon a “traditional” African life – holding land, cattle, and family in the countryside, for example – but rather to adjust the terms of the social contract to their advantage. The migrant workers of Durban fortified a generational politics in the city and used this power of experience to reimagine the configuration of cultural politics back home. The next chapter will explore how and why, already rising in stature in the roiling African generational conflict, migrant labourers used their power to challenge the colonial state itself.

Chapter 3

Faith in Ourselves: Labour Action and African Belief Systems as Catalysts for an Anti-Colonial

Politics in Durban

Introduction

Missionaries are constantly telling us about the life to come whilst the present is lived without any kind of assistance from them or from anyone else – Mbovu ka Mtshumayeli, 1903¹³⁴

In 1904, the Government of Natal conducted its first full census of the African population in the colony.¹³⁵ It was up to that point the largest overt act of overt surveillance over Natal Africans by the white settlers, and it was not received well. Despite the Natal Native Commission's claim that the Government took "great pains... to allay [African's] fears that it meant neither confiscation nor new imposition," there was no consultation with the subjected population regarding how or when the count would be conducted.¹³⁶ A meeting between Government magistrates and African chiefs to announce the census at Greytown – a meeting in which many of the latter group were chosen or supported in their position of power by the former group – resulted in a tense question and answer period between the two parties regarding the true import of the census.¹³⁷ Natal Africans were naturally suspicious of the counting, and their suspicion was confirmed when the census was followed by the imposition of a Poll Tax in 1905.¹³⁸ Their

¹³⁴ Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 3, p. 24

¹³⁵ Stuart, *A history of the Zulu rebellion*, p. 100

¹³⁶ Colony of Natal, "Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7," p. 43

¹³⁷ Stuart, *A history of the Zulu Rebellion 1906*, p. 101

¹³⁸ Colony of Natal, "Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7," p. 43

nervousness¹³⁹ was no doubt amplified by the pestilence which had struck maize crops in the same year.¹⁴⁰

There are two possible explanations for the disquietude about the census as it emerged among Africans in 1904. The first possible reason is the one implicitly identified above by the writers of the Natal Native Affairs Commission some years later: that Natal Africans feared the count as a precursor to an additional taxation burden. Prior to the Poll Tax of 1906, taxes levied on Natal Africans were still more or less levied by population, primary among them the Hut Tax which was paid by Chiefs in an amount proportional to the number of huts they ruled over.¹⁴¹ A full count could have been seen as an attempt to increase taxes or make everyone into a taxpayer. For African peasants, having lost massive numbers of cattle to pestilence and crop yields to locusts, drought, and the devastation of the South African War in the preceding eight years,¹⁴² a new tax at the time would have been particularly onerous.

The second possible explanation is far more visceral. It is possible that Natal Africans conceived of a census as preparation for an act of mass violence by the colonial state. James Stuart, though by means of deeply racist anthropological analysis, surmised as much in his *History of the Zulu Rebellion* published in 1913. His retrospective thought was that the census appeared to Africans like an act of warfare in Zulu tradition, whereby an attacking force encircles the other to gain advantage in battle.¹⁴³ Stuart's pseudo-analysis aside, the specter of colonial violence may also have contributed to Natal African's fears. A well-documented

¹³⁹ The term *nervousness*, as used here in a discussion of perceived biopolitical control by a colonial state, is borrowed from Nancy Rose Hunt's work on the Colonial Congo. This incantation carries implications of both fear and reverie among the colonized in the face of surveillance and the theft of bodies – both of which were highly evident among Natal Africans in the early 20th century. See: Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State: violence, remedies, and reverie in colonial Congo*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015

¹⁴⁰ Stuart, *A history of the Zulu Rebellion*, p. 102

¹⁴¹ "Report, Natal Native Commission 1881-82," p. 41

¹⁴² Colony of Natal, "Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7," p. 2

¹⁴³ James Stuart, *A history of the Zulu Rebellion of 1906*, p. 100

historical antecedent no doubt weighed on the African imagination. Just thirty-one years earlier, in 1873, the Hlubi chief Langalibalele had refused an order to count the firearms in possession of the people under him. As punishment for his doing so, Natal British forces killed two hundred Hlubi people and seized seven thousand of their cattle.¹⁴⁴ “Rounding up,” as it were, rarely ended well when Africans were on the receiving end. During an interview sometime after the census, an African named Mavandhla noted to government officials this fear in clear terms. He had been paying his Poll Tax at one of the collection sites where violence broke out, and he recalled that on that day that “it was a matter of curiosity on [the African] side whether the government wanted the tax or wanted their lives.”¹⁴⁵ The record suggests that Natal African nervousness in 1904 was both material and phenomenological.

At some time around the taking of the census, the white Government became aware of the circulation among Natal Africans of an *umhlola*, or a religious portent.¹⁴⁶ The message of the *umhlola* was circulated orally, and thus impossible to reproduce with perfect fidelity. However, the main calls to action – passed onto Government officials by Africans under interrogation – stated that Africans should slaughter all pigs, white fowl, and other animals whose coat was the same colour as European settlers’ skin, and abandon any cookware and plates fashioned by Europeans.¹⁴⁷ The point of the action, with its obviously racial undertones, was to make way for a changing of the order. Here it is important to note that the temporal and metaphysical were intricately linked in local African epistemologies: a similar portent had descended on the Xhosa people of central Southern Africa in 1856 which caused them to kill hundreds of thousands of

¹⁴⁴ Stuart, *A history of the Zulu Rebellion of 1906*, 11

¹⁴⁵ Colony of Natal, “Natal Native Commission, 1906-7, Evidence,” p. 698

¹⁴⁶ Alfred Thomas Bryant, *Zulu-English Dictionary: With a Synopsis of Zulu Grammar and a Concise History of the Zulu People*, Mariannhill Mission Press, 1905, p. 253

¹⁴⁷ Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 94

cattle in hopes of staving off British control.¹⁴⁸ It is equally important to note that not all Natal Africans who heard the portent, or the equivalent rumor in Xhosa communities a half century prior, believed it. Some were unwilling to part ways with what material wealth they did possess, others challenged the efficacy of such an action on practical or spiritual bases, and others placed their loyalties with the colonial state. Still, the staying power of the rumor – evidenced by the fact that it reached the ears of magistrates as a serious concern after the fact, and the fact that there are documented cases of livestock culling in accordance with the instructions – attests that it retained a certain purchase among Africans.¹⁴⁹

One must approach the phenomenon with the understanding that those who acted in accordance with the *umhlola* probably experienced other stressors which would lead them to take such action and were on the whole more prone to taking part in anti-settler protest whether or not the rumor appeared. Still, the *umhlola* in Natal, in such close proximity to both the census and the Poll Tax imposition, suggests that this time was sufficiently stressful to Natal Africans that invocations to higher powers appeared palatable to affect change, even when it meant destroying wealth.

By 1906, thousands of men who concurred with the call for drastic change followed up the *umhlola* with action: they took up arms against the colonial state. The “Zulu Rebellion,” which James Stuart’s 1913 treatise claims to recount in full, consisted of a series of violent battles between African “rebels” and Natal troops in 1906, primarily in the lower Thukela River basin of Zululand, just north of Durban.¹⁵⁰ Most of the African participants were young men who

¹⁴⁸ Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 94

¹⁴⁹ For a map of sites where animal slaughters were recorded as occurring in accordance with the portent and prior to the outbreak of violence, see Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 96

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 1-7

abandoned work posts to take part.¹⁵¹ Scholars have variously framed the conflict as a “peasant rebellion” owing to discontent about the 1905 Poll Tax and economic demands placed on Africans, or alternatively as an expression of generational conflict between younger and older Africans come to a head with the younger generation attempting to assert control over their fathers by doing what the latter did not have the courage to – defeat the colonial state.¹⁵² What is certain, though, is that it was carried out by-and-large by the younger generation, some of whom were emboldened by the prospect of metaphysical destiny that they would succeed.¹⁵³ Their attempts to change the order were demonstrably unsuccessful in routing the British from Natal. But still, over four thousand and six hundred Africans took part and its effects loomed large over Natal for years afterward.

Considering the demographics of the combatants and the government reports of preceding protests which took place in the cities, including Durban,¹⁵⁴ it is highly likely that migrant labouring men themselves took up arms. Still, without lists of names and mugshots, this is impossible to confirm. What is instructive, however, and what this chapter will explore, is how Durban served as a potent site of formation for the politics, nervousness, communication, and spiritual belief systems which spurred the disturbances of 1906. Specifically, this chapter will show how the generative potential of new senses of individuality and African collectivity coalesced around the sociopolitical infrastructure produced by migrant labourers to make violent action possible.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the conflict between African fathers in the countryside and African sons in the cities was hotly contested in the late nineteenth and early

¹⁵¹ Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 112

¹⁵² See Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion* and Benedict Carton, *Blood from your children*

¹⁵³ Carton, *Blood from your children*, Chapter 5

¹⁵⁴ Stuart, *A history of the Zulu Rebellion of 1906*, p. 118

twentieth century. This chapter will seek to explore how the collapse of traditional orders of family and patronage, combined with the physical dislocation of children from parents, made way for a more direct abrasion between the younger generation and the colonial state. Next, this chapter will explore how urban work politics, which pitted workers against capitalist bosses and colonial magistrates, spurred a disruptive politics among urban working youths which was distinct from the African generational conflict that raged at the same time. Finally, this chapter will explore the contours of belief systems, notably of healing and biopolitical control, as practiced and reformed by Durban's workers during prolonged dislocation, and how these practices created a population prone to accept the medicines which they did on the eves of their battles against Natal forces.

Whether it is directly provable that a critical mass of African combatants came from the docks or kitchens of Durban, the record of evidence strongly supports the notion that the necessary changes in African attitude, ontology, and affiliation to produce an armed resistance could not have unfolded without the cauldron of the city. The argument herein is that, at the site of Durban, young African workers *lost* faith in traditional African leaders due to their own experiences of success in resistance to settler political control and *found* faith among the quotidian worker politics and urban practices of healing. This change in collective political imagination – and the individual aspirations of many who lived through it – were integral to the formation of a politics which drew thousands of mostly young Africans onto the battlefields of Natal in 1906.

The Inversion of Indirect Rule

The previous chapter of this thesis explored at length the changing dynamics of intra-African politics stemming from the action and experience of increasingly powerful, dissenting young workers in Durban. Indeed, preceding scholarship has even argued that conflict between the colonial state and migrant labourers can be understood as an enlargement or extension of the conflict between sons and fathers.¹⁵⁵ However, a closer analysis of the dynamics between the capitalist order in Durban, their representatives in the colonial state apparatus, and the workers from whom they extracted value reveals that the incipience of young men unsatisfied with the state of the political economy developed from a novel struggle and remained distinct from the grievances of those young men with the African patriarchy. Close contact between the state and African workers changed the texture and interaction-ways of colonial politics in a manner never before seen. Put simply: the politics of Natal's 1906 disturbances were rooted in a dispute between young working Africans and the colonial state that was possible due to the collapse of traditional indirect rule. Those politics appeared and cohered at the dense work locations, Durban chief among them.

The system of "indirect rule," long contentious but nonetheless deployed throughout the colony of Natal, was turned on its head at the site of Durban. Indirect rule, termed as a form of "Native Administration" by the white colonists of Natal and sometimes called the "Shepstone system" after its grand architect in Natal, Sir Theophilus Shepstone, was rooted in the segregation of Africans from whites and the rule of whites through the intermediaries of African patriarchs.¹⁵⁶ The rural life of Natal Africans in the middle of the nineteenth century, combined

¹⁵⁵ See: Carton, *Blood from your children*, and analysis of Carton's argument in the second chapter of this thesis

¹⁵⁶ For a good summary of the tenets of the system of indirect rule, see Jeff Guy, *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal*, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2013, pp. 495-504

with the geographic and political strategies of white settlers, atomized African communities into “tribes,” allowing chiefs to preside over their people so long as they deferred to the white government. This political conformation minimized the interaction between non-chief Africans and the state. Such indirect rule and atomization – the political basis of white domination – was inverted in the city, where workers of all stripes, tribes, and geographies congregated to participate in the colonial-capitalist economy as individuals and as a group.

The heightened interface between young, mostly landless migrant labourers in Durban and the colonial administration represented a geographic and political collapse of “indirect rule” within the city limits. The state took great measures to interfere with African city life for various reasons – they had done so in rural locations as well, to be sure, but in Durban the interface was more direct. One particularly cumbersome arena of conflict between workers and the state were pass laws. First introduced to the labour pool by the *Togt Law* of 1874, passes were designed to limit the mobility of Africans between city and countryside and within the city by tethering an African worker’s legal status to an employer or labour pool which legitimized their presence.¹⁵⁷ By the earliest years of the twentieth century, approximately 8 000 Africans were arrested each year for contraventions of pass law, out of approximately 20 000 arrests total – “proportionally higher than any part of the world,” according to the South African Native Affairs Commission of 1905.¹⁵⁸ By 1907, the Natal Native Commission recommended that the pass system be abolished or seriously amended due to inefficiencies, ineffectuality, and evasion on the part of Africans in Durban. Not only had the system persisted as matter of colonial concern, but that it also became a major point of tension between the state and workers. Of paramount note for this analysis is that the pass mechanism, and the associated arrests, resulted in direct conflict between working

¹⁵⁷ Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, p. 32

¹⁵⁸ La Hausse, “The struggle for the city,” p. 27

individuals and the state. These micro-conflicts were unmediated by Chiefs, headmen, patriarchs, or any other figures to whom the colonial state gave legitimacy or power. The workers navigated the penal system as individual entities entangled with the state. These circumstances fostered the heightening of tension between the workers-as-individuals and colonial state.

Another significant arena of increased interface between the workers and the government was the introduction of the Poll Tax in 1906. The tax was introduced by the colonial government because young, unmarried, male wage earners were not “contributing their proportion” to state coffers.¹⁵⁹ Unlike the Hut Tax and Dog Tax which were collected by Chiefs in rural areas to transfer to the state, the Poll Tax was levied directly on the young men themselves, because it was a general tax applied to unmarried men of all races.¹⁶⁰ However, specific to Africans, the tax was required to be paid by its due date before a worker could be granted a Pass to travel within Natal, or into Durban.¹⁶¹ The very payment *process* of the tax was said to cut the patriarchal control out of the relationship between young Africans and the colonial state. A chief named Maguzu complained, when giving evidence to the Natal Native Commission, that “the fact of the boys having to personally pay the Poll Tax and hold their own receipts gave them a sense of independence which was not calculated to increase parental control.”¹⁶² Thus the imposition was not only onerous financially, but it also tied together the migrant labourer’s individual fate with his ability to navigate within and fight against the organs of the colonial state on his own terms. The Poll Tax was, to be sure, a material burden. But more importantly, it represented a nexus where the African wage workers of Durban became individualized by the state – their status as economic forces was explicitly acknowledged, and they were singled out for appropriation.

¹⁵⁹ Colony of Natal, “Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7,” p. 43.

¹⁶⁰ Marks, *Reluctant rebellion*, p. xv

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 132

¹⁶² Colony of Natal, “Natal Native Commission, 1906-7, Evidence,” p. 708

The result of the collapse of patriarch-mediated law in the geographic space of Durban was the potential for a specifically Durbanite African politics. Alongside the declining power of African fathers analyzed in the preceding chapter of this thesis, the agitation of wage earners by the state proportionally increased as well. As one magistrate identified in 1907:

There is no doubt whatever (sic) in my mind that these centers, and more so Durban, are plague spots, the very schools wherein the Natives mind, manner, and morals are corrupted and destroyed... it is from and through [low class Europeans that] he picks up his "new" code of morals leading to disease and destruction.¹⁶³

In gestures small and grand, the labouring population of the city seized the mantle of their independence from old political structure to confront the explicitly political challenges of city living. The politics of Durban's workers have variously been described as dogmatically proletarian, reflecting a class consciousness that sometimes even overlapped with white workers to oppose urban bosses,¹⁶⁴ and as ethnocentric extensions of rural affinities that precluded the opportunity for class consciousness.¹⁶⁵ Both of these characterizations oversimplify the dynamic of African Durbanite responses to colonial-capitalist logic. For example, in 1905, approximately 1 000 Africans in Durban signed a petition to the city magistrate to reverse his decision to shut down the African food market and replace it with a city monopoly. Both stall vendors and wage workers participated in this civil action.¹⁶⁶ This successful petition represented both a cross-class and cross-ethnic act of mutual protection: working class labourers showed up in large numbers to

¹⁶³ Secretary for Native Affairs Vol. 1/1/367, Acting Magistrate, Alexandra Division to Secretary for Native Affairs, 26 January 1907, quoted in La Hausse, "Struggle for the City," p. 38

¹⁶⁴ See Hemson, "Class Consciousness"

¹⁶⁵ See Mahoney, *The Other Zulus*, Chapter 4

¹⁶⁶ La Hausse, "Struggle for the City," p. 54

protect the interest of petty bourgeois shop owners, the former effectively eschewing their own “class interest” by expending energy and political capital to assist the latter, and all forming a coalition to prevent the incursion of Indian or white food vendors to extract capital from the multiethnic African economy in Durban. The most important aspect of this political action, and those like it, is that it represented a self-organized effort of Africans in Durban to exert political control over their urban circumstances and to do so without going through their traditional leaders to communicate with the government.

There were much larger issues besetting the African population of Durban besides eating options, and they took far more diverse paths to protecting their interests than petitions to the government. This section has demonstrated that the conditions of Durban were primed for self-organization among young Africans outside of traditional boundaries – organization in direct dialogue with the colonial state as individuals within an order and a distinct population with specific interests. The remainder of this chapter will explore how African Durbanites built, formulated, and used political capital against the colonial state in ways both reflecting and transforming traditional, rural understandings of politics and power. The workers of Durban lost faith in their traditional patriarchs to confront the abuses of the colonial state, and simultaneously found faith in themselves to do a better job by turning inwards. Crucially, they turned inwards toward their self-organized ideas of individuality and belonging, and their conceptions of the illegitimacy of African patriarchs, to gain the confidence required to take direct action. Pressed on by their experiences of abuse at the hands of the Natal government and capitalist bosses and encouraged by the genesis of their own spiritual and political ecosystem, migrant workers would eventually become key figures in a reaction to the 1905 Poll Tax and 1904 census.

Worker Power and Political Consciousness

The interface between Durban's workers and the colonial state was experienced in terms both racial and economic. The municipality pursued a policy of segregation in living and mobility, as discussed in first chapter of this thesis. But the character of work in the city was confrontational in more complicated ways due to its wage orientation. The Natal Native Affairs Commission of 1882 and the Commission of the same name published in 1907 both offer ample remarks on the want of rural Africans for land.¹⁶⁷ However, only the commission of 1907 goes to lengths to discuss or suggest remedies for the challenges presented to the state by unsatisfied wage labourers. Moreover, the tone of the latter report is surprisingly concessionary, as far as colonial documents with reference to colonized populations are concerned: the Commission recommends contractualization of wage agreements, standardization of a minimum wage to be disbursed to a worker, and further oversight of employers and recruiters engaged with workers so as to increase and steady the labour supply.¹⁶⁸ The discrepancy between these two reports on the topic of wage labour in Natal evidences two phenomena at the turn of the century in the industrial centers such as Durban: firstly, that the political implications of wage labour disputes grew in relevance to the Colony's magistrates in the intervening years, and secondly, that the Colony found it necessary to make overtures to African worker rights in the interest of assuaging worker complaints. This seemingly innocuous contrast in the record on closer investigation is evidence to the phenomenon of developing worker consciousness and power in the cities between 1882 and 1907.

¹⁶⁷ Colony of Natal, "Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7," p. 3 and "Report, Natal Native Commission 1881-82," p. 8

¹⁶⁸ Colony of Natal, "Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7," p. 36

The most mercurial workers in the city were those employed in togt agreements, largely the dock workers and ricksha pullers. Both groups took strides of self-organization to undermine attempts by bosses, often government companies, from exploiting them. For example, in 1879, at least one hundred togt dock workers “at once [threw up] their [togt] badges” and walked out in retaliation to the local magistrate punishing them for demanding a wage increase.¹⁶⁹ The disturbances caused by workers increased in proportion with their power. The city experienced its greatest boom in shipping activity between 1886 and 1890, in which time the number of ships at harbour doubled.¹⁷⁰ As demand for labour steadily increased, so too did the strain that workers could put on capitalists, and so too did the pressure exerted by workers. The police bureau took particular notice of a series of “spontaneous” strikes by togt workers at the point of the Bay between 1901 and 1903 when economic activity had increased even more.¹⁷¹ The general population of Natal took notice of this worker power as well after a major local newspaper detailed a series violent clash between dock workers and police in 1902.¹⁷²

Evidently, as Natal Africans developed a cognizance of their importance to the colonial economy, they sought to escape abuses and unfair treatment by leveraging their power as a labour reservoir. Not only did they attempt to influence their fate as labourers: they succeeded in remarkable ways. Their consistent upward pressure on wages resulted, in the 1890s, in a standard togt wage for dock workers which was approximately the same as dock workers in London.¹⁷³ The crucial aspect of labour action in Durban for this analysis is not, however remarkable, its success, but rather its provenance and implications. Shula Marks correctly identifies that,

¹⁶⁹ Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” p. 32

¹⁷⁰ Lucile Heydenrych, “Port Natal Harbour, 1850-1897,” in in Guest and Sellers eds., *Enterprise and exploitation*, p. 40 [unnumbered chart figure]

¹⁷¹ “Superintendent of Police Report Book” No. 6, Natal Archives, June 1907, cited in La Hausse, “Struggle for the City,” p. 33

¹⁷² Natal Advertiser, 19 September 1902, cited in La Hausse, “Stuggle for the City” p. 33

¹⁷³ Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” p. 29

“urbanization in the true sense of the word was a reality for a minute number of Africans” during this time.¹⁷⁴ However, the relatively small proportion of participants in urban and city-based inculcation did not neuter the generative possibilities of labour action in the sense that Marks suggests. Rather, urban labour action was among the most effective and visible resistance to the incursion of colonial-capitalist logics into African life: it produced real results.

At the beginning of this chapter is detailed the massacre of the Hlubi people by Natal troops after a noble confrontation with the colonial state over a legitimate grievance. This scene repeated itself in various iterations throughout the history of resistance in rural Natal, which likely made outward resistance deeply unattractive despite the overwhelming hardships of life in rural Natal. This is not to say that rural Natal Africans passively acquiesced to the rule of the colonial state – tactics such as ‘squatting’ on crown land to farm without paying rents¹⁷⁵ and harbouring technically-illegal African refugees into socioeconomic communities were certainly outward expressions of self-help during times of hardship.¹⁷⁶ However, resistance in Durban was distinct in both its possibilities to proliferate and the wins it could gain because of its economic nature. Economic resistance was distinct from strictly sociopolitical or legal resistance because of the interdependence between workers and capitalists in Durban.

The colonial state did not in a strict sense depend on the actions of African farmers to enforce racist policies, although they did appoint Chiefs to do their bidding for administrative purposes. However, capitalists, and by extension the colonial state with its development imperatives, did depend on labourers to unload ships, clean wharves, and shovel coal. The somewhat-leveled playing field of worker-boss interactions in the matrix of conflict between

¹⁷⁴ Marks, *Reluctant rebellion*, p. 310

¹⁷⁵ Colony of Natal, “Report of Native Affairs Commission, 1906-7,” p. 27

¹⁷⁶ “Report, Natal Native Commission 1881-82,” p. 14

Africans and white settlers in Durban imbued a generative potential onto urban African politics which did not exist elsewhere. The economic choice and power of migrant labourers, though severely restricted by colonial policy and economic circumstance, persisted. The spontaneous realization and exercise of this power among diverse workers in Durban served as a launching point for African direct action, which culminated in the disturbances of 1906.

Though sources which comment on the disturbances of 1906 tend to focus on the colony as a whole, which was mostly rural, a few direct links between urban disturbance and insurrectionary politics precipitate from the record. In order to commit an armed rebellion, Natal Africans had to consciously or unconsciously overcome two challenges: agitating and organizing. While the actions of those working Africans at Durban – from walk outs in 1879 to police clashes in 1902 – may not have been teleologically aimed at inciting a rebellion, they certainly served as a platform for overcoming these two activation barriers. Traces of agitation and organization, centering the city and labour relations as a site of rebellious imagination, can be found in the margins of James Stuart’s retrospective “History of the Zulu Rebellion of 1906,” published in 1913.

Stuart does little to recognize active organization on the part of Africans, but he does acknowledge that colonial officers were alarmed by expressions of place-based solidarity and seditious activity that could only have transpired among Durban’s African working class. First, he contends that African public crowds showed “unbridled resentment and public defiance” toward police and in protest of the Poll Tax at five locations before the commencement of armed struggle, the most populous of which was Durban. Stuart’s presence of mind to note these five locations, and laud specifically the capacity of white police officers to stay calm in the face of large crowds betrays a *colonial* nervousness at the sight African solidarity. One of the factors

which emboldened combatants to take up arms was probably the fundamental realization that there were more Africans than white people in Natal, by many orders of magnitude. Marks argues that the role of city politics in the 1906 disturbances is muted by the fact that violence never broke out in these places despite roughly equivalent African and European populations. However, the preceding observations in this chapter attest that the possibility for such an act became real – physically and discursively recognizable – because of mass city gatherings.

Contrary to Marks’ analysis, direct lines between urban agitation and the 1906 disturbances are still evident, if more subtle than an armed conflict on Durban’s Grey Street. The city was, like urban areas throughout history, a location of generative congregation. Stuart cites in a footnote of his *History of the Zulu Rebellion* that, when news of the Poll Tax arrived in Durban – prior to any government official delivering the news – “Mditshwa and other Natives held meetings,” without government knowledge at the time, “at which the poll tax and other matters were discussed, and inflammatory and seditious speeches uttered.” One speech indicated that the young working men admonished their fathers for “[submitting] to every law,” and saw an opportunity to prove they would not do the same. Moreover, though, Stuart notes that the result of these meetings were the men deciding to “*write back to their chiefs*” (italics added) regarding actions they could take against the colonial state.¹⁷⁷ The agitators came from different lineages and geographies, and nevertheless held some common ground with one another – akin to their collective action in labour disputes. Moreover, anecdotal evidence from the police bureau attests that white observers of the 1906 rebellion noted at the forefront of many charges the ricksha pullers from Durban,¹⁷⁸ a particularly mistreated and strike-prone contingent. In any case, the very act of gathering and reporting back to the traditional centers of political power indicates that

¹⁷⁷ Stuart, *A history of the Zulu rebellion*, p. 118

¹⁷⁸ La Hausse, “Struggle for the City,” p. 30

a specific capacity to organize in the city, a specific set of demands coming from Durban, and a willingness to participate in mass action stemming from the culture of urban work was important to the genesis of the disturbances.

African Durbanites' endemic ways of congregation, resistance, and communication made possible the prospect of raising an army for armed resistance. Misme ka Beje, a sonless elder of the Nyuswa residing in rural Natal and another interlocutor of James Stuart, recalled with horror how the idea of rebellion reached his community and prompted his brothers to join:

The Poll Tax Act did not begin by being proclaimed among the chiefs, but among the young men of Durban and the towns. We heard that the young men of Durban had *created a disturbance* in Durban when collected to notify them the provisions of the Poll Tax... we said, 'what is the meaning of this?'¹⁷⁹

Working-class restlessness in town was a nursery for anti-colonial politics – and perhaps most importantly the political imagination required to commit seditious acts – which would form an integral part of the turn toward armed resistance in 1906. Nyuswa's brothers were prompted to action by the boisterous confidence which emanated from the African workers in Durban, seasoned in political confrontation with the colonial state in ways that many rural Africans were not. In many senses, the countryside fighting began on the docks and in the beer halls of the port city.

Labour Ailments, Social Cures

African religiosity in Durban was diverse, but its multiple manifestations suggest that African working-class spirituality, as with worker consciousness, codeveloped with anti-colonial

¹⁷⁹ Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 4, p. 53

politics. The belief systems brought by workers from their countryside homes, specifically in relation to healing, were replicated and transformed in Durban's marginal spaces such that faith served as an important site for imagining and developing a politics of emancipation.

It is important to first map the terrain on which healing practices can be understood in the city. There are no immediately obvious reports of hawkers selling herbal medicine, no reports of old women operating infirmaries out of the back of *shebeens*, and no mass gatherings bearing resemblance to the “sniffing out” ceremonies performed by diviners in Zululand.¹⁸⁰ What remains, however, are traces of settler biopolitical control and African evasion of that control in the colonial crucible of the city. Luise White ably demonstrates the value and limitation of rumor in colonial Africa for excavating the histories of the subaltern subjugated by the settler colony, especially rumor and action on biopolitics.¹⁸¹ Fears of the intentions of white settlers – such as one that they might be counting up in order to kill off African masses – and the counterstrategies expressed to evade this fate prevail throughout African history. Healing is the practice of exercising control over the fate of the physical body. In the absence of direct experience of the African episteme in the settler colony, one must trace the contours of this episteme by that which was intelligible to and reported on by the white observers of the day: politics of control over bodies. Struggles over healing practices, and African rumor regarding the biopolitical practice of settlers, are powerfully informative tools for dissecting the dissonance between African worldviews and settler regimes. It is on this model that the lines of a spiritual politics in Durban, and the practices of Africans within this system, may be traced.

¹⁸⁰ For a lengthy description of a “smelling-out” ceremony performed in Zululand, which featured diviners publicly identifying persons guilty of wrongdoing during a communal gathering in which they would literally smell members of a homestead gathered in a circle, see: Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 1, pp. 333-334; account given by Lunguza ka Mpukane of the Tembu, a Zulu royal lineage

¹⁸¹ Luise White, *Speaking with vampires: Rumor and history in colonial Africa*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Evidence of heightened, state-sanctioned biopolitical control, and African reactions to such regimentation being tied to anti-colonial politics, abound in the city of Durban. During a plague outbreak of November 1902 in Durban, for example, municipal authorities used emergency powers to destroy many African co-living spaces near the docks and rounded up Africans and Indians suspected of infection to segregated camps guarded by plague police.¹⁸² This draconian effort of public health administration, dubbed by several scholars the “sanitation syndrome,”¹⁸³ was a rampant logic of colonial administration that subjected Africans Durbanites to abuse based on the presumption of their risk to public health. The destruction of makeshift living space and further attempt to confine African workers to standardized barracks as a form of biopolitical control was, too, met with protest and ultimately failed. The co-living arrangements analyzed in the first chapter of this thesis were, directly or indirectly, strategies of resistance to settler control over the body. Africans would not submit to control and surveillance in group living quarters, just as they resisted large scale counting up: because of a fear of relinquishing control over their bodies.

These anti-barrack strategies throughout the nineteenth century coalesce with the rhetoric which permeated the 1906 disturbances regarding African evasion of state control over African bodies. Socwatscha, a chief who marshalled to fight on the side of the colonial forces during the violence, reported that the young men who were arrested and taken to jail on his patrol “were in the habit of exclaiming ‘happy are those who have fought and are already dead.’”¹⁸⁴ Most of these fighters had probably known a peer who did time in the gaols of Natal if not spent time there themselves. Their commitment to the fight, to the evasion of restriction on their movement

¹⁸² Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” pp. 63-64

¹⁸³ Maynard Swanson, “The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague And Urban Native Policy in The Cape Colony, 1900-1909,” *Journal of African History* 18 (1977): 387-410

¹⁸⁴ Colony of Natal, “Natal Native Commission, 1906-7, Evidence,” p.709

and bodies by the colonial regime, attests that body autonomy was an issue at stake in the struggle for Natal. Notwithstanding the stories (true and false, to varying degrees) of white cannibalism, torture, and experimentation on African bodies that circulated many white settler colonies in Africa, those who fought the state identified the fear of state biopolitical control as one which they would not permit lying down. The concern of resisting the counting, cataloguing, and confinement by colonial magistrates was an important motivating factor in the mistrust of the census and fight against the Poll Tax. Reflected in the African nervousness at the notion of “counting up” during the census, resistance to state-controlled housing, and the ethic of death-before-imprisonment is the resistance to bodily control on the terms of the state.

Instances of white frustration with African indigenous healing practice are scarce but readable in the colonial record. The writers of the 1882 Natal Native Commission complained persistently that Africans continued to defer to “their own medicine men” in times of poor health.¹⁸⁵ By the early years of the twentieth century, the colonial state had made it illegal for Africans to practice medicine of their own kind without the possession of an expensive license.¹⁸⁶ Any sort of traditional medicine practiced by poor or working Africans was in itself an act of resistance to racist policy. Yet Africans in Durban persisted, probably out of a combination of defiance and necessity. As late as the 1930s, there was a “nativist healing center” located near Durban, drawing most of its patients from the ranks of city workers. Its focus, and that of the similar centers around Natal, was healing through means of ancestor communication with the help of women diviners.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ “Report of the Natal Native Commission 1881-2,” p. 14

¹⁸⁶ Colony of Natal, “Natal Native Commission, 1906-7, Evidence,” p. 772

¹⁸⁷ John C. Rounds, “Curing What Ails Them: Religious Choice among Zulu Speakers in Durban, South Africa,” *Africa* vol. 52 no. 2 (1982): pp. 77-88

Evidence also indicates that local magistrates took great pains to avert African attention toward western medicine in lieu of indigenous medicinal practices. A slyly placed advertisement disguised as a Zulu-language article in *Ilanga Lase Natal* article tells the story of one “Mr. Fruend” who, in August 1903, pursued help from a white doctor in Cape Town for war injuries (presumably from the South African War two years earlier) after seeing several *izinyanga* (Zulu healers). “His” testimony is that the traditional healers failed to help him, but the “pills” from Cape Town cured him with haste.¹⁸⁸ The sum of this evidence is that, despite the best efforts of colonial public health measures, Africans resisted settler medicine and settler biopolitical control in Durban, rather retaining connection to their traditional systems.

The systems of African healing observed by young city workers would go onto play a role in the genesis of the 1906 disturbances. In his deeply orientalist 1913 “History of the Zulu Rebellion,” James Stuart offers one particularly informative scene his account of “antecedent events” to the “rebellion.” He reports that, sometime before the first outbreaks of violence, the Zulu monarch Dinuzulu visited cities in Natal to round up support. On one visit to nearby Pietermaritzburg, Stuart writes, Dinuzulu demonstrated his perfection of a bullet-deflecting medicine by demonstration on a goat which proved impervious to all guns but his.¹⁸⁹ It is highly unlikely that this ever took place. However, this instance of a *white man’s rumor* remains informative. It speaks of a fear among whites that African spirituality, despite its status as an illegal act, was still practiced openly and held some purchase even among those who travelled to work in cities far away from the “backward” countryside. It also suggests that such practice was an explanatory factor for the willingness of city workers to participate in the disturbances. Stuart,

¹⁸⁸ “Wazi zuzela amamedhlela ake,” *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 14 August 1903, p.3. For the translation of this article from isiZulu I owe a debt to fellow undergraduate and Eswatini native Takhona Hlatshwako, whose knowledge of isiZulu made the contents of this article accessible to me.

¹⁸⁹ Stuart, *A history of the Zulu Rebellion*, p. 114

and the many doctors who advertised in the white pages of the African newspaper in Durban, betray traces of a settler nervousness about the power of African belief systems operating in labour centers prior to the conflict.

The evidence of African religiosity most adjacent to the disturbances takes the form of the medicine which many of the rebels took before charging into hailstorms of colonial forces' bullets. Curiosity is found in not only what they took, but how it was taken. The efforts of the African combatants were both an affirmation of Zulu spiritual revivalism and a negation of the Zulu order, the sort of which had both been playing out in the port city of Durban for years.

The traces of Zulu revivalism are evident in the sights and sounds of the combatants in 1906. According to testimony in the wake of the conflict, the Africans who took up arms shouted the war cry "*Usuthusu*" of the Zulu royal lineage, akin to those who had fought with the Zulu contingent during the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879, and wore the traditional war emblem *tshokobesi*.¹⁹⁰ Their healing practices, however, were demonstrably non-traditional.

Bambatha, a leading Chief in the disturbances, offered a medicine to the men who took part in the disturbances in the form of a concoction which could purportedly render one invincible to the projectiles of Natal forces (like that purportedly demonstrated by Dinuzulu). The medicine was administered widely by a young, self-declared healer called Cakijana, a "strategist" who travelled with Bambatha and courted the Zulu monarch Dinuzulu.¹⁹¹ Cakijana was a Machiavellian figure who carved out space for himself in the movement by murdering and orchestrating the murder of other African doctors who took part in the rebels' cause.¹⁹² The name Cakijana translates roughly to "trickster," and a character of the name features to this day in

¹⁹⁰ Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, p, 252

¹⁹¹ Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 115

¹⁹² Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, p, 302

Southern African folk stories.¹⁹³ He still, however, retained trust among the majority-young men over whom his doctoring practice resided.

His reliability laid precisely in the fact that he was a conduit to Zulu tradition who came not from the old order but from the ranks of the younger generation. Cakijana was not the recognized name of the young man, rather he was called in court transcripts “Sukabekuluma *alias* Cakijana.”¹⁹⁴ In fact he was not at first a doctor, but rather a messenger of the monarch Dinuzulu who was sent by him to fetch a doctor named Simiti.¹⁹⁵ Documentation of the trial of Dinuzulu suggest that the young man was chosen for his position of emissary because of his knowledge in the working of firearms, not any prior experience in doctoring.¹⁹⁶ Cakijana did not become a leader in the movement until he allegedly disobeyed the orders of Dinuzulu, the paramount Zulu elder, in his messenger duties by convincing a detachment of agitated young men that he spoke on behalf of the king to encourage insurrection and was vested with the powers of healing.¹⁹⁷ Carton notes that, in the traditional Natal African homestead, it was patriarchs and elders who mediated spirituality and communication with ancestors.¹⁹⁸ Yet a young man from the hinterlands was able to take this role on for himself, evidence of the shifting conceptions of spirituality interlocked with political dislocation and generational strife playing out in the cities.

It was on these connections and these promises – with support the spiritual world, and from the ancestors – that Cakijana was promising the efficacy of his medicine. Cakijana, a young

¹⁹³ For this anecdotal evidence I once again owe a debt to Takhona Hlatshwako, fellow undergraduate, who heard me utter the name Cakijana in conversation and immediately recognized its provenance in Southern African lore from the stories told to her by her elders.

¹⁹⁴ *The Trial of Dinuzulu on Charges of High Treason at Greytown, Natal, 1908-09*, Pietermaritzburg: “Times” Printing and Publishing Company, 1910, p. 2

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. v

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29

¹⁹⁷ “U-Dinuzulu,” *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 20 November 1908.

¹⁹⁸ Carton, *Blood from your children*, p. 2

and inexperienced healer, seized a moment of popular discontent to *become* a healer and contravene African custom because of his specific skills, placement in proximity to the Zulu elder infrastructure, and opportunism. Equally importantly, he was taken by some young Natal Africans to be genuinely powerful. That he was accepted by the warriors who met him as a legitimate actor betrays this concept that these young men had found a certain faith in their peers to legitimize control over multiple aspects of traditional African power.

In both replicating and rejecting certain orders of Natal African tradition, the rebels reformed them. The doctor Cakijana, and the majority-young men who took his medicine as a precursor to fighting, projected the generational politics fomented at Durban onto a Natal-wide conflict. The power of their movement to disturb the happenings of Natal suggests a hold of those city-bound politics not only among those who shaped them in the city, but among those who experienced their reverberations across the colony. Cakijana's *intelezi* (medicine) of the resistance was doubtlessly received by many a young man absconded from the docks or rickshas of the port city. Their participation in the disturbances, as young men and self-asserted heirs to the African resistance against the colonial state, betrays the power of a young urban class' anti-colonial politics to affect the machinations of an entire colonial system.

The *umhola* (rumor) and *intelezi* which facilitated the armed resistance of 1906 not only reached and affected a contingent of Durban's workers during the period of "antecedent events" – they also became ontologically possible because of the dialogue between working men of Durban and wider Natal African politics. While it is impossible to trace in full the clandestine practice of traditionalist African healing in Durban, or what it meant to those who lived it, the persistent refusal of and mistrust in western medicine offers clues into the belief system that put divine protection into view as a possibility for some in 1906. Resistance to biopolitical control,

and its counterpart of persistence and reformation of African healing practices, were intricately tied to anti-colonial sentiment among the young men who left the town for Nkandla forest to fight against the colonial state.

Conclusion: My Destination is Durban

In the months immediately after the cessation of the first wave of violence in the 1906 disturbances, a rumor once again arose in the various regions of Natal. The rumor was that Bambatha, who had by then been killed by Natal forces, was still alive, and that he proclaimed: “my destination is Durban.”¹⁹⁹ This rumor, like those encountered earlier in this chapter, is so tantalizingly little yet still informative for understanding the contours of the conflict which devastated Natal’s African population. That the figurehead of the insurrection would be rumored, whether literally or in metaphor, to be seeking renewal in the city is an indication that the base of power for anti-settler politics was to be found there. The disturbances of 1906 were largely a convalescence of the new ideas about individuality and politics of collectivity which took shape under the specific urban stressors found at Durban. Resistance to African chiefs and white settlers were similar inasmuch as they aimed toward an expansion of life possibilities for young African workers, and they took shape in a common urban crucible. Through life strategies of co-living and African economic intercourse, the reformation of African political power within a deeply rooted patriarchy, and the resistance to exploitation by a colonial-capitalist order, migrant labourers in Durban fostered imaginations of a better future and a durable social infrastructure to help realize them.

¹⁹⁹ Carton, *Blood from your children* p. 134

Whether the incantation cited at the beginning of this conclusion literally suggested that Bambatha would appear someday, or that another “Bambatha” would take root somewhere in the town – and it probably meant one, the other, or neither to different people who heard it on the wind – attests that Durban was a formative site for the politics which came to a head in 1906. The ideas of insurrection were both labour related and biopolitical. The possibility of confrontation with the colonial state was realized in labour action, and the motivation and confidence to take up arms were rooted in that urban politico-spiritual ecosystem which Durban’s African workers fashioned to make their lives make sense. And clearly, to some of the Africans who survived the conflict and believed in the cause, hope remained that in the crucible of Durban, that politics and the confidence in its potency could be revived.

Conclusion

A Continent of Encounters

There was no such thing as Sunday or a day of rest in
Zululand. We worked any and every day. We heard nothing of
Sunday, Saturday... we learned all of this in Natal.²⁰⁰

Much of the modern history of Africa has been a period of upheaval, displacement, and stress for a great many Africans. These conditions are precipitated in large part by the emergence of new encounters. Some of these encounters, as John Peele writes about in his treatise on the first decades of mutual entanglement between Africans and missionaries in southwestern Nigeria, fundamentally reshaped how Africans conceived of internal ethnic identities.²⁰¹ Others, as Jessica Krug demonstrates in her study on the war of extraction on African land and livelihoods in Kisama, foster profound reimaginations of place-based identities to facilitate resistance to the worst excesses of global capitalism.²⁰² Natal was one of the last subsections of the African continent in which such a story unfolded. We as historians are lucky, in a sense, that it was: temporal proximity grants us the benefit of thousands upon thousands of pages of meticulous documentation through which to read Natal encounters. Yet we are also confounded, finding it necessary to read this moment in Natal against those which preceded it on the African continent and those which occurred in close proximity.

This inundation is precisely why an urban approach to the moment of encounters in Natal is so valuable. The city of Durban is both a microcosm of Natal which bears marks of the moment as it unfolded in every African community on the subcontinent and a site of wholly

²⁰⁰ Wright and Webb eds., *The James Stuart archive of recorded oral evidence* vol. 1, p. 339

²⁰¹ John David Yeadon Peele, *Religious encounters and the making of the Yoruba*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003

²⁰² Jessica A Krug, *Fugitive modernities: Kisama and the politics of freedom*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018

novel encounters which demand to be appreciated and analyzed in their novelty. African workers brought with them traces of histories dating to time immemorial when they entered the city limits. But simultaneously, the city is a space of hyperconcentrated geography and sociocultural interaction. Its dynamics imbued onto African people forces of “heat and pressure,” speaking in geological terms, that could not be found anywhere else in the colony. The sights and sounds of Durban’s encounter are distinct from the diffuse processes of change which surrounded them, yet still hold the potential to offer windows into the moments north, west, and south of the city whence the African migrant workers came.

Durban’s migrant labourers were forced to (re)invent tradition every day because they were dislocated from the keepers of African tradition and faced by a colonial state that could punish and dispose of them in the absence of durable social structures. But, as Eric Hobsbawm reminds us, invented tradition invariably retains “reference to the past,”²⁰³ from which it borrows form, recognizability, and legitimacy. Historically speaking, “the past” for Durban’s workers encompassed the life history of Natal Africans. Historiographically speaking, “the past” encompasses both the histories of Natal Africans and the long histories of encounters across the African continent. Thus, we find in Durban not only the marks of Natal African experience, but also traces of Peele’s ethno-religious convalescence, Krug’s modalities of resistance, and countless other pasts which register as chapters in the grand story of modern African encounters. None of these pasts are perfectly replicated in Durban, but each both contributes to and is reflected by the dynamism which unfolded there in the age of capitalist expansion.

²⁰³ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The invention of tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 4-5

Durban: an African Frontier

In his treatise on the twentieth century Revivalist movement in East Africa, Derek Peterson catalogues the social technology of incipient young people escaping the grip of traditional ethnic identities and objectification at the hands of the colonial state. In particular, he writes about how revivalism was “a form of dissent premised on movement” in which subjects acted out their definitions of self-determination by placing distance between themselves and the land which their ethnic forefathers beseeched them to stay on. Revivalists, he argues, put on display “the indeterminances of territorial governance in a *frontier zone*” (emphasis added).²⁰⁴ Although he did not write about cities specifically, still Peterson captures saliently the generative potential of city-going for the young men who went to work in Durban. So went revivalists about Uganda and Kenya to write their new biographies apart from the anchors of ethnically entrenched spaces, so too went migrant labourers throughout Natal and into a different *frontier zone* where possibilities abounded for the self-construction of their own life stories.

The city of Durban has been described as a frontier for African migrant labourers in different senses by different authors. Jon Soske describes the city frontier as a space of racial convalescence, where an African nationalism cohered at times in reaction to and at other times in harmony with the Indian diaspora. In his view, the presence of Indians in Natal forced and helped African intellectuals to better define a conception of the nation such that it could simultaneously liberate the African subject and empathize with the also-colonized other.²⁰⁵ Ralph Callebert describes Durban as a frontier of global capitalism which intertwined Africans with the happenings and fate of subjects across oceans, introducing new ideas and practices which would

²⁰⁴ Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, p. 76

²⁰⁵ Soske, *Internal Frontiers*, pp. 3-4

become formative to urban labour politics.²⁰⁶ Still, Keletso Atkins described Durban as a cultural frontier, where “indigenous institutions” met “modern concerns” to produce a durable, African working class with the capacity to self-organize around improving their status as workers.²⁰⁷ The thread which connects all of these analyses, and which ties together this study, is the frontier as a geographic category.

Dislocation was endemic to the experience of migrant labour. But the inseparable twin of dislocation is exploration, and in times of exploration comes about discovery. The experience of African migrant labourers in Durban was an exercise in discovery: of self, of new political technology, of the usefulness of old political technology, and of different ways to organize the world which were not immediately available within the old way of doing things. As Peterson describes the “indeterminances of territorial rule” exposed by travelling revivalists, so too did the dislocation of young African men from the watchful eye of “tradition” expose the opportunity and necessity to develop different life strategies. Extraction from the home was a necessity of urban labour and a cause of new creation.

The colonial state played its own peculiar, orientalising role in the process of African discovery as well. White settlers maintained fearful and paternalistic views of Africans, ranging from notions of primitivism and absurdity to caution against the African menace.²⁰⁸ Their insistence that the Africans in their city were not intelligent or aspirational enough to devise a greater political project in their togetherness both upheld systems of exploitation and undermined them. This persistent underestimation invited and obscured the ingenuity of African workers. From the vantage of imperial white supremacy, settlers refused to see the development of

²⁰⁶ Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, p. 153

²⁰⁷ Atkins, *The moon is dead*, p. 145

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 142

African political technology until it erupted in strike action and violent conflict. The unintentional permission granted by the ignorant white majority is another crucial condition of the frontier which made it such a potent place of discovery. Despite a deep affinity for physical and political control, the colonial state's dogmatic refusal to acknowledge the competency and humanness of young African workers begot the latter group's organisation in the marginal spaces of the city by granting them permission to engage and create with one another visions for and strategies to create a different future.

However, as with frontiersman the world over, Durban's migrant workers departed from bases which equipped them with the skills to explore the frontier gracefully and back to which they returned their discoveries. As the 1905 South African Native Affairs Commission noted with an air of contempt:

They are attached to their homes and even when they go away to labour centers... prefer to do so for short periods... and return to look after the interests of family and livestock.²⁰⁹

What was to the white settlers a perpetual thorn – the tendency of migrant workers to return to their homes, care for their loved ones, and try to build a better life outside of the gaze of the colonial state – was a vital part of the frontier exploration for thousands of young men. Their work was not idle. Their efforts and developments were not empty. They retained a teleology throughout their time away: to enhance and secure the prospects of their African life project, and the wellbeing of the people who shared it with them. A first principle of this study has been to pursue an African-oriented understanding of the lives of African subjects. Not to be lost in the conception of migrant labourers as urban actors is the fact that their livelihood strategies were,

²⁰⁹ "South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5," p. 52

like workers around the world to this day, rooted in a desire to make the best of the circumstances they were dealt for themselves and for the people they cared about.

Life in Durban was not easy for Africans who took up space within its boundaries. They were subject to physical abuse at the hands of bosses, harassment at the hands of police, isolation from their families, and economic uncertainty compounded by the degrading prospects of rural life. Many went to Durban not by choice but by compulsion as one of the last viable routes for maintaining subsistence. Still, at the frontier of the colony of Natal, they managed to wrestle dignity from life and working conditions which sought to confine them in indignity.

This thesis is a work of African history, which seeks to recollect the history of African navigation in colonial moments. But it is undeniably inspired by and gestures toward works of urban history. It is quintessentially a study of how subjected populations navigate worlds of stress and opportunity in urban environments. The world over, colonized people in cities occupy what Fanon calls zones of “mutual exclusion,” where the only space left for the colonized is marginal.²¹⁰ The contours of how subjected peoples navigate these urban spaces, physically and politically, hold commonalities not lost to the author. The logics of imperialism and of resistance to imperialism borrow from and replicate one another across geographies. Whether in Africa, Latin America, or Asia, the technology of the oppressed at urban frontiers can likely be traced in fashions similar to the analysis presented in this thesis.

Their City, Our Terms

Africans who went to work in Durban confronted alienation and formed within it new conceptions of self, place, and togetherness which reverberated back onto the political landscape

²¹⁰ Frantz Fanon trans. Richard Philcox, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 2004, pp. 4-5

of Natal. The first chapter of this thesis excavated the marginal spaces of Durban to find the areas where Africans developed new conceptions of insiderhood and outsiderhood through the negotiation of living space and working arrangements. Spurred on by mistrust and fear of Indians in Durban, ill-founded though it may have been, they generated both the need for and inspiration to develop a racial consciousness among African city-goers regardless of their geographic origin. Africans found solidarity and sleeping space by inviting newcomers in and creating space for one another in backyards and public squares where co-living was a vital strategy for survival. On the back of co-living arrangements spawned more cooperative ethics in economies that carried back to rural homes, leaving an indelible urban mark on the trajectory of wider African political possibilities.

Moreover, the youthful workers in Durban's throes leveraged their position of dislocation from old structures of power to reimagine what power could look like in a durable African society. Through workers guilds and young men's gangs they developed new ideas of group belonging that were particular to life in the city and centered around youthfulness and masculinity as organizing categories. They also found space to assert themselves as powerful individual agents among the overbearing African patriarchal system of power by reinvesting capital on their own terms to "skip" traditional means of advancement. Their self-organization deliberately rebelled against the power of chiefs and patriarchs, simultaneously shifting political power toward themselves in the grand scheme of African politics. Young migrant labourers simultaneously lost faith in their fathers to confront the challenges of the colonial moment and found faith in one another to be the true protectors of the African life project.

Finally, in confronting the colonial state as individuals apart from their fathers and chiefs, young African men in Durban developed a strong sense of self-identification. In the process of

criminalisation and taxation at the hands of the state, workers developed conceptions of their own positionality in the colony of Natal separate from their existence within an old African superstructure. This burgeoning individuality, coupled with urban connections to traditional African spiritualities and nascent worker politics, cohered as a concerted anti-colonial politics in the city that was yet to be expressed so forcefully anywhere else among Africans in Natal. The combination of staunch individualisation at the hands of the state and the collective organisational logics of the urban center proved a crucial development in the genesis of armed resistance comprised of young men asserting their power and individuality.

African migrant labourers in Durban during the city's rapid expansion occupied a node of transition. They lived in a world after the fall of the Zulu kingdom, the last substantially independent African polity in Southern Africa, and before the militant labour action and anti-apartheid activism which would consume mid-twentieth-century Southern African political imagination. They did not fill the niche passively. Rather, they were then and remain now a crucial link in a story of African ingenuity and indigenous politics.

The development of African political consciousness and organization, especially among youth, would be repeated for decades through the apartheid years after the Durban moment. The capacity of migrant labourers to confront and challenge the colonial state and stagnant ways of operating in Natal African politics was an important chapter in the story of African resistance to colonial imposition. The legacies of dock workers and ricksha pullers live on in the creative politics of South African people living at the margins today; their commitment to justice and connection to global phenomena live on at the modern docks of Durban, where African workers in 2009 boycotted work on an Israeli ship in protest of apartheid in Israel against Palestinians.²¹¹

²¹¹ Callebert, *On Durban's Docks*, p. 1

The city of Durban was a South African crucible. The livelihood strategies made anew there are now an entry in the catalogue of tradition from which Africans continue to borrow form, recognizability, and legitimacy.

In a time of confusion, African migrant labourers at Durban made worlds within a colonial landscape which fulfilled their needs and aspiration. From Grey Street to the Umgeni River, they transformed the life force of a people who lived for millennia between the Drakensberg Mountains and Indian Ocean. Their story is an extraordinary testament to the infinite possibilities which reside within and between people who live, by force and by choice, at the margins of the world.

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