

Exploring the Contact Zone in Paton's, *Cry the Beloved Country*

In Paton's South Africa, the white settlers had destroyed the African tribal systems through mining camps, exploitation, unequal education, segregation, and inaction, not to mention colonization itself. Against this backdrop Paton writes *Cry The Beloved Country* (hereafter *CTBC*), a story of mid-20th century South Africa told mainly through the experience of the Zulu, Stephen Kumalo, an aging Anglican Priest. Kumalo's parish is a land without potential that has been further devastated by incompetence, drought and decimation. Throughout this essay, attention will be given to Kumalo's experience in two different contact zones.¹ In the first contact zone, Kumalo is subalternated² by his position as an elderly rural Zulu trying to make his way in Johannesburg, a fearful metropolitan world "not made for him." In the second contact zone Kumalo is subalternated in relation to Jarvis, a successful³ white farmer whose life interweaves with Kumalo's in such a way as to accentuate the significant power differential between the two. In each of these contact zones, Kumalo experiences some relief from the clash of cultures, ultimately resulting in Kumalo moving into a new space that had previously been unavailable to him. Though Kumalo's experience in these contact zones is full of fear and even tragedy, he comes out of them into a different place in life, a place where his new

¹Contact zones are "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 1991, 33).

²As an Anglican Priest, Kumalo would probably not be considered as standing in the space of the subaltern within the context of his village, however in the two different geographies, Kumalo is subalternated, in that is he is outside the power structures of the geographic zones in which the encounters take place.

³Read "exploitive".

contacts have provided not only material support, but have also helped him to become a more active agent in the story of his family and his parish.

Paton divides his novel into three different books. The first book is about Kumalo's journey into Johannesburg and Sophiatown. The second book starts with James Jarvis, a white farmer who lives in the more productive hills above Kumalo's parish. Jarvis' narrative is like a counterpoint to Kumalo's own story and journey.⁴ Though they have lived in the same neighbourhood for decades without ever really crossing paths, their stories collide in Johannesburg, with Kumalo's son, Absalom murdering Jarvis's son, Arthur. The third book is the story of Kumalo's return to his parish and the outworking of Kumalo's experience in the contact zone.

The story will be read narratively,⁵ focusing in on the two major contact zones already mentioned and concluding with a brief listen to the final meeting between the two principals. The story will be taken as 'truthful'; no attempt will be made to argue with the conclusions, implications, or manipulations of the author, however the reader will intentionally notice the counterpointual relation between Kumalo and Jarvis which will aid in hearing the initial clash and final resolution of their meetings. This approach will the reader to hear and notice some different ways in which contact zones might be negotiated. While the contemporary post-

⁴The reader is intentionally looking for the way in which these two men share parallel but independent stories and the points of similarity and difference that will heighten the way in which Kumalo, the Zulu Anglican Priest is subordinated to Jarvis, the successful English farmer.

⁵My training in Narrative Therapy and inclination toward a reader centred hermeneutic makes it hard to read Paton with the kind of cynicism common to other postcolonial readings. While I do share some of Paton's liberal and Christian values (as well as the advantages of white supremacy) I have attempted to write this paper with an appreciation for postcolonial theory and a sensitivity to postcolonial social and political realities even though I am reluctant to adopt all the ideological assumptions that typically underwrite postcolonialism.

colonial reader, might wish that the two principals of the story would have acted differently, this exploration will focus on the record of how they did act with the resources available to them at a particular time and place.

After a brief introduction to the destitute land in which Kumalo lives, Book 1 begins with the arrival of a letter from Johannesburg requesting Stephen Kumalo come to the city on account of his (quite a bit younger) sister, Gertrude, who has been reported as sick. From the outset, the reader learns that whatever the problems with the surrounding land (and they are many), the city is a dangerous place for the priest's family. While he has some sense that his brother John has settled down in the city, "His sister Gertrude . . . had gone there with her small son to look for the husband who had never come back from the mines. His only child Absalom had gone there, to look for his Aunt Gertrude, and he had never returned" (*CTBC*, 36). All of this is made more ominous by the ensuing discussion between Kumalo and his wife (who is never given a name):

We had a son, he said harshly. Zulus have many children, but we had only one son.⁶ He went to Johannesburg, and as you said—when people go to Johannesburg, they do not come back. They do not even write any more. They do not go to St. Chad's to learn that knowledge without which no black man can live. They go to Johannesburg, and there they are lost, and no one hears of them at all (*CTBC*, 39).

Scraping together as much money as he can from savings set aside for other things (including the money set aside for Absalom's education), Stephen Kumalo sets out to Johannesburg to guarantee the care of his sick sister and to hopefully retrieve his son.

The journey had begun. And now the fear back again, the fear of the unknown, the fear of the great city where boys were killed crossing the street, the fear of Gertrude's sickness. Deep down the fear for his son. Deep down the fear of a man who lives in a

⁶ An accusation?

world not made for him, whose own world is slipping away, dying, being destroyed, beyond any recall (*CTBC*, 44).

Kumalo's journey through the countryside is marked with strange sights and experiences, and the reader sees a man alternately curious and excited, then impatient and confused, but mostly afraid.

Stephen Kumalo's journey to Johannesburg is a journey away from relative power, status and freedom to a space of bewilderment, disorientation, and paralysis. This man, who would be amongst the elite in his parish, is but a child in the city, afraid even to cross the street. He arrives, totally subordinated by the city; and with nowhere else to turn, Kumalo is reliant upon the kindness of strangers. The first stranger is a con man who steals some of his money, while another, "an elderly man, decently and cleanly dressed" escorts Kumalo to the Anglican Mission House that he was directed to in the letter from Johannesburg.

And it is in this place that Kumalo's status turns from that of subaltern to agent for in Kumalo's world, religion provides a safety and support that his tribe and family does not. The tribe cannot, because as we are reminded over and over again, the tribe has been broken. The family cannot, because they have been caught in the web of the city. Even Kumalo's brother, John, who has achieved some legitimate success in the city (unlike Gertrude and Absalom who can only make a living through crime), has been and will be no help for Stephen (nor has he been nor will he be for Gertrude and Absalom).⁷ It is Stephen's religious affiliation that provides him (and later some of his family) with some relief, shelter, guidance and financial

⁷The reader learns that John Kumalo's reluctance to help his family includes a sense that he has become a member of the indigenous elite in the city. Even if he were to help Stephen it would not be on Stephen's terms; he has rejected Stephen's subservience to the white man, including the white man's religion and the white man's chosen geography for the blacks.

support.⁸

Through the safety and support of his Anglican brothers and sisters, Stephen is able to achieve his mission: find his family and do what he can to retrieve them from the city. Over the course of Book 1, Kumalo is able to “rescue” his sister and nephew as well as his son Absalom’s pregnant girlfriend. Even discovering Absalom in prison is a kind of perverse success: besides from the fact that Stephen has finally caught up with his son, Absalom repents of the crime for which he is imprisoned; commits himself to truthfulness; and is even ready to marry his girlfriend. Beyond this, the impending trial is made a little less tragic by the church’s arrangement for a white lawyer, Carmichael, who against all custom, shakes hands with Stephen and calls him “Mr. Kumalo” and agrees to take Absalom’s case pro deo. Overcome, Kumalo stammers, “I have never seen such kindness” (*CTBC*, 157).

Kumalo’s affiliation with the church provides him with a safe house.⁹ His identity as “Anglican Priest” gives Kumalo agency in Sophiatown and Johannesburg that would be unavailable to him as elderly rural Zulu. Choosing this safe house means that Kumalo loses other options (including trying to work more closely with his brother, John).¹⁰ Thinking of the Mission House as a safe house allows the reader to see the way in which all safe houses might exist only with the agreement of the dominating culture and the way that safe houses require

⁸Even the stranger who actually helps the priest when he first arrives in Johannesburg was an Anglican.

⁹ A safe house is a defined space that exists on the periphery of contact zones. It offers its members some relief from complete subjectification by the dominating Other in the contact zone. They are “intellectual and social spaces” where members can “construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone” (Pratt 1991, 40).

¹⁰There is some animosity between the two brothers that seems to go beyond their religious and “political” differences.

their own shibboleths and ideologies in order to give voice to those subordinated people in the contact zone.¹¹

Book 2 is like a fugue to Book 1, starting on a different, higher note, but with similar structure to Book 1. It introduces the reader to James Jarvis who lives in the “lovely” rich green hills overlooking the red barren valley that is Kumalo’s parish. Jarvis, like many other whites in the area, looks down literally and figuratively at the people struggling to live below. Though he has many “natives” working for him, it would not have been proper for him to be familiar with the native Other who ekes out a living in the barren valley below. Jarvis’ contemplations about the reserves makes clear that he sees the natives as ignorant, shiftless, drunkards, untrustworthy, thieves, idle, and worthless (*CTBC* 162, 163).

The conterpuntual relation between Jarvis and Kumalo extends further than shared geography. Most importantly both have only one child, a son that each had “lost” to Johannesburg.¹² But while Jarvis regrets that his son, Arthur, will not take over the farm, he accepts the path that Arthur has chosen for himself. This acceptance is in stark contrast to Kumalo’s paternalistic pursuit of Absalom to Johannesburg and even into prison.

In certain ways, both sons have become men wholly unlike their fathers, and neither son can fully answer why. Arthur is not able to answer his father, only in part because he has been murdered, but more importantly because he and his father live in two different South

¹¹See, Canagarajah, A. Suresh (1997). The question to be asked, are safe houses safe for those who can’t or won’t follow the “rules” of the house? Also see, McClintock’s, “Azikwelwa” (We will not ride) from her work, *Imperial Leather* where she explores the black “Bohemians” who also would have another kind of safe house in their affiliation with the English liberals of the early 20th century.

¹²By the end of the story, both men will have lost their sons completely to death.

Africas.¹³ In Absalom's case, he is unable to answer his father because there is no answer to the question of how one becomes a criminal and murderer. Stephen will turn from the "terrible and useless questioning" (*CTBC* 308) and instead focus on helping Absalom to become the best man he can be in the circumstances. Jarvis, on the other hand, is able to dig into his son's life, seeing the respect that Arthur has garnered; witnessing some of the work he has put his hand to and reading some of Arthur's reflections on the "native problem." As a result, Jarvis will not only come to hear his son's answer but will also over time, learn to become a man more like his son.

Another significant contrast between Jarvis and Kumalo is their corresponding trips to Johannesburg. While Kumalo has to break the bank to make his journey, Jarvis gets to choose between a private compartment on the fast mail train or an aeroplane (all arranged by the local constabulary). While Paton spends around ten pages describing Kumalo's arduous (and solo journey) to Johannesburg, he uses less than one page to set up Jarvis's journey (accompanied by his wife) and no time in describing it.

Over the first part of Book 2 we watch Jarvis, who is discomfited by his son's stance on the native question, come to a place of appreciation and understanding even if not full acceptance. And so the reader turns to Chapter 25¹⁴ and the meeting between Jarvis and Kumalo.

¹³Arthur writes, "From [my parents] I learned all that a child should learn of honour and charity and generosity. But of South Africa I learned nothing at all" (*CTBC* 207).

¹⁴Parenthetical notes will be left out as the reader follows the chronology of Chapter 25.

The story in Chapter 25 is related almost entirely from Jarvis' perspective. At the beginning of the chapter it is clear that Jarvis has the upper hand in this encounter. Besides from the implied racial advantage, the meeting takes place on Jarvis' turf, a favoured niece's home where Jarvis and his wife have gone for some reprieve when "the Court was not holding the case." Kumalo, clearly the subaltern in this space has come knocking at the door on an errand for another tribe member from his home town.

On answering the door, Jarvis' power in the contact zone is accentuated in multiple ways. As host, Jarvis *finds*¹⁵ an *old, native parson*,¹⁶ wearing *worn* and maybe even *dirty* clothes. Conversely, the parson takes off his hat (in *deference*), and he looks *startled, afraid* and is *trembling*. Jarvis addresses the old man in Zulu of which Jarvis is a *master* (even though he undoubtedly has never had any dealing with the natives other than as servants or employees)! Jarvis is surprised that the parson would sit down in his presence, but reasons that it must be because the old man is *ill* or *starving*, as Jarvis can see the parson is *humble*, and *well-mannered*.

Jarvis (con)descends the steps to the parson, enquiring as to his well-being. The parson continues to *tremble* and *look to the ground*. The only way for Jarvis to see what is on the parson's face is for Jarvis to lift the old man's chin, but Jarvis cannot, it would have been improper.

And here it is that Jarvis starts to become a little helpless. Custom has made it that Jarvis has always been unable to directly address the needs of natives, but this learned

¹⁵Words in italics indicate words from the book that indicate power differential.

¹⁶Jarvis sees a "Parson" where others would see a "Reverend."

incapacity was only another expression of white supremacy. Now (for whatever reason) Jarvis does not call upon someone else to attend to the parson, but instead seeks to give aid himself; but with no effect. Jarvis tries a different voice, one which because it is new makes him a little more helpless, he enquires again, "Are you ill . . . do you wish water . . . are you hungry?" And the refusal of the parson to receive help, "I shall recover. . . I shall recover" makes Jarvis helpless to even help.

He stands waiting upon the parson to recover even though "it is not easy for a white man to be kept waiting" by a native. "I shall recover;" the reader wonders, does the old man mean, "I shall recover . . . on my terms . . . in my time?" Is this a small (and maybe accidental) act of defiance? The parson tries to rise, but cannot. Jarvis would help the parson, but cannot, custom will not allow it. Finally, the old man lifts himself up, and lifts his face up and now the parson sees in Jarvis *a suffering* that was neither illness nor hunger.

At this stage Jarvis is at last able to help and he *stoops* and *retrieves* the parson's dropped hat and stick. The parson is able to make clear his business, and knowing for sure that he can't help, Jarvis at last calls for the "boy who was working there."

Jarvis leaves the two natives to deal with the matter, until he (re)recognizes the parson as being from his area. He returns to the parson, "I know you," and "the *suffering* of the old man's face *smote* him." Jarvis recognizes, "there is something between you and me, but I do not know what it is." The parson confirms, "It is true; you do not know what it is."

Even if it is in spite of himself, it is the parson who now has the power, because he has the knowledge. This knowledge allowed him to recognize that Jarvis' suffering was from neither illness nor hunger. But this same knowledge, "My son killed your son," if it was known

would excuse Jarvis (by custom if not by law) for taking vengeance. And thus, though the parson has the knowledge which Jarvis *desires*, in the contact zone, even knowledge (especially this knowledge) is not enough power for the parson to not be *afraid*. And he will not answer, and his silence, though not given and taken as defiance, has the same effect. Jarvis is undone by the parson's silence; Jarvis needs something that only this old Zulu can give.

Despite Jarvis' reassurance, "You need not be in fear of me," the old man is afraid, and he puts Jarvis off. Finally, Jarvis takes another stance in the contact zone, partly colonial master to underling and partly priest to penitent, he commands the parson to confess, "Tell me, it will lighten you." The parson repeats, "I am afraid" to which Jarvis promises (with a promise more like a god than a priest), "you need not be afraid. I shall not be angry. There will be no anger in me against you."

The parson finally confesses "It was my son that killed your son." And rather than retaliating, Jarvis confesses in return that which he had already promised, "I have heard you . . . There is no anger in me." Now the two men appear to have stumbled onto on equal footing in this contact zone. The knowledge is out there and it will not be used as an excuse for harm or even anger. Instead, the heaviness that is between them is turned to a shared loss through the old man's vague memories of the brightness that was in a much younger Arthur riding through the valley.

In Book 3, near the conclusion of the novel, the two men meet once again. It is the night before Absalom's execution and Kumalo has set out into the mountains on a vigil. He comes upon Jarvis (who may have been looking for him). This time there is a more complex set of power differentials between the two. Each of their stories has changed, so the counterpoint

between them has changed also. Familiarly, Kumalo is afoot while Jarvis is on horseback. But while they are on unequal footing materially, Kumalo is in a more advantageous relational space because in the ensuing time, Jarvis' tragedy has continued to experience more loss even as Kumalo has experienced some growth in his family. Jarvis' wife has died and his daughter-in-law and grandson have moved back to Johannesburg whereas Kumalo has his wife, a nephew and a daughter-in-law (with a grandchild on the way).

Jarvis has become a silent benefactor to Kumalo's parish not so much out of guilt but in appreciation, "I have seen a man who was in darkness till you found¹⁷ him. If that is what you do, I give it willingly (CTBC 307)."¹⁸ In their meeting he offers the plans for the promised new church in the valley, charging Kumalo: "You will know what to do." Kumalo is *shocked* and *frightened*¹⁹ when Jarvis freely shares that he will be moving to Johannesburg, but Jarvis quickly reassures, "I shall be often here."²⁰

Referring to Arthur's son, who also has come riding in the valley, Jarvis asks, "You know the small boy?" Kumalo answers, "Indeed, I know him." And then Jarvis asks Kumalo if he remembers Arthur when he too was a small boy. And in a short space reminiscent of their encounter in Johannesburg, Kumalo again has knowledge which Jarvis needs to know and Kumalo "though he did not well remember, said, I remember." The two men are silent for a

¹⁷Another counterpoint is revealed: in Chapter 25, Jarvis starts by thinking he has found an old man and ends the narrative realizing that the old man found him.

¹⁸Hereafter, parenthetical notes will be left out as the rest of Chapter 36 is read chronologically.

¹⁹What will they do without their benefactor?

²⁰For some this would be a threat, but for Kumalo it is a promise.

spell, made somewhat more equal by the sense of shared memory and the appreciation of the brightness that was in Arthur and also in Arthur's son.

The silence is broken by Jarvis' question, "Where are you going at this hour?" Kumalo is now *embarrassed* but he answers, "Into the mountain" and *stammers* for more. Jarvis replies with *compassion*, "I understand you . . . *completely*." The old man weeps at this reply, and it is now Jarvis who is embarrassed, but even now custom will not let Jarvis come down from his horse and instead Jarvis remains and extends his hand from that position of power and declares, "Here is something that is only begun. And while I live it will continue." Jarvis' incapacity to do that which is not lightly done, means that the two men begin to return to more familiar roles, colonizer and colonized, and this will be the constant temptation of their relationship. Jarvis' 'repayment' will easily be interpreted as paternalism even by Jarvis and Kumalo. This uncovers another reason that Jarvis has to move to Johannesburg. He can only remain decentred by staying at the periphery, maintain distance and developing a level of disinterest that will allow his resources to be disbursed with fewer strings attached.

The old man implores, "Do not go before I have thanked you." Jarvis seizes the opportunity to make the situation more equal, and suggests that any good that he is doing in the valley is only because of the greater work that he has seen the priest do. And either because of the deepness of the relationship that had developed or a newfound courage in Kumalo, he compliments Jarvis, "of all the white men that I have ever known—" and the reader is left to fill it in, "you are the whitest of the white, Jarvis" or "you are the least white, Jarvis." Jarvis brushes it off and their conversation ends the way so many conversations end in the book, "Go well, go well."

Kumalo has been changed by his time in the contact zones. Kumalo survives the first contact zone of the city because of his affiliation with the Anglican Church. While some post-colonial writings might dismiss ministers like Kumalo as a collaborator, helping to spread European imperialism, Kumalo would see his own story differently.²¹ Kumalo cannot see the complicity of Christendom in the colonizing of Africa, but he can see how his Christian brothers and sisters in Johannesburg (both African and white) have given him a moral and material support that was not found elsewhere. He has been reconciled to his son and has experienced an unbounded grace and acceptance from his own congregation.

The contact zone with Jarvis was fraught with danger for Kumalo. Though artless in the contact zone, Kumalo more than survives, he actually helps Jarvis move to a state of helplessness that cements Jarvis' own conversion. This conversion, along with the cooperation and compassion shared by Jarvis and Kumalo moves beyond paternalism to a place of mutuality that while not sustainable in a post-colonial setting might be a realistic depiction of one path toward decolonization. Kumalo is now surrounded by the larger family common to other Zulus, he has received the endorsement of his congregation and he has developed a new found assertiveness. It is these things, even more than the material support from Jarvis that will give Kumalo a new capacity to make a positive difference in his parish.

²¹Ramachandra argues that when free of religious nationalism, "Christian conversion gives [dominated or overwhelmed groups] a sense of dignity and self-worth and empowers them to break free from subordination" (Ramachandra 2005, 488).

Bibliography

- Barnard, R. (2006). "Oprah's Paton, or South Africa and the Globalization of Suffering." *Safundi* 7:1–21.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. (2010). *Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country*. New York: Infobase.
- Canagarajah, A. Suresh (1997). "Safe Houses in the Contact Zone: Coping Strategies of African-American Students in the Academy." *College Composition and Communication* 48:173-196.
- Hogan, Patrick Colm (1992). "Paternalism, Ideology, and Ideological Critique: Teaching "Cry, the Beloved Country." *College Literature* 19/20:206-210.
- Lirola, M. M. (2007). "Exploring the Relationship Between Paton's Ideology and His Context." *LiCus* 2:101-112.
- McClintock, Anne (1995). Chapter 9. "Azikwelwa" (We will not ride): Cultural resistance in the desperate decades. In *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* (pp. 239-351). New York: Routledge.
- Pratt, Mary Louise (1991). "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* 91:33-40. New York.
- Ramachandra, Vinoth (2005). "Global Religious Transformations, Political Vision and Christian Witness." *International Review of Mission* 94:477-492.
- Samuelson, M. (2008). "The urban palimpsest: Re-presenting Sophiatown." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 44:63–75.
- van der Vlies, Andrew (2006). "'Local' Writing, 'Global' Reading, and the Demands of the 'Canon': the Case of Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country", *South African Historical Journal*, 55:1,20-32.