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Third World meets first World: The theme of 'Jim Comes to Joburg' in South African English Fiction

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to trace some of the extent and the implications of what is popularly known as the ’Jim Comes to Joburg’ theme in South African English fiction. This description, which became a catchphrase in the literary history after the release of a film of the same title in the late 1940s, has loosely been used to categorise works which are essentially concerned with the rural black man's encounter with the white controlled industrialised city. Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country of 1948 — which is still today the most-read single work by any South African writer — is certainly the best-known example to deal with this type of material; part of my purpose is to describe the literary context in which it arose, and how, fair from being a ‘first’, it significantly altered a debate in the fiction which had been strenuously under way for half a century.

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Third World Meets First World: The Theme of 'Jim Comes to Joburg' in South African English Fiction

The purpose of this paper is to trace some of the extent and the implications of what is popularly known as the 'Jim Comes to Joburg' theme in South African English fiction. This description, which became a catchphrase in the literary history after the release of a film of the same title in the late 1940s, has loosely been used to categorise works which are essentially concerned with the rural black man's encounter with the white-controlled industrialised city. Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* of 1948 — which is still today the most-read single work by any South African writer — is certainly the best-known example to deal with this type of material; part of my purpose is to describe the literary context in which it arose, and how, far from being a 'first', it significantly altered a debate in the fiction which had been strenuously under way for half a century.

In literature Johannesburg has always received a controversial, mixed and often bitter press. Consider the implications of its demography: one hundred and fifty years ago the area was part of Mzilikazi's Riemland, a well-treed, big-game hunting zone which supplied meat and hides; one hundred years ago, a cleared ridge of veld pasture was occupied by cattle and sheep, with a land-holding population of a few dozen Boer farmers whose chief occupation was the supply of livestock and green produce to the markets of Pretoria, some 80 kms. to the north. Just over the Vaal River in the South African Republic, controlled by President Kruger and his Volsraad, the territory had been annexed by the British from Natal Colony, and abandoned as economically unviable just before 1886. But after the British left, prospectors who had moved from the diamond bonanza of Kimberley in the Cape discovered what became known as the richest goldfields in the world, along the Ridge of White Waters — to be exact, beneath the widow Petronella Oosthuizen's farm at Langlaagte.
The change of way of life which ensued was, like everything else in Johannesburg's brief story, to be dramatically rapid and exaggerated, taking on proportions which, even in our modern world of mass population flows, seem unbelievable, even wondrous. By its first census, ten years on, in 1896, a population of 102,000 was recorded, and for our purposes the significant feature is that half that population was black. Ninety years later — today, that is — the black population of a black satellite area of Johannesburg like Soweto is over 1 ½ million. It is the story of that sizeable migration from the rural areas to the industrial nexus that the 'Jim Comes to Joburg' works tell. From a set of statistics like that one knows immediately that most of the literature will record not only how 'Jim comes to Joburg', but why he stays there; we are talking about the saga of several million people who, within a period of only three generations, have transformed their lifestyle — or have had it transformed for them — in previously unimaginable ways. It has been the burden of the 'Jim Comes to Joburg' chroniclers to record this, to make the event be felt imaginatively as one of the main experiences of modern South African life.

Without being too schematic about it, the evidence in the literature is that the saga falls into four main historical phases, as follows:

i. The first blacks came to Johannesburg following an adaptation of the practices employed for raising farm-labourers; that is, as contract workers recruited in the rural areas for limited terms to provide manual labour, this time on the mines. Following this arrangement the system of compounding arose, with its dormitory accommodation on mine property.

ii. Other blacks on the Rand found employment in domestic jobs, or in the industrial or service sectors, residing in their vicinity of employment. This second phase gave rise to shanties on white plots, landlordism and the system of rack-renting in the city centre and its close suburbs, like Doornfontein to the east and Vrededorp to the west, and ultimately the phase of townships in the sky atop city skyscrapers; it also gave rise to distinctive slumyard cultures, the characteristics of which were poly-ethnic, providing the 'melting pot' lifestyle which is much celebrated in the literature.

iii. The third phase, the passing of which is much mourned in the literature, is the freehold situation, evident until the 1950s in townships such as the Sophiatown complex, and today partially evident in
Alexandra, in which black freehold rights were secured by leasehold

tenure. In 1950, as a result of a renewed influx into the city of people
illegally in search of work, thanks to the World War II industrial
boom, the suburbs of Sophiatown contained 40,000 people on 1,700
plots, while Alexandra held 98,000 — half of the families occupying
one room each.

iv. The fourth phase, which through a number of systematic legal acts,
like the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 and the Native Resettle-
ment Act of 1954, often undertaken in the name of health regulations
or of ‘urban renewal’, has overtaken the previous phases, resulting
in urban segregation and the removal of blacks to what are now
known as townships, Soweto, some 20 kms. outside Johannesburg,
being the most famous and largest of them all. These are racially
determined ghettos which exclude the black population from
residence within the city limits, huge dormitory complexes in which
leasehold rights have only recently been re-established, leaving the
central business district ‘white by night’, and the black population
subject to administration boards and superintendents.

To these four phases of the demographics of Johannesburg a fifth
should perhaps be added — that of illegal squatting, which is a feature
throughout the saga, and strongly dramatised in Paton’s work in the
Shanty Town sequence, which in real life involved 20,000 dispossessed
rural people living in 250 shelters made of packing cases and hessian — it
was then one of eleven squatter camps containing in 1943-44 some
90,000 people. A further comment is that I do not mean to imply
anything like a neat developmental model, for phase one — the
compound phase — is still in use, phase two persists (usually illegally) in
some pockets, phase three is returning in a new guise, albeit in a com-
pletely controlled geography, and so on. And one point on which the
literature is emphatic, anyway, is on how Jim, once he is in Joburg,
ever stops learning how to beat the system. No control, all the writers
agree, works quite in the way intended, although this broad pattern of
population management is indeed in evidence as a background to all the
literature.¹

The first literary work to tell the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ story in prose
fiction is a great and neglected one — perhaps the most conscientious in
the range of its concerns and the scrupulousness with which it probes the
mechanics of the system which causes the saga. It is Douglas Blackburn’s
*Leaven: A Black and White Story*, published in 1908, but dealing with the
pre-Second Anglo-Boer War 1890s. Blackburn’s novel connects with the previous phase of South African English literature, that of the British Imperial romance, and his intention is to swing the South African novel away from the adventure of exploration of darkest Africa into the new mode of satirical, materialist realism. This is tackled quite schematically: we now have a book which begins in darkest Africa (Bulalie’s family’s Native reserve in idyllic Natal) and propels its questing hero in the reverse direction to that taken by Allan Quatermain et al. What drew the British outward bound was hidden treasure; for Bulalie it is a concertina, better than a mouth-organ, symbols of the lure of civilisation. Blackburn invites his urbanised readership to enjoy a new type of adventure, one more apt for his times, one which leads from Africa into the heart of their darkness.

The stages of Bulalie’s progress are these. First, he is a parricide, and in fleeing his home valley and the magistrate’s office, is lured into a Natal roadgang. The process is hardly voluntary, for there was in Natal, in Blackburn’s words, a

law which provides that the native chief who occupies a small slice of the land taken from him by his white masters may continue to live on it if, among other tributes and services, he supplies a certain amount of labour for the public roads. The Natal government is careful to explain that the servitude is not obligatory, for the native ‘called out’ has perfect freedom of contract. He has the alternative choice of working for three months with pick and shovel on the roads for tenpence per diem or for an equal or longer period in preparing road material in the local jail for mealie pap and free water.

The second stage is domestic service in Pietermaritzburg, with its pass regulations and 9.00 p.m. curfew for blacks, where he earns £1.0.0 a month as a ‘kitchen boy and general factotum’ (p. 101) in a boarding-house. This episode ends in a Black Peril scare, during which the innocent Bulalie is sentenced to three years and 23 lashes for attempted rape, the victim of his scheming employer, Mrs Hopgood, who defrauds him of his earnings. Even before Bulalie reaches his great goal, he is jailed, and sjambokked senseless.

The third episode features his encounter with the other major character of the work, the missionary priest, the Rev David Hyslop, newly out from England, and known through Natal as ‘the Kaffir disintegrator’, this in retaliation on the part of the labour-hungry colonists averse to his gospel of equality and fraternity, particularly in respect of equal pay for equal work. Bulalie, an escaped convict, now lives under Hyslop as his only convert, submitting to Christianity in exchange for shelter from the law.
The fourth episode features an event which is not elsewhere recorded in the literature — the occurrence of blackbirding, or illegal labour recruitment, by which Bulalie is smuggled across the Natal border, impressed in a lot of 50, purchased by the mines at £2.0.0 a head. Here is this expert slave-dealer, Weldon, at a wayside canteen en route:

He made a little speech while the boys fed, consisting of well turned Zulu phrases depicting the joys awaiting the weary pilgrims in the City of Delight, Johannesburg. Puza, first; money, more puza; skoff (food), unlimited skoff, with sheep meat, bullock meat, every day; puza all day. Intombis (girls). Then fights with Basutos, Shangaans — dogs of every tribe whose heads they could break with their kerries — dogs who could not throw an assegai, or knobkerrie. A kafir paradise!

He repeated the paean with judicious variations, flourished his sjambok, made cuts and thrusts, stamped his foot and uttered old tribal war cries, till the boys, their mouths bulging with baking-powder-inflated bread, took up the cries and hailed him Inkoos! (Chief).

Weldon had not lied when he boasted that he knew kafirs. He did know them, their weakness, their docility, their credulity and their easily stirred enthusiasms. (pp. 201-2)

In Blackburn the entry into Johannesburg is unremarkable, unlike the later works where it is always a watershed experience. Bulalie simply moves into yet another wicked colonial institution, where there are 'compound managers who have saved a hundred pounds a month out of their salary of forty or fifty; but that has necessitated very strict, almost grinding economy and self-denial' (p. 206). On the mine Bulalie receives 53/- a month and this is his response to Johannesburg city: ‘Wonder on wonder, in the streets of Johannesburg men and women as plenty as mealie stalks in a big garden, and in the shops — ow! That is the only word that described them — ow! drawn out long and lingeringly through the fingers held over the mouth’ (pp. 217-8). To which Blackburn adds the comment:

He neither knew nor cared to know that the conditions amid which he lived were unique, abnormal; that they represented only the sordid, brutal side of the white man’s civilisation, as unlike the phase of existence the philanthropist imagines when he talks of civilising the native as the London viewed through the atmosphere of an East-End slum is like the city of luxury and refinement pictured by the romantic village maiden with the aid of a ‘high-life’ novel. (p. 218)

Blackburn’s low-life novel then proceeds to demonstrate how readily Bulalie learns to survive and, indeed, prosper, avoiding the eye of the ‘Protector of Natives’, an official appointed by the mines specifically to curtail abuses. There are three — and the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ works are unanimous on these — illicit liquor-running, extortionate money-

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lending and gambling, and prostitution. In collusion with his shift-boss, Bulalie the 'boss-boy' and mine policeman becomes a skilful entrepreneur in all three, multiplying his meagre wages ten-fold.

Hyslop, the recipient of his ill-gotten gains, finally deserts his failed mission reserve and sets off with great expectations for Johannesburg; he is saved by Bulalie during a faction-fight, and in his place Bulalie is killed. The novel concludes that mindless violence, fomented with the multitudes of compound dwellers to let off steam, is encouraged along artificially maintained tribal lines to destroy the chance of their uniting in common cause against their crooked overlords. Blackburn's analytical indictment of the compound system concludes his record of a process of interlinked injustices, and the Johannesburg mines for him are only a further step in a British colonial system of labour management. There is no fuller record of labour relations in South African literature, at least up to that first phase of the black man's saga of Johannesburg life; and subsequent phases Blackburn could not foresee. Nevertheless, in the examination of class and crime, Blackburn was an extremely accomplished writer, and his _Leaven_ makes all the subsequent works seem gauche and naive in this respect.

The next full-scale work to tell the 'Jim Comes to Joburg' story is W.C. Scully's _Daniel Vananda_ of 1923. Subtitled _The Life Story of a Human Being_, Scully's work has one intention — to exemplify this thesis:

That the Native is being demoralised and degraded morally and physically, is literally and awfully true. This is apparent to any unbiassed observer on the outskirts of any city or large town where the Bantu congregate — in the slums of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth and in the locations controlled by the godly and British City of Grahamstown, where the death-rate has been over fifty per thousand. It is most terribly apparent in and around Johannesburg, where the Bantu population averages some 200,000, more than nine-tenths of which are males. Most of these people left their homes in a state of comparative innocence; they usually return postgraduates in some of the worst forms of vice. ³

Scully remarks further:

This degradation — this exploitation — have not been effected of set purpose; they are more the result of ignorance — of lack of imagination than of malice prepense. They are probably due to the essential infirmity of human nature, and afford an additional illustration of the truth of Hazlitt's principle: — that no one people is fit to be entrusted with authority over another, and that any relation falling short of equality between two races occupying a given area, leads to what is practically the enslavement of the one by the other. And if history teaches anything it is this: that in the final result the enslaver is more accursed than the enslaved. (p. vii)
The lesson given in Scully’s document is lengthy and leisurely, showing a black case-history in the person of Vananda, nicknamed Daniel who, with the breaking of the Eastern Province tribes, moves to a mission education, petty crime in King Williams Town, a spell as a tenant farmer under a good land-owner, a trick played on him by a bad black policeman, a broken marriage — and then, for the penultimate chapter, Johannesburg. He travels in the bare train: ‘At length they reached the Rand ... without whose output of lubricating gold the axles of those wheels which drive the mill of the world’s commerce might long since have burnt at their bearings and fallen into ruin’ (pp. 187-8). These wheels are literal, those of a mineshaft headgear. Daniel ‘stepped into an iron box, which clonked down and down into the murky depths’ (pp. 189-90) — and his descent into hell is complete.

In his after-hours Daniel meets the big three — gambling, ‘nameless vices’ (p. 192) and brandy; there is a rockfall, which renders Daniel lame; worst of all, there is miner’s phthisis, the wasting lung disease, which stalks the underground galleries of the mine and its hospitals, and which Daniel contracts. Scully is the only novelist to deal with this aspect of the hazards of deep-level mining in detail. In the end Daniel is to die of phthisis, dumped in his home valley on his hands and knees, unable to breathe and uncompensated.

But Daniel has a streetwise half-section friend, as most of the main characters in the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ series have — he is the actual ‘Jim’ of the novel, Jim Coki, a ‘huxter’ (p. 199), employed by a Chinese laundry in the service sector. Daniel, in effect, escapes from phase one to phase two life, from the compound to the slumyard, by breaking his contract. In livery as a domestic servant, he lives off one Mrs Flotov, a financier’s wife in Joubert Park. Jim, incidentally, makes some of his income as a gigolo to bored, white housewives (and Scully is the only writer to mention this possibility), but Daniel falls foul of Mrs Flotov, an unjust Black Peril trial ensues, and he escapes to ‘a galvanised iron warren close to the Ferreira mine’ (p. 207) in which cubicles are rented for two pounds per month. As Scully would have it, ‘He was now one of the many victims marked for immolation in the pit beneath the out-stretched palms of Moloch’ (p. 216).

Melodramatic and overstated though Scully’s method is, his work gives an early illustration of the curiously unracial feeling of Johannesburg in the 1920s. In the slumyards blacks and whites (usually non-British) cohabit, and charity among thieves is the norm. But, unlike Jim Coki, Daniel is no profiteering rogue; the former survives like a picaresque hero, the latter merely succumbs — is reduced to jetsam — and
returns to a ruined ancestral home to die before his youth has ended. Scully is indignant that such cynical reduction of men’s lives should exist, but the reader backs Jim Coki as the character to come.

The third work in this series — although its author, lacking a scrupulous sense of literary origins, was given to puffing the notion that it was the first — is William Plomer’s *Ula Masondo*, a novella first published in the collection *I Speak of Africa* in 1927. Here the story is briskly and deftly told, with a certain daring of style — Plomer is the first, and one of the very few, to give his ‘Jim’ some interior monologue, so that the effect of the work is less documentary, more intimate. *Ula Masondo* is coterminous with his novel of the same period, *Turbott Wolfe* — it, too, begins in Lembuland — so that it extends Plomer’s personal cosmography. Like all Plomer’s Lembus (Zulus), Ula Masondo is immensely appealing physically, and it is his vanity which is stressed — he leaves his family kraal in an expensive, beautifully woven blanket, and returns on the Kaffir Mail as a ‘prodigal Bantu dandy’, as follows:

Ula Masondo was wearing as many of his best clothes as he could. The rest were contained in a suitcase of plum-coloured cardboard embossed to look like leather, which he carried in a hand resplendent with cheap rings. He was perched on high-heeled shoes which made him look as if he was standing on tip-toe. He wore voluminous tweed trousers fastened at the ankle with a buckle, and a wide scarf of purple silk under his coat.  

Plomer’s novella illustrates the colonial policy which is discussed in Blackburn and Scully, as well, the ‘gospel of forcing the native to work by fostering a desire for the luxuries and trivialities of civilisation’ (*Leaven*, p. 4). Thus the work is framed by conversation in a Lembuland ‘Native’ store, where the white trader encourages Ula’s extravagance, while at the same time deprecating the way in acquiring trashy knick-knacks he, in fact, sells out his own birthright and his family. When Ula returns to Lembuland, he denies his mother as being uncivilised in the ways of the world, which leads to her suicide and the dissolution of the clan.

Here is Ula’s first sight of Johannesburg:

The passengers crowded to the window to see these peaks ... a dump as big as a hill, quite near, rising sheer and white from the ground, with tiny trucks running along the top ... on the other side of it the steel and iron and stone of the mine buildings stood drab and stern, bitter citadels of unreasoning industry....

Dirty children were playing in a donga; they could be heard stirring with a stick among old tins in an ashpit. Some women were drinking tea on a veranda.... A native was playing a concertina.... Rows of gaudy posters on a hoarding ran past as if on wheels....

‘Here’s an omen,’ said Ula Masondo, who knew what he felt but not what he meant. (pp. 55-6)
And in Plomer there is one image of privilege and wealth that resonates through the series from here on: Ula ‘saw a grey motor-car gliding down an avenue of gum trees to the manager’s office, and catching the sun between the shadows. A white borzoi dog was sitting at the back, and its long snout gave it a stupid and puzzled expression’ (p. 57). There it is, at once the pampered pet of white class, and its vicious watch-dog.

Ula is befriended by a skebenga or ‘boss-boy’, Vilakazi, who pampers him and — by now the pattern is established — introduces him to gambling (the first of many three-card tricks), liquor (methylated spirits sold illegally at the price of French brandy), and women, specifically Emma, ‘who lived with a white man during the week and supported him by her earnings from black men on Sundays’ (p. 58). Vilakazi is a confidence trickster, and literate; he falsifies Ula’s letters from home to read as if all were well there, whereas the truth is that the Masondo family has been reduced by drought, erosion and disease in Lembuland to depend on trading store credit and on Ula’s earnings. Plomer also introduces a new factor into the story, appropriate to the 1920s: the matter of amalaita gangs, formed in secret prison brotherhoods. Ula, Vilakazi, Emma and their associates spend their off-hours in the mine-dumps, avoiding the gangs, and as in most of the series from here on crime is no longer laid at the white man’s door, but at the door of an intermediate criminal class who so screen our ‘Jim’ from the white world that he is never really to see that it exists. They drink meths, fight, and the lonely mission bell rings over the industrial wasteland unheeded.

There is a rockfall underground, and Ula is entombed. While he is asphyxiating, Plomer releases the interior monologue which is one of the most memorable features of the work: it is an invitation to the reader to share some of the beauties of precontact rural life, which gives the work a sense of lost glory, doom and despair. Although Plomer sees the tribe is broken — and indeed illustrates how this occurs — this Edenic nostalgia for a lost paradise merely underscores the inadequacies of the alternative. Ula is rescued, takes to crime to clear his debts, and eventually flees home with Emma; she is pregnant with another man’s child which she will dump in Lembuland before returning to her career. In the brief time Ula has been away, a canteen has been established near the station in his valley, and it is to this that he repairs. We last see him dancing: ‘His earrings were swinging and the streamers of pink wool at his wrist were describing flying curves in the air’ (p. 80).

After Plomer’s work, in 1931, comes the first in the series by a black African, R.R.R. Dhlomo — it is a novella entitled An African Tragedy,
published by the Lovedale Press. If Johannesburg has had a bad image to date, now meet Sodom and Gomorrah. *An African Tragedy* was intended to sound a call that our Jim thus far has not heard — that of the church as a redeemer and rescuer in this situation, set to reverse the drain from the tribal areas to the big city, and to preserve the rural character in harmonious, traditional familial productivity. In common with many other calls of ‘back to the land’, Dhlomo’s tone is monitory and his tactics are polemical, pamphleteering. Hence, the lurid portraiture in *An African Tragedy*, and its shocked sense of outrage. Hence, also, its dedication: ‘To all those who have not found God’s all in all this story — the humble effort of my inspiration — is with my innermost and fervent feelings dedicated!’

Dhlomo’s ‘Jim’, Robert Zulu, is no adolescent tribal youth wanting to find his fortune and sow his wild oats; he is a teacher in a village school who cannot raise sufficient money to pay lobola for his intended bride, Miss Jane Nhlanzeko. So he sets off for ‘the most unreliable city of Johannesburg’ (p. 1). He falls in with a bad companion, John, into drink, ‘faithless women’ and ‘gullible mine boys’ (p. 5). And, in Johannesburg, Robert himself hands Dhlomo his story, so that, for the first time, we have a participatory narrator, one who recounts the tale not as ‘fiction’, but (supposedly) as living testimony. And Dhlomo’s motive is new, too: ‘For after all is said and done what is the use of trying to unite our people when their offspring wallow in the mud — so to speak?’ (pp. 6-7).

The rest follows swiftly: Dhlomo introduces a skokiaan queen, a figure who dominates from here on, and much of the feel of being black in Johannesburg — segregated trams, curfews, exemption certificates, illiterate, crooked black policemen, and the Blantyres, Malawian gangsters who in Dhlomo’s version are even more immoral than indigenous ones. Robert evades a murder rap and Marshall Square, where most other heroes reside for lengthy periods, but it is the alcohol which gets him. And syphilis.

When he returns home to purchase Jane’s hand, it is the syphilis he bequeathes her; their first-born dies of what is euphemistically called ‘ophthalmia’, and Robert dies, too, after a spree of seducing the wives and daughters of his community, beaten to death by the sober, God-fearing parishioners who do not accept his city ways. With his death, the drought breaks and Dhlomo concludes that ‘God moves in a mysterious way...’ (p. 40).

The message and the impact of another work in the series is similar, although the presentation is less bald — in Frank Brownlee’s novel, *Cattle*
Thief, of 1929. Although this work predates Dhlomo’s by two years, it belongs in spirit to a later phase which, while it has the same intention of spreading the message of ‘back to the land’, has gone past the Christian motivation for this. Brownlee is intent to argue a case that ‘back to the land’ is not only morally correct but, in the end, more profitable for ‘Jim’, when ironically it was to be the very Depression which succeeded the work which gave the rural areas their strongest reasons yet to move to the cities for bare survival.

Brownlee’s work is subtitled The Story of Ntsukumbini, and it is he who (supposedly) tells his own story through the agency of Brownlee, who visits him, chapter by chapter — a man in his seventies in the Transkeian Native Territories, one who has ‘through courage and determination’ maintained his ‘tribal entity’. The work is a magically beautiful and persuasive one; by now labour recruitment is regularised, mine conditions relatively safe and healthy and, as Ntsukumbini talks, the next generation of strapping youths is excitedly taking off for their initiation into manhood — not in the mountains and forests, but in the famous mines. The work makes clear that this, as a wage-earning method, is preferable to working on whites’ farms, an opinion endorsed unanimously by the works to follow.

Ntsukumbini recounts the financial lessons he has to learn with great wit. He, too, is forced to entrain for Johannesburg because of a prospective father-in-law’s extortionate dowry demands: ‘The journey to the mines was long and confusing, but we managed to reach there safely. I said the first thing we must do was to buy spades and dig for ourselves; why should we work for any master and give him the gold’ (p. 120). Instantly Ntsukumbini’s team is conned — by a Zulu ‘foreman’, who gives his name as Kumalo and who promises them employment for a bribe, ‘If we would meet him the next day at the same spot ... he would meantime have arranged everything for us. Nkosi [he says to Brownlee], I am still looking for that man’ (p. 121).

Then the descent, the rockfall and — this time a twist — a loutish, white shift-boss named Jim. Brownlee is being tongue-in-cheek here, reversing the ‘Jim’ appellation for ironic effect. When Ntsukumbini rescues Jim in the rockfall, the latter has this line to deliver: ‘You may be a damned black nigger, but you are a white right through’ (p. 129). Such are the techniques of an author who prefers his fictional mouthpiece to his increasingly colour-conscious readers. Ntsukumbini is the first to escape Johannesburg unscathed, leaving the city behind where the ‘white men ... seemed to be tired of looking at black people’ (p. 124).

The great ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ novel set in the 1920s — and here
one may merely speculate — seems never to have been completed. It is Herman Charles Bosman’s *Johannesburg, Christmas Eve*, abandoned shortly before his death in 1951. A fragment of it survives, published posthumously as the short story, ‘Jim Fish’, in which Bosman intends to pursue every possible irony derived from his character’s by now traditional nickname:

He was an African from a kraal in the Waterberg, and he had not been in Johannesburg very long. His name was Mletshwa Kusane. That was his name in the kraal in the Waterberg. In Johannesburg he was known as Jim Fish. That name stood on his pass, too.

In those days a black man didn’t mind what sort of ‘working name’ he adopted. He had not come to Johannesburg to stay, anyway. At least that was what he hoped. And while he stayed in the city, saving up money as fast as he could to take back to the farm with him, he didn’t particularly care what name his employer chose to bestow on him, provided that his employer handed over his wages with due regularity on pay day.

This Jim’s employer owns a bakery, in the back yard of which Jim lives, so that ‘he received back as rent a not inconsiderable part of his employees’ emoluments’.

Afterwards [Bosman continues], when Johannesburg took on more of the external characteristics of a city, the owner of the bakery was to find that this arrangement did not pay him so well, any more.

For the city council began introducing all sorts of finicky by-laws relating to hygiene. In no time they brought in a regulation making it illegal for the owner of a bakery to accommodate his black servants on the bakery premises. The result was that, at a time when business wasn’t so good, the owner of the bakery found himself with a municipal health inspector on his pay-roll. Afterwards it was two health inspectors. (p. 142)

Had Bosman been able to sustain this vein of satire we would at least have had another first — a ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ novel written from within Johannesburg, with an intimate knowledge of the city and its history. For, up to this point, the city itself has been more symbolic than real.

The same is true of the next work, and after Paton’s it is probably the best known of the series. First published in 1946, and thereafter as No 6 of the Heinemann African Writers Series, Peter Abrahams’ *Mine Boy* has remained continually in print. Set back from its date of publication in the 1930s and almost entirely located in the Malay Camp of the Vrededorp (second phase) development of the city, *Mine Boy* is the first of the series to raise some hint of a mine-worker beginning to take his destiny into his own hands — and in a significant way. On the mines Abrahams’ hero,
Xuma, has an influential friend, but this time he is a white miner, Paddy O'Shea, nicknamed the Red One. In the final sequence, when a rockfall causes the death of their fellow workers, O'Shea orders a spontaneous strike; in sympathy with his friend, ostensibly his boss, Xuma chooses to go to jail as a strike organiser, and thus the spirit of revolt is translated into a united gesture of defiance, and immediately imprisoned.

But this incident is merely the tail-end of a novel that is not very carefully organised to announce this new direction. For the most part, Xuma from the north is our orthodox hero, falling foul of the standard items. Most of *Mine Boy* illustrates how, left homeless in the north by his mother's death, he finds a surrogate mother in Leah, an older friend in Johannes the induna, an impossible love in the teacher, Eliza, and a true love in Maisie. Xuma has also emphatically come to stay, and after the standard newcomer's adventures he finds himself at home in Malay Camp, with its drunken brawls, Saturday night bioscopes, pass raids and police chases.

As Leah instructs him:

Listen to me Xuma. I will try to make you understand. In the city it is like this: all the time you are fighting. Fighting. Fighting! When you are asleep and when you are awake. And you look only after yourself. If you do not you are finished. If you are soft everyone will spit on your face. They will rob you and cheat you and betray you. So, to live here, you must be hard. Hard as a stone. And money is your best friend. With money you can buy a policeman. With money you can buy somebody to go to jail for you.... It may be good, it may be bad, but there it is. And to live one must see it. Where you come from it isn't so. But here it is so.8

Tough, also, is the labour itself; Xuma's first day on shift is a tour-de-force description (pp. 66-8) of men of prowess being reduced to mindless machines. 'So it went on...' is Abrahams' devastating refrain.

At this point in the 'Jim Comes to Joburg' story we reach Paton's novel, though in *Cry, the Beloved Country* the Jim of our theme is hardly like the foregoing gallery of proletarian country bumpkins, what Nadine Gordimer aptly calls the Dick Whittington figures of African fiction.9 Paton's main character is the elderly black priest, Rev Stephen Kumalo. Kumalo is a new character in the saga, one whose 'Jims' have already left the Ixopo hills — his brother John (into politics), his sister Gertrude (into shebeening), and his son Absalom (into housebreaking). Thus we now have an innovation that probably accounts for the novel's immense success — put simply, Paton's readers can now identify with his hero in a way that might not have been possible had he made John, Gertrude or Absalom the bearers of the tale.
And as for our ‘Jim’, in Paton he hardly appears, or if he does Kumalo treats him with uneasy scorn. Here is Kumalo’s train departure:

Kumalo climbed into the carriage for non-Europeans, already full of the humbler people of his race, some with strange assortments of European garments, some with blankets over their strange assortment.... The day was warm, and the smell strong in the carriage. But Kumalo was a humble man, and did not much care. They saw his clerical collar, and moved up to make room for the umfundisi. He looked around, hoping there might be someone with whom he could talk, but there was no one who appeared of that class.10

Now, in Paton’s story, it is Kumalo who is the novitiate, not the mine-workers.

— There is the wheel, umfundisi. There is the wheel.
A great iron structure reaching into the air, and a great wheel above it, going so fast that the spokes play tricks with the sight. Great buildings, and steam blowing out of pipes, and men hurrying about. A great white hill, and an endless procession of trucks climbing upon it, high up in the air. On the ground, motor-cars, lorries, buses, one great confusion.
— Is this Johannesburg? he asks.
But they laugh confidently. Old hands some of them are....
— Johannesburg, umfundisi.
He sees great high buildings. They go on and off. Water comes out of a bottle, till the glass is full. Then the lights go out. And when they come on again, lo the bottle is full and upright, and the glass is empty. And there goes the bottle over again. Black and white, it says, black and white, though it is red and green. It is too much to understand. (pp. 16-17)

This amazed naivety — ‘It is too much to understand’ — persists throughout Cry, the Beloved Country, so that one almost wishes for the rapid disabuses of the earlier works, in which the careers of figures like John, Gertrude and Absalom would be considered triumphant successes over adversity rather than morally questionable lapses into compromise and sin. Paton’s mode is reformist and his motive is to prove, as Rev Theophilus Msimangu says, that ‘The tragedy is not that things are broken. The tragedy is that they are not mended again’ (p. 25). With memorable vividness, Paton proceeds to demonstrate this, revealing a Johannesburg condition to the world which might not have heard of it before, but which would certainly hear of it again.

Looking back at Cry, the Beloved Country now, from the perspective of thirty-seven years on, it remains memorable for its portrayal of the Sophiatown complex and the third phase of Johannesburg black residence, of resilience and poetic appeal. Out of that milieu in the 50s was to
arise the work of the black ‘Sophiatown renaissance’, the school of jazzy, fast-talking city-slickers, published most notably in *Drum* magazine, which found a readership among the urbanised black population. In Paton’s work there is little evidence that this was becoming possible.

Nor does Paton exhibit much of the economic base of the sociological plight of the people Kumalo encounters. When the narrative collapses into an impassioned appeal to — of all people — Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, whom one would have thought part of the cause of the problem rather than part of its solution, Paton’s fiction becomes too transparent. Nor does the novel foresee that once British capital is taken over to a large extent by Afrikaner nationalism in the same year (1948), the freehold areas in which a new urban African personality was forming were simply to be razed to the ground. With Sophiatown forcibly removed to Soweto, a new phase begins for which Paton’s world can offer only sentiment and holiness.

Nevertheless, Paton’s legacy is immense. It promised that vision of a new sunrise that was not to be seen yet, and which many readers would see as the coming of a new, just dispensation which through brotherhood and toil would release the black man from enslavement. Everyone after Paton writes in the lea of this promise.

Then, in 1953, comes *Blanket Boy’s Moon*, in many ways the most frank of the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ works. Written by Peter Lanham, based on an original story by A.S. Mopeli-Paulus, the novel is the first to be written set in National Party times, and also the first to present a convincing history from below. ‘...when a Mosotho leaves his beloved Lesotho for the first time to travel to the Union, it is, for him, what it would be for a white man suddenly by black magic to be flown to the moon’ — hence the title. Blanket boys themselves have received a standard press in the story — they are the butts of practical jokes galore at the hands of other blacks, admired by whites for their stately aloofness. But this blanket boy, Monare, is a new figure; he is already married back home so that the plot is not a quest for dowry story, but hinges on the necessity for him to maintain his domestic circle.

Then we have it all. The recruitment, the memorable first journey on the Kaffir Mail, the wise friend, Koto, the mine disaster. But Monare’s stay in Johannesburg, which occupies only the first quarter of the narrative, is really about leaving the labourer class for street-trading, hawking. This upward social mobility from work unit into salesman of home-made trousers corresponds to leaving the compounds for a tenancy in the freehold areas; in the former he is a mine policeman, and in the latter he falls foul of the civil police with predictable reliability. These worlds are a
matter of a few miles apart, too, Third World and First World, a bus-ride between them in the civic sprawl.

*Blanket Boy’s Moon* is also more astute on the mechanics of oppression, for it is the first work fully to explain how white power co-opts black strength into the process of suppressing other blacks. The police are pervasive here, and it is black detectives and spies who arrest Monare, on the grounds of drinking white man’s liquor, but really for entering the clothing market in legal competition. Late night raids by Afrikaner policemen making their first appearance, torture, forced confessions now enter the saga as features of normal procedure; tsotsis with narrow-bottomed trousers are also introduced. So are more intimate sexual matters, as the breaking of families is highlighted. As Monare’s cell-mate says:

‘...best off are those African men or women who work as house-servants; for sometimes the white Baas will allow a man’s wife to live with him in the quarters in exchange for her labour in the washing of clothes. And if the woman is employed in the house, sometimes is her husband permitted to sleep with her, should he agree to cut the white man’s grass and wash his car.’

The two men lay silent for a while.

Monare then said, somewhat diffidently: ‘Yes, boys, or the friendship of the hand — these are what many of us Africans are reduced to. Yet the truth is that this friendship of boys leads one to a lonely path in the end. There is little chance of living in such a manner in the homeland.’

His cell-mate laughed again.

‘Women, boys — I have tried them all.... But this companionship of boys is against the white man’s law. Should you see your Orlando Moruti again ask him how the white man can condemn us for a crime which they themselves have forced on us by separating us from our families...’ (p. 36)

Thus the personal dilemma of the migrant labourer and the adult ‘Jim’s’ enforced polygamy, with the arrival of the second family in town. This is not the case with Monare, in point of fact, but the single-sex hostel system dates from here in the chronology.

Dating from 1960, Sharpeville and the State of Emergency on the Rand comes a novel which contains all the structural violence of what has become the characteristic image of apartheid South Africa. Not published until 1979, it is Athol Fugard’s thriller, *Tsotsi*. The action plays out in the week of the demolition of Sophiatown — the images of power are now bulldozers, police dogs, whistles, over which toll the mournful bells of Father Huddleston’s naught-for-your-comfort church and social centre. *Tsotsi* is almost totally given over to urban violence — gang-wars, racketeering, muggings on crowded trains — the sharpened bicycle spoke shoved into the living tissue of the heart.
For our purposes *Tsotsi* is especially interesting for it is one of the last works to use the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ story in the version with which we are familiar, although now it is a concealed part of a far larger panorama — in fact, only pp. 9-12 of the Penguin edition. Fugard’s ‘Jim’ is Gumboot Dhlamini, murdered on the 5.49 train (always ten minutes late), and throughout the rest of the novel he is literally a dead man. And in the final sequence he is buried in a desolate, unmarked graveyard, unattended, and unidentified by all except the reader.

In *Tsotsi* this early trope of the South African novel is laid to rest as well, because the focus in the fiction now shifts dramatically. In post-Sharpeville there seems no room left for the comedy of manners that centred on a naive come to town; there are no more gaping clowns set to be mildly ripped off in educative adventures. The picaresque exploits of rapscallions are now over; we are into life-and-death manoeuvres, organised crime, and wholesale criminal violations of human dignity. Tsotsi himself is the new hero; born in a slumyard, an ashpit scavenger — one of those twilight children Ula Masondo saw from the train a quarter of a century before. Above all, the South African novel that deals with urbanism can no longer treat Johannesburg as a strange, new phenomenon, as most of its characters are now born there and living there — its history is now their past.

But in an adapted form the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ theme survives effectively enough; after all, many Johannesburg workers do support families in the rural areas, though no longer as courtiers and spouses, but as children or grandchildren. For the Johannesburg nexus the homelands are no longer such reservoirs of labour as holding grounds in which surplus populations, the retired and the unemployable, are maintained or to which they are returned after a working life. Such is the situation in Es’kia (Ezekiel) Mphahlele’s novella *Mrs Plum*, first published in 1967 in his collection *In Corner B and Other Stories*.

As Norman Hodge has suggested, *Mrs Plum* is a ‘Jane Comes to Joburg’ work, for Jane is the ‘working name’ of Mphahlele’s heroine. Her real name, however, is Karabo, and Mphahlele makes significant play out of names as identities Karabo recalls:

> I must remember never to say *boy* again when I talk about a man. This makes me think of a day during the first few weeks in Mrs Plum’s house. I was talking about Dick her garden man and I said ‘garden boy’. And she says to me she says Stop talking about a ‘boy’, Karabo. Now listen here, she says, You Africans must learn to speak properly about each other. And she says White people won’t talk kindly about you if you look down upon each other.

> I say to her I say Madam, I learned the word from white people who know
nothing, just low-class whites. I say to her I say I thought white people know every-
thing.
She said, You'll learn my girl and you must start in this house, hear? She left me
there thinking, my mind mixed up.
I learned. I grew up.13

In Mphahlele's version of the story there is a Jim, slipped in for the
amusement of those in the know — he is the boyfriend of Mrs Plum’s
daughter, a white. But Karabo’s story of her relationships in the
domestic service arrangement is hardly just one of sly in-references;
rather, it is an imitation of a black woman’s hesitant, faltering and proud
monologue, an expression of learning to come to terms with the
Johannesburg world that is her only option. Mphahlele is witheringly
satirical of white liberal pretensions to achieving a ‘fair deal’ for blacks;
Mrs Plum’s Black Sash-type protests are seriously contradicted by the
actual home situation. Dogs are the pervasive symbol — loved pets,
pampered protectors, and all the strays that have wandered through the
series seem to coalesce in Mrs Plum’s revoltingly privileged Monty and
Malan. Karabo’s status is weighed besides that of these symbols of
decadent middle-class luxury, and in the ‘maids and madams’ relation-
ship the comparison works with devastating effect.

But Karabo’s lesson in how to bargain with the system, achieve self-
help, self-education, despite her remaining a dependent figure, unpro-
tected in the workplace and without the most basic rights, sets the tone
for much urban black writing to come. For Karabo facing Johannesburg
is her only way through to a life better than a dog’s, and she is there
really because dependent on her are the relatives in a now non-viable
‘homeland’. Her story is the story of many millions of people, who had to
come to Joburg, and had to stay. The railway bus connects her with her
origins, but her life begins at the terminus where thousands of work-
seekers and commuters mingle in the modern metropolis.

The ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ strain in the South African novel stops
here in the late 60s as a recognisable, pristine form. Its chief movement
— the first step taken from a pre-industrial rural world to an industrial-
is ing urban one — is no longer a dominant experience in South African
life as a whole, and thus the magnificent works that reflected it are no
longer felt to be of urgent interest.

The interface between these two worlds, which I have rather facilely
called a Third World-First World encounter, cuts no longer between so-
called ‘civilised’ whites and so-called ‘precivilised’ blacks. Even
Blackburn at the start of the trail showed that neither side was particu-
larly entitled to claim any particular virtue, and innocence disabused is
not likely to endure where the learners are as skilful and masterful as those in this series. And with urban sophistication, the fiction that deals with the black experience has grown up, too. We have come a long way from Sol T. Plaatje's hero's lament in *Mhudi* of 1930, addressed to the white reader: 'Give back the palmy days of our early felicity/ Away from the hurly-burly of your city'...\(^{14}\)

In a work like *The Marabi Dance*, first published in 1973, the writer, Modikwe Dikobe, turns a modern perspective back on the Doornfontein slumyard culture of the 30s, revealing an attitude to knowing urban survival which would have been inconceivable to Scully or Abrahams, for example. In her *The Collector of Treasures* of 1977 Bessie Head examines the ripple effect of industrial labour practices developed in the City of Gold moving back outwards to the tribal areas across the border in Botswana, showing how the process of societal transformation on the Rand has spread its tentacles throughout Southern Africa. Stocktaking of this, the major socio-economic event in the subcontinent's recent history, is indeed unending.

To conclude, I can find only one further work of fiction which consciously uses the 'Jim Comes to Joburg' formula and which expects the reader to know it through allusion to it in the tide — it is Mbulelo Mzamane's short story, 'My Cousin Comes to Joburg', the first in a sequence called *Mzala*. The new tone is knowing, even world-weary, and the point of view is of a gleeful belonger, a 'township kid' precocious in worldly wisdom beyond his years:

My cousin, Jola, comes from Tsolo in the Transkei. He has the stature of an adult gorilla and walks with his arms flung far out and his hands curving in, like a cowboy ready to draw. He has a protruding chest which seems to lead him wherever he goes. Overall, he gives the impression of a well-constructed tower. He can carry both our rubbish bins, full, with the ease and dignity of an educated man carrying a newspaper. His is not the delicate walking-cane amble of office workers who walk for relaxation, but the easy gait of one to whom walking is as customary as it is necessary.

He's been in the city for years now. But there was a time when he was as green and raw as a cabbage.\(^ {15}\)

But he's been in the city for many years now — and his name is no longer 'Jim'. As Mbuyiseni Mtshali writes in his poem, 'The Watchman's Blues', the name is now 'not John or Jim/ but Makhubalo Magudulela'.\(^ {16}\) Origins, identities, in black consciousness days, are reasserted; assumed names are rejected.

In Mzamane's story, ripe with nostalgia, sharp with comedy, the perspective has utterly changed. The past may be reviewed, not as an
instructive document for the present, but as a tale told by the extended family of ‘Jim’s’ descendants, those wise enough to inherit the very City of Gold he built with the strength of his arm.

NOTES

1. I am particularly indebted to Deborah M. Hart, *South African Literature and Johannesburg’s Black Urban Townships*, M.A. dissertation (unpublished), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1984, for information about Johannesburg. No other Southern African city seems to have caused such fiction; the only exception is Salisbury-Harare, as reflected in Doris Lessing’s novella, *Hunger* (1953).