Made in Cato Manor: Ronnie Govender and the Fight to Preserve a Personal/Public Space

Lindy Stiebel

Summary

South African writer Ronnie Govender's work linked to Cato Manor, in Durban, urgently aims to fill an "empty space". This is due not only to a lost childhood and nostalgia for an erased environment, but also to a sense of anger that a place like Cato Manor has never received the attention that other sites of apartheid forced removals – say District Six and Sophiatown – have. This urban township area was declared a "non-place", it seems, not only by the apartheid government but also by the post-apartheid chroniclers of the past. This makes Govender's task all the more urgent and poignant. If he doesn't keep the Cato Manor of the 40s and 50s, and the histories of the descendants of indentured Indian families who lived there, in particular, alive in our memories, then who will? – one can almost hear him asking.

Opsomming

Suid-Afrikaanse skrywer Ronnie Govender se werk verbonde aan Cato Manor, in Durban, poog om dringend 'n "leë ruimte" te vul. Dit is nie bloot te wyte aan verlore kinderjare en heimwee vir 'n omgewing wat uitgewis is nie, maar ook gebelgdheid dat 'n plek soos Cato Manor nooit dieselfde aandag geniet het as ander areas van gedwonge verskuiwings tydens apartheid, byvoorbeeld Distrik Ses en Sophiatown, nie. Hierdie dorpsgebied is as 'n "onplek" verklaar, nie net deur die apartheidsregering nie, maar ook deur die postapartheid-kroniekskrywers van die verlede. Dit maak Govender se taak soveel meer dringend en aangrypend. Indien hy nie die Cato Manor van die 40's en 50's en die geskiedenis van veral die nasate van Indiese kontrak-arbeiders wat hier gewoon het in ons gedagtes lewendig hou nie, wie sal dan? – kan 'n mens hom amper hoor vra.

It is the history of this place and the lives lived in Cato Manor that spurred Govender on to write some of his best-known short stories, in the collection *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories.* "At the Edge" can be seen to refer variously to a person's political and public marginalisation as well as a psychological state of mind. It suggests a position in which stasis is impossible and action of one sort or another must follow as a consequence. The "action" Govender chose to undertake in his literary career is evident in his writings that deal with Cato Manor, a contested space. This article, then,

JLS/TLW 36(3), Sep./Sept. 2020
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387
© *JLS/TLW*

will explore the profound link between Govender and Cato Manor, not only an infamous site of contestation and forced removals, but also Govender's heartland. Theorists drawn from to pursue these personal and political interwoven threads include Said (1994) on "rival geographies", De Certeau (1984) on "walking in the city" and Boym (2001) on nostalgia, both reflective and restorative.

Introduction

The South African writer Ronnie Govender and the Durban township Cato Manor are synonymous with each other. Born in 1934 in Cato Manor, Govender would go on to write about his birthplace again and again in his works using a variety of genres. What the two share, beyond a natal link, is being sadly overlooked – Govender as a literary figure in South African letters and Cato Manor as a politicised space that has been forgotten in terms of public memorialisation. Govender, it seems, has both a personal and a political motive when recreating Cato Manor for his readers: he is asserting his own worth as a person and writer, and that of a community and a place which was dismantled in 1950 by the Group Areas Act. Such a motive requires a great deal of energy and even anger. Govender has exhibited both in his writing about Cato Manor and his own position. This article will draw upon Govender's writing on Cato Manor as found in *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* (1996), *Song of the Atman* (2006) and *In the Manure* (2008) to explore this idea. While reference will be made to these works, this article does not aim to provide a close textual reading of these texts but rather analyse the links between Govender and Cato Manor − between writer and place − the reasons for such links and how these are part, not only of his writing, but also of his identity as a private citizen of South Africa and as a public chronicler of a place and time that history has obscured, in his opinion. Whilst the link between Govender and Cato Manor has been made by other commentators, the addition made by this article is to focus specifically on the private/public meshing of Govender's approach to his birthplace which became a public forced removals hotspot, to bring this linkage up to date, and furthermore to bring this relatively neglected writer to renewed academic attention, following on from the recently published first full study of Govender by Chetty (2017).

Firstly, some historical context is important for both the writer and his heartland. Fatima Meer's iconic work *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (1969) succinctly summarises the events leading to Indians finding themselves in southern Africa, and, thereafter, to the linked question of "belonging", important for Govender and other descendants of these first Indians, to the place named Cato Manor which they grew to call "home". Meer writes:

> The majority of Indian South Africans are the descendants of indentured workers brought to Natal between 1860 and 1911 to develop the country's sugar belt. White colonists despaired of exploiting the colony's agricultural resources, due to the scarcity of labour. Slavery had been abolished and the Zulu, relatively secure in their tribal economy, refused to market their labour.
>
> India, convulsed by the British occupation, offered a solution. Peasants and craftsmen, often deluded by unscrupulous recruiting agents, bound themselves for five years and more to unknown masters, under little known conditions ….
>
> Free, or passenger Indians as they came to be called, followed in the wake of the indentured to Natal, but White colonists became alarmed by the competition offered by these merchants and by those whose labour contracts had expired. By 1913 Indian immigration was generally prohibited by law.
>
> The result is that today, with few exceptions, Indian South Africans, are South African citizens by birth. (1969: 7)

Ronnie Govender's grandfather, Veerasamy Govender, was one of these indentured labourers who, on ending his period of labour, opted to stay on as a market gardener in the newly established farmland called Cato Manor. He would have been an example of what Appadurai calls a "deterritorialised people" (quoted in Vally 2012: 66) having left one land for another, completely disconnected, across the Indian Ocean. Vally describes how such displaced people developed "coping intentions … culturally shaped as they searched for ways to combine their desire for cultural continuity with the demands of the new space" (66). Such efforts to cope in a new land by recollecting past practices and developing new ones are typical of a diasporic people. However, Singh asserts that "[w]hat possibly distinguishes the Indian diaspora from its counterparts is its extreme heterogeneity, diversity and, in some cases, a persistent localism …" (2003: 4-5). What those descendants of indentured labour achieved in Cato Manor was just this – a "persistent localism" peculiar to that space, recognised by its various inhabitants, culturally derivative but applied specifically to a place many were to call home until dismantled by the Group Areas Act. This is the background against which, and from within which, Govender writes. He writes not only for himself but for others that came before him. On his 75th birthday, he remembered his grandfather and "his beloved market-garden in Cato Manor". He described the "meticulous rows of cabbage, beetroot and other vegetables which he would take by horse-cart, before sun-up, to sell at the morning market". He continues:

> It was through such labour that our forebears were able to put their pennies together to build their own schools, welfare institutions, sports fields, and other amenities which should have been the responsibility of government. (Chetty 2009: 14)

The wanton destruction of Cato Manor by the apartheid government makes the loss of this garden of Eden for the child, and then adult, Ronnie Govender,

even more worthy of anger. Said's comment on struggles over land and possession in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), though applied elsewhere in the world, echo Govender's preoccupation with dispossession and contestation, and the attendant anger:

> Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings. (1994: 7)

This is certainly true of Cato Manor, a place which was painstakingly developed by small scale Indian farmers, formerly indentured labourers, into a sustainable area in terms of food, but more importantly, culturally too with the addition of schools and temples; before being forcibly denied to those very same inhabitants by the apartheid government.

Some context is necessary for this contested spot, what would become a "rival geography" in Said's terms (1994: xxii-xxiii), a contested space perceived differently by rival claimants. Cato Manor was originally farmland owned by George Christopher Cato, a sugar baron and also Durban's first mayor. In the early 1900s, Cato decided to subdivide this land into a number of smaller farms for sale. The new landowners leased and sold tracts of land to many of the indentured labourers who had decided not to renew their contracts or return to India. Govender's grandfather was one of those who decided to settle at Cato Manor and turn their hand to market gardening. His case is reminiscent of that of one Ramsamy, cited in Desai and Vahed, who explained his motivation as follows: "I have no capital, nor have I a trade, the hoe and I have been friends for the last five years, I have strength; if I put thrift on my side I will make one strong effort and see if I succeed" (2010: 343). Through such examples of frugality and hard work, Cato Manor developed into a core source of fresh fruit and vegetables for the markets of Durban as well as the ships in Durban harbour. As Edwards notes:

> Recollections from both white and Indian residents during this time all give the images of lines of carefully tended vegetable patches, groves of sweet smelling avocado, mango and pawpaw plantations and the daily early morning clatter of donkey carts carrying produce of the city market. It is impossible to find memories that do not evoke images of a nirvana of happiness, hard work and dreams of the future. (1994: 416)

This image of "happiness, hard work and dreams of the future" is certainly mirrored in Govender's recollections of his childhood when his grandfather was still alive and Cato Manor was still intact. A passage from Govender's fictionalised biography of his uncle Chin, *Song of the Atman* (2006), recreates this "nirvana of happiness":

> In front of the house stood the garden, fronted by the stream. There were rows of lettuce, chillies, beetroot, cabbages and turnip, or whatever vegetables were in season. From frames constructed of reeds hung clusters of podlenka or snake gourds. There were also thriving pumpkin and cucumber vines beyond the rows of vegetables. On the fences along the sides of the garden hung heavily laden vines of double beans and granadilla. (65)

That this place was a veritable cornucopia, a place where a young child from an extended family could roam freely in play, adds to the nostalgia experienced for its loss. As Boym defines nostalgia, it is a "longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (2001: xiii). Boym goes on to qualify further her understanding of nostalgia: "At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythm of our dreams" (xv). Boym refers to both reflective and restorative nostalgias – the former acknowledges historical and individual time that has passed, never to return; whereas the former sees the past "not as a duration but a perfect snapshot" (49). Govender's nostalgia for Cato Manor is of the reflective variety acknowledging the irrevocability of the past – Cato Manor as he knew it is over, destroyed – but, in his writing, there is something of the restorative nostalgia: a desire to capture Cato Manor in a work like Cato Manor and Other Stories as a "perfect snapshot" of a past caught in amber. In Govender's case, the home that was Cato Manor not only existed but was dramatically taken away in traumatic circumstances perhaps heightening the potential for nostalgia. That he is an imaginative writer, means he could translate this nostalgia into words. In the Epilogue of *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* [hereafter referred to as *At the Edge*], tellingly subtitled "The Flesh Sags", Govender writes a series of short prose poems each entitled "Cato Manor". The first reprises the vegetation, childhood and place:

> CATO MANOR
> beneath the heaving crowns of mango
> flowers bearing promise of a child's summer
> the games we played
> the friendships we forged
> the battles we fought
> and the love we made
> beneath those heaving crowns
> of mango flowers (1996: 147)

Of course, Cato Manor was not always paradise and not for everyone either. Despite the apartheid policy of racial insulation, Cato Manor – given its desirable proximity to Durban's centre – quickly became a multicultural and multiracial environment. To augment their income, many Indian landowners sub-let their land to black African families forbidden by law to own land.

Despite the lack of infrastructure and essential services, uMkhumbane - the isiZulu name for Cato Manor named after the river running through the place – rapidly grew to a community of around 100,000 in the 1940s. Deplorable living conditions and exorbitant rentals asked by some Indian landlords escalated tensions in this vibrant conglomerate. The 1949 riots in Cato Manor and Grey Street were the culmination of this simmering antagonism. A small incident in the city market between a black African and an Indian is identified as the tinder spark: by its end, there would be 142 dead (one white, 50 Indians, 87 Africans, four unidentified) and many Indian owned homes and businesses torched. Dhupelia-Mesthrie ascribes the reasons for the 1949 riots (and the later 1985 Inanda riots which are not the focus of this article) as follows:

> While both eruptions clearly had racial overtones where Indians became victims at African hands, the causes have to be sought in class conflict and the role of the state. The ordinary African knew the Indian in specific relations which could be perceived as exploitative or competitive: the Indian shop-keeper, the Indian bus owner, the Indian landlord, the skilled Indian worker. Potential African traders felt thwarted by Indian traders in the 1940s, especially in the Cato Manor area. (2000: 26)

Rumours of white complicity added to the incendiary mix of the time. Dhupelia-Mesthrie adds: “White politics in Durban had been characterised by much anti-Indian hostility in the 1940s and the National Party’s election campaign [of 1948] which branded Indians as aliens destined to board the ships back to India, also had a role to play in African perceptions of the Indian” (26). Meer adds in the threat of Indian militancy, evident in the protest marches against the anti-Indian Land Act of 1946 as an example, as a factor. She posits that this increased local White antagonism and “White politicians and newspapers made capital of it. Africans, suffering a wider and more intensive range of injustices realised the vulnerable position of Indians and used it to get rid of some of their own repressed aggression” (1969: 36). Govender’s own position on the reasons for the 1949 riots is interesting for the vehemence with which he resists the “Indian exploitation of African people” theme. His frustration at this analysis is of a piece with the anger he expresses when the 1950 Group Areas Act decreed the dismantling of Cato Manor, partly as a result of the violence of the “interracial” riots that mingling together occasioned. His memoir, *In the Manure* (2008), published when he was nearly 75, is quite clear on his position as to what occasioned the riots and how aggrieved he felt at what happened thereafter:

> Cato Manor was the first and largest area to be hit. Its destruction was carried out with ruthless efficiency, so complete that even the apparently progressive Cato Manor Development association has forgotten its remarkable history, going by what it has presented thus far. While the truth is being told about District Six and Sophiatown, this does not appear to be so in the case of Cato

> Manor. The association has even made the incredible suggestion that the main cause of the so-called Cato Manor riots of 1949 was the exploitation of Africans by Indian landowners. In the association's historical resume, presented whenever there is a big occasion, this astonishing suggestion is made as a matter of fact. Whatever their racial makeup, landlords generally are not overly scrupulous about exploiting their tenants. In any event they comprised a small section of the Indian community, who were largely working class … No reference is made to the findings of the official commission of enquiry that a third force had exacerbated the violence among poor people competing for the same resources. (2008: 90)

A familiar refrain to those who know Govender's work is the reference to the unfairly disproportionate treatment Cato Manor has received in South African history compared to other more famous forced removal places such as Sophiatown (mostly "African") and District Six (mostly "Coloured"). And this is linked to the lack of critical attention Govender himself feels he has received as a writer. Is this, he seems to be saying, because Cato Manor was a mostly "Indian" settlement and he, Govender, is seen as a writer of Indian descent? And that Indians in South Africa have always occupied an uncomfortable position of being too successful and thus too threatening to others? The injustice of such perceptions angers Govender, evident in his writings. Academics have pointed out how the positioning within South African society of the 1860 Indians plus passenger Indians and their combined descendants has been problematic. Frenkel points out how portrayals of Indians as "successful", as "beneficiaries of apartheid", when most Indians by and large were of working class descent and, within apartheid, oppressed second-class citizens respectively "emerge from a particular history of racial myths that can be traced back to the first wave of Indian migration to South Africa" (2010: 10). She shows how anti-Indian sentiment grew in the late nineteenth century as Indian merchants' expansion threatened White traders. Frenkel reminds us that:

> … the "race problem" in South Africa was initially designated as a problem between whites and Indians. The repressive legislation and discrimination pioneered in Natal against Indians was later applied to black South Africans. This crucial information is not widely known in South African public culture and forces a re-orientation of ideas that form the base of South African historical consciousness in that the ground of apartheid regression, and hence resistance to it, thereby includes South African Indians at its genesis. This is important because racial stereotyping has sometimes placed Indians as opportunistic, only joining the resistance to oppression at a later stage, when clearly history tells us otherwise. (12)

The cultural, linguistic and caste diversity of Indians and their descendants is flattened under such stereotyping. Much has been written about this in recent years, occasioned in part by the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the *SS*

Truro with the first indentured labourers (see Desai & Vahed [2010] and others). South African literature is also not exempt from racial stereotyping of Indian characters – Frenkel names Mphahlele's "unscrupulous Indian hawker" and "Gordimer's marginal but always exploitative Indian store-keeper" (2010: 21). Furthermore, literary histories of South African literature have "largely ignored texts written by South Africans of Indian descent …. While a few token South African Indian writers might be known outside of their local areas, the vast majority of writers are not given the same type of recognition as writers from other communities" (21, 22). Govinden concurs on that point noting, in a chapter tellingly entitled "Healing the Wounds of History", that "South African Indian literature, especially the literature that deals with indenture [has been] far too long marginalised in discussions of South African political and literary life" (2011: 284-285). Govender's perception of being overlooked whether for prizes or mention in South African literary life has, therefore, some support. Govender's hurt at being consistently overlooked in his own birthplace is clear in singling out his exclusion – despite being awarded the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1997 for *At the Edge* – from Michael Chapman's lauded *The New Century of South African Short Stories* (2004):

> Significant … is the fact that these Durban academics hadn't read Sathie's [Govender's alter ego for his memoir, derived from one of his given names Sathieseelan] book. Perhaps that explains why they choose a writer from far-away Stellenbosch, Breyten Breytenbach, as their writer-in-residence rather than a Commonwealth Prize winner, born and bred "right on their doorstep". (2008: 207-208)

In the absence of personal recognition and, linked thereto, public recognition for the place to which one is irrevocably attached, Govender engages in what Jacobs identifies in post apartheid South Africa as "a process of self-narration – a national recollection of those blanked-out areas of its identity" (1994: 878). Certainly this is true of Govender's later autobiographical works, but is also equally true of his short stories written about Cato Manor of the 1940s and 50s which in essence retell his growing up within this environment and among its people. These stories were written after the destruction of Cato Manor in the 50s but only published in 1996, post-apartheid, when a publishing opportunity presented itself. Chetty rightly identifies *At the Edge* as "a text-site of memory" (2017: 37); Govender in conversation with Chetty confides this book "is a work I've felt very deeply about. Perhaps because this work was so close to the hearth I was reared at. I was born in Cato Manor and spent my youth there. Its destruction was traumatic and I think my outrage actually served to intensify my already strong sense of belonging to the district" (161). In his memoir, he reiterates this notion of traumatic loss, anger and the imperative to write the past back into being as a reminder to others: "A community had been bludgeoned. It would be nothing short of tragic if the

memory of a once-vibrant community with a remarkable record of self-help was lost forever. The intent of the short stories was to capture the spirit of Cato Manor through its people, the poor, the rich, the lowly and the mighty, their joys and sorrows, their dreams, their successes and their failures" (Govender 2008: 202).

The anger Govender expresses at being 'negated' through being academically/publicly overlooked is mirrored in his anger at Cato Manor, his birthplace from which he derives his private "home" identity being negated by the apartheid government at the stroke of a pen. His efforts to establish an identity for himself that doesn't rest on being "Indian" are fuelled by the same indignation at attempts to pigeonhole him, only to be dismissed. He is at pains to assert his right to being seen, simply, as a South African:

> Although at various times, I have been described as an Indian South African, a South African Indian, an Asiatic, a charou, a coolie; I know I am a South African …. I am a South African playwright. I have never heard Athol Fugard being described as a European playwright …. I have no doubt about my South Africanness and I resent any suggestion that I am not African or South African. (Chetty 2017: 163)

His gift, ironically however, as a South African writer, has been to cast a spotlight on South African Indian life particularly as it has been lived in and around Durban. As has been noted before: "Govender has a gift for dialogue, particularly with Indian patois" (Stiebel 2019: 115), usually to humorous effect, despite the seriousness of his political and social message concerning oppression and racism experienced by South African Indians. The humour behind the dialogue in his *At the Edge* short stories, his satirical plays and his memoir leads to the more optimistic reading of Govender's work as finally celebrating survival despite negation or neglect – both personal and public. As Chetty remarks of Govender's work *At the Edge*: "His intention in writing is … to convey or re-ignite the quality of their lives, so the present and future generations can derive wisdom and happiness from their memory" (Chetty 2017: 39). To read the following passage from one of the short stories, "Brothers of the Spirit", inevitably leads to a wry smile of recognition at the familiar family dramas, the tensions, the jokes of a tightly packed community, the Hindi and Tamil-inflected language patterns that only an insider could have known:

> Cut-Neck Bobby had developed into a heavy drinker over the years, although he never stumbled or measured the road like Bullwa did when *he* was drunk. Bullwa was a real bull of a man who never smiled. They lived, with their families, in a wood-and-iron house that was plonked in a gash in the rich, red sands of the hill in Cato Manor Road which separated the Indian area from the white suburb of Berea.
>
> The brothers looked forward to the weekend. Friday night! The sounds of the lively natchannia music and the inevitable aftermath – a *pare* [fight] or

> family feud – interspersed with screams and yells, "*There nanike* [Your granny's …] … *hare mei re*! [oh, my mother!]" would float down from the hill and we knew that life was going its usual way in the Cut-Neck-Bobby household. (1996: 39-40)

And only an insider could have drawn the map [see above] that physically situates *At the Edge* in the hills and valleys of old Cato Manor. Not only is the hand drawn map a visual guide to the short stories within the collection, it performs the function of a story in itself as Brown points out:

> While accurate in terms of street names and geographical location, its markers and icons are distinct from those of official cartography: it is a mapping of character, theme and use (Cut-Neck-Bobby's House, Ahmed's Shop, Vellama's House, Adam's Garage …; of inclusion and exclusion (White School, Municipal Housing for Indians, Muslim cemetery). (2005: 108)

The complexity of the geographical hilly terrain and interconnectedness of the houses situated on small subplots "posed a challenge to the police to enforce discriminatory laws. Surveillance was not as easy, as residents were often able to outwit the police by escaping through routes which were unknown to the police" (Pillay 2014: 12). This "human geography" symbolised by the hand drawn, "insider", map subverts the control exerted by the police who uphold apartheid's laws and is clear evidence of De Certeau's theory of ascribing meaning to place – the "city" – from the ground up, literally by walking its routes (see De Certeau 1984). The map, placed by Govender significantly at the beginning of *At the Edge* so that the reader can literally get his/her bearings, "was Cato Manor as he knew it, as he mapped it through his knowledge of growing up there" (Pillay 2014: 15). This observation illustrates perfectly De Certeau's notion of space as practised place (1984: 117). Govender's map drawn from memory is evidence of routes walked and rewalked. Crang discussing De Certeau summarises this theorist's approach

to practised place as "spatial transformation … mediated via memory" (2000: 150). Cato Manor in Govender's remembered map is laid out for the reader, inviting us to take short cuts, cut across lanes, recreate the now mostly disappeared places in our mind's eye. The repetition of characters' names, descriptions of the market gardens, the litany of road names all act like mantras to summon up a desired topography and a world once very present, now gone. The subsequent bulldozing and destruction of Cato Manor was a literal erasure of this human map and an attempt furthermore to symbolically erase the lived experience and subsequent memories of its former residents. The last paragraph of the collection alludes to this traumatic event:

> CATO MANOR
> silence now and bush
> no more Discovery Road
> no more Trimborne Road
> no more hopscotch
> no more ripe mangoes from Thumba's yard
> Cato Manor, you have done your penance
> amid crumpled eviction notices. (Govender 1996: 149)

Again, De Certeau is useful in understanding Govender's witnessing to a now empty space, still teeming with ghosts in his memory: "what is memorable is what we can dream about a site. In any palimpsestic site, subjectivity is already articulated on the absence that structures it like existence" (1984: 144). For Govender, who can still map Cato Manor after its demise, this is a practised place, an imaginative geography in Said's terms, which is both there and not there for him; and, by extension, for his readers of the Cato Manor stories.

This was, in the final days before the forced removals, a community "at the edge" of things as the titular short story of the collection describes. "At the Edge" is a mystical account of an exorcism performed by Govender's grandmother Vellamma that he witnessed as a child, and which had a profound effect upon him. As Singh observes, at one level the story "brings up questions about religion, spirituality and the nature of existence, and on another level serves to intensify the plight of people in the face of the imminent destruction of Cato Manor" (2009: 78). Govender had said much the same thing: "I witnessed this incident of exorcism by my grandmother and the tremendous spiritual kind of power …. And suddenly you were at the edge of another kind of consciousness. Perhaps this was also a metaphor for Cato Manor's destruction and people being pushed to the edge" (in Rastogi 2008: 226). But, far from erasing memory of Cato Manor for one of its ex-residents, Govender turned his anger and grief attached to the trauma of literal destruction into the repetitive act of imaginative reconstruction of the place in his oeuvre. It is as if "Cato Manor becomes the proverbial clay in Govender's hands, which he moulds and re-moulds … [he] continues re-building his lost

home through his fictional reconstruction of Cato Manor in much of his writing" (Pillay 2014: 110). His determination not to let Cato Manor be forgotten, and his anger at how other forced removal sites like District Six and Sophiatown have been memorialised in a way Cato Manor has not been, have been the fuel for this endeavour. Similarly, as this article has tried to show, the public amnesia concerning Cato Manor (stereotyped as an "Indian/ African" township primarily in its origins) and the public amnesia concerning Govender (stereotyped as an "Indian" South African writer), a son of Cato Manor, in terms of his literary career are seen by Govender as connected. The following excerpt from an interview he had with Chetty in Durban in 2000 neatly brings these 2 strands together − the place and the person are deeply entwined:

> RC: What do you see as the reasons for your exclusion from the Writers' Festival organised by the University of Natal, especially in view of the fact that your writings have won international awards like the Commonwealth Writers' Prize?
> RG: … It was not simply a question of inviting Ronnie Govender to the Festival, it was the snubbing of a book that dealt with a district on the University's doorstep. In fact, some of the land which University extensions were built on is land expropriated from Indian owners through the Group Areas Act. This was in fact the University saying, we don't give a shit about the destruction of Cato Manor, let alone not recognising a book that won a prestigious international prize. (Chetty 2017: 162)

In more recent years, there has been some amelioration of this public and private positioning: firstly, recognition of the place Cato Manor and, secondly, the person Ronnie Govender. The modest Cato Manor Heritage Centre has been at the Intuthuko Junction complex for some years with photographic displays of the interwoven Indian/African history of the area. More recently the far more ambitious Umkhumbane Museum and cultural park has started. The impressive five storey museum built on land centrally straddling the Umkhumbane River was the Grand Prix winner of the first Africa Architecture Awards in 2017. To mark the launch of this museum site, the remains of Queen Thomozile Jezangani kaNdwandwe (mother of the Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini) were reinterred in a tomb especially constructed in 2011. The Queen resided in Cato Manor after leaving the Royal Household, and was a talented crafter and vocalist. The museum was built alongside her tomb where she is memorialised. What is interesting from an historical interpretation point of view is how the history of Cato Manor, or Umkhumbane as it is now officially known, foregrounds "Zulu" agency with the result that there is little or no reference to "Indian" history in current references to this new museum site. Though the designers, Choromanski Architects, allude on their website to a far earlier 'deep' history of this area "dating back to early Iron Age settlements to which this project provides a

platform for expression" (Choromanski Architects), it appears the current official reading favours reading the site as one of Zulu heritage. For example, one website describes the Umkhumbane Museum as documenting "the socio-political history of Cato Manor, cultural traditions and history of the Zulu Nation as well as offering venues for educational and recreational events" (South African Property Insider). Still to be built as part of the bigger cultural site are a Forced Removals Museum, the Umkhumbane public square, park and amphitheatre. It is clear this is to be a major development with municipal and national financial backing. This surely goes some way towards bringing Cato Manor into present day recognition. As one announcement asserted – very much in the spirit of Ronnie Govender's own statements on the matter: "[a]lthough South African history remembers Sophia Town and District Six, scant attention is given to Cato Manor where forced removals under apartheid first took place, and where earliest resistance to these began. Today, Cato Manor is home to 100 000 people who have re-settled the area post 1994" (South African Property Insider). The Umkhumbane Museum architects' website similarly writes:

> The heritage of Umkhumbane holds national relevance and global significance as one the world's largest forced removals sites. Community uprisings, subjugation and eventual emancipation form a major part of the site's history. The heritage of the people who resisted oppression permeates through the present as a triumphal spirit of freedom. This spirit is an inspiration for the development of a complex which celebrates life, growth and *the transition of a community of people*. (Choromanski Architects, own emphasis)

Govender's "humanism" which leads him to "[believe] firmly in the inter-connectedness of all humans, their fragility and need to depend on each other, help each other and mutually enfranchise each other" (Chetty 2017: 174), surely would endorse this last statement by the architects. The "community of people" cited above is one of Govender's recurrent themes in his writing. It remains to be seen with the full development of the museum site whether the interrelatedness of Indian and African lives in the "old" Cato Manor is acknowledged. This Govender's work has always stressed – the short story "1949", for example, is a vivid account of final sacrifices made by and for neighbours during the violent riots – in order to "reconstitute the vital memory of multiracial living in Cato Manor" (38).

And what has changed for Govender in terms of personal recognition? In recent years, he has received a number of local and national awards: in 2008, the South African Government conferred the Order of Ikhamanga on Govender "for [his] excellent contribution to democracy and justice in South Africa through the genre of theatre"; and in 2014, the Durban University of Technology conferred an Honorary Doctor of Technology in Arts and Design upon Govender "for his contribution to literature and the arts in general as well as his contribution to democracy, peace and justice in South Africa

through theatre" (see https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/ronnie-govender). In 2015, the Rotary Club of Durban Umhlatuzana conferred upon Govender the prestigious Paul Harris fellowship.

At the Edge has played repeatedly to full houses locally in Durban, and further afield at the Edinburgh Festival, in Toronto, and then in India where it toured all the major cities, receiving standing ovations at every performance. The play has won Vita nominations for Best South African Playwright and Best Actor. The first full book length analysis of his oeuvre *At the Edge: the writings of Ronnie Govender* by Rajendra Chetty appeared in 2017, his 83rd year. Chetty places Govender in the same bracket as Bessie Head, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Richard Rive. Thus it seems that, in later life, there has been official national and academic recognition of Govender's contribution to South African literature which would go some way to assuage the frustration of being overlooked reported above. Physically, too, Govender has moved on, being located since his late 60s in Cape Town with his family. However, as Gagiano, observes: "this relocation does not change the predominantly Natal/KwaZulu-Natal regional location of his writing – or the much broader reach of his socio-political and moral concerns" (2019). One can only hope that this writer's rich writings and the milieu about which he has so consistently written will be the focus of further research in the future.

References

Boym, Svetlana
2001 *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Brown, Duncan
2005 Narrative, Memory and Mapping: Ronnie Govender's *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*. *Current Writing* 17(1): 108-126.

Chetty, Rajendra
2009 Theatre Icon Turns 75. *Metrobeat* 13 May: 14.
2017 *At the Edge: The Writings of Ronnie Govender*. New York: Peter Lang.

Choromanski Architects
2020 Online: <https://choromanski.com/frontpage/portfolio-item/umkhumbanecul tural-park/>. 1 July 2020.

Crang, Mike & Thrift, Nigel (eds)
2000 *Thinking Space*. London and New York: Routledge.

De Certeau, Michel
1984 *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Desai, Ashwin & Vahed, Goolam
2010 *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story, 1860-1914*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Dhupelia-Mesthrie, Uma
2000 *From Cane Fields to Freedom: A Chronicle of Indian South African life*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Edwards, Ian
1994 Cato Manor: Cruel Past, Pivotal Future. *Review of African Political Economy* 61: 415-427.

Frenkel, Ronit
2010 *Reconsiderations: South African Indian Fiction and the Making of Race in Postcolonial Culture*. Pretoria: UNISA Press.

Gagiano, Annie
2019 Book Review of *At the Edge: The Writing of Ronnie Govender.* Online: <https://www.litnet.co.za/at-the-edge-the-writings-of-ronnie-govender-by-rajendra-chetty-a-review/>. 1 July 2020.

Govender, Ronnie
1996 *At the Edge and Ot0her Cato Manor Stories*. Pretoria: Hibbard Publishers.
2006 *Song of the Atman*. Jo0hannesburg: Jacana.
2008 *In the Manure: Memories and Reflections*. Claremont: David Philip.

Govinden, Devarakshanam Betty
2011 Healing the Wounds of History: South African Indian Writing. In: (eds) Chapman, Michael & Lenta, Margaret *SA Lit: beyond 2000.* Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.

Jacobs, J.U.
1994 Life Writing I (South Africa): Autobiography. In: Benson, E. (eds) & L.W. Connolly *Encyclopedia of Post Colonial Literatures in English* vol 1. London: Routledge.

Meer, Fatima
1969 *Portrait of Indian South Africans*. Durban: Avon House.

Pillay, Selvarani
2014 Fictional Reconstructions of Cato Manor in *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* and *Song of the Atman* by Ronnie Govender. Unpublished MA thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Rastogi, Pallavi
2008 *Afrindian Fictions: Diaspora, Race and National Desire in South Africa.* Ohio: Ohio State University Press.

Said, Edward
1994 *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.

Singh, Gurharpal
2003 Introduction. In: Parekh, Bhikhu, Gurharpal, Singh & Vertovec, Steven (eds) *Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora*. London: Routledge.

Singh, Thavashni
2009 Changing Form and Political Purpose in Selected Works of Ronnie Govender. Unpublished MA dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

South African Property Insider
2020 Online: <http://sapropertyinsider.co.za/2018/06/12/durbans-new-umkhumbane-cultural-museum-cato-manor-built-half-million-red-corobriks/>. 1 July 2020.

Stiebel, Lindy
2019 Book Review *at the Edge: The Writing of Ronnie Govender* by Rajendra Chetty. *English Academy Review* 36(1): 113-116.

Vally, Rehana
2012 Made in India, Proudly South African: Commemorating 150 Years of Indian Presence in South Africa. In: Patel, Suraja & Uys, Tina (eds) *Contemporary India and South Africa: Legacies, Identities, Dilemmas.* New Delhi & Abingdon: Routledge.

Lindy Stiebel
stiebell@ukzn.ac.za
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal