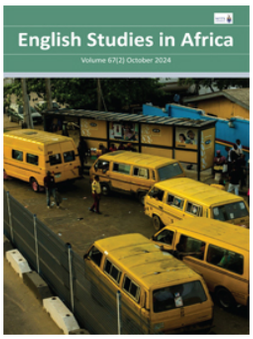

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The Arrival from Abroad: Train Travel and Mobile Ideas of Race in Pre-Apartheid South African Literature

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies and explores an inciting incident in two pre-apartheid South African novels: the trope of an 'arrival from abroad'. This trope centres on a character arriving by train from a place figured as foreign, whether that is Cape Town or London, to the rural South African setting of the story, bringing ideas of interracial togetherness with them that challenge local racial hierarchizations. Two novels are used as case studies, one from the beginning of the 20th century – Perceval Gibbon's *Margaret Harding* (1911) – and one written on the eve of apartheid – Peter Abrahams's *The Path of Thunder* (1948). The traveller from abroad is either a black South African who has been educated in Europe or Cape Town and arrives home to effect change, or the traveller is a white character from Europe whose values are pitted against those of white South Africans. In both cases, the 'arrival from abroad' is a destabilizing force to the local community, bringing often unwelcome ideas from outside. Together, Gibbon's and Abrahams's novels allow me to explore the interrelations between the mobility of ideas from one place to another, ideologies of race, the figure of the outsider, and train travel in South African literature from the first half of the 20th century. Comparing Gibbon and Abrahams enables me to trace differences and continuities over time and in diverse uses of the trope. This article argues that the 'arrival from abroad' trope is used to embody a notion of mobile ideas at a time when trains served to shift both goods and people to radical effect on society.

KEYWORDS

arrival from abroad; interracial relations; mobility of ideas; Perceval Gibbon's *Margaret Harding*; Peter Abrahams's *Path of Thunder*; South Africa; train

Introduction

An inciting incident to the plot of some pre-apartheid novels is the arrival by train of a character from the outside, usually Cape Town or the UK, to the rural South African setting of the story. I call this the 'arrival from abroad' trope – a locally specific iteration of 'a stranger comes to town'. This outsider brings new and sometimes unwelcome ideas, introducing modernity to a remote place or smaller town. This can be seen in the two novels analyzed in this article: Perceval Gibbon's *Margaret Harding* (1911)[1] and Peter Abrahams's *Path of Thunder* (1948).

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The mobilities of ideas have not received the same amount of attention as the mobilities of people and things (Cresswell; Kallis). All three are, however, firmly linked because the mobility of ideas is frequently furthered by the mobility of things and people, especially in a historical context before modern communication technologies (Kallis 201–202). In fact, the human geographer Tim Cresswell calls for more scholarly attention to the history of the movements of ideas. He also encourages researchers to use a wider variety of methodologies to investigate the history of the mobility of ideas. Cresswell does not refer to creative writing; however, fiction allows us to explore how humans have imagined the transport of ideas through travel and the mobilities of people. The 'arrival from abroad' trope is a clear example of such imaginings, where the railway facilitates the mobilities of not just people but also of ideas.

In this article, I use a novel from the beginning of the 20th century – Gibbon's *Margaret Harding* – and one written on the eve of apartheid – Abrahams's *The Path of Thunder* – as case studies. In these novels, the 'arrival from abroad' trope is exploited to broach ideas of race, particularly interracial relations, which disrupt the community in the local South African space.[2] Through Gibbon's and Abrahams's novels, I explore the interrelations between the transfer of ideas from one place to another, ideologies of race, the character of the outsider, and train travel in South African literature from the first half of the 20th century. Comparing Gibbon and Abrahams enables me to trace differences and continuities across time and in diverse uses of the trope, and to argue that the 'arrival from abroad' trope is marshalled to embody a notion of mobile ideas at a time when trains served to shift both goods and people to radical effect on society.

Trains in South African Literature: Moving People and Ideas

In literature, a train usually signifies more than the movement of people from one place to another. It functions as a metaphor or a symbol, often as 'a contradictory symbol of both modern anxiety and potential freedom' (Spalding and Fraser x). In the first half of the 20th century, physical human travel could of course be facilitated by other means of transport than the train. There are instances of the 'arrival from abroad' trope in early South African literature where the foreigner does not arrive to the rural locale by train, but by some other mode of transport such as the ox-wagon. In Pauline Smith's *The Beadle* (1926), Englishman Henry Nind arrives with the post-cart to wreak havoc in the small Afrikaans community of Little Karoo through his ideas of sexual relations across the perceived racial barriers between Afrikaner and English. The use of the train, however, strengthens the trope's ambivalent relationship to modernity. Ox-carts and post-carts recall South African historical mobilities, particularly of the so-called *voortrekkers*,[3] while 'trains are an expression of the cultural project of modernity' (Spalding and Fraser x) linked to colonialism, industrialization, urbanization, worker mobility, and civilization. The train has played a prominent role in South African literature from the 19th century to the present, in poetry, short stories, and song. Novels have generally not centred on the train, but they might incorporate scenes with trains in significant ways, as is the case with Gibbon's and Abrahams's novels. Accordingly, scholarship has mainly focused on the train in poetry and short stories (Alvarez; Gunne; Jones; Wright 'Iron'; Wright 'Express'; Wright *Stimela*), leaving novelistic texts about trains somewhat neglected (excepting Gunne; M. Wade). To place the 'arrival from abroad' trope in context, it is

worth exploring how trains have been imagined throughout South African literary history and what ideas or ideologies have been associated with representations thereof.

From the earliest depiction of the train in South African literature onwards, a great deal of focus has been on it as mover of people – whether colonizers or workers – and as mover of ideologies and ideas, such as civilization discourses or discourses around modernity and protest. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the train was mainly depicted in writings by white South Africans. Poetry and travel writing described the Cape-to-Rand train journey, for instance Dorothea Fairbridge's *A Pilgrims Way in South Africa*, Cullen Gouldbury's 'Rhodes's Dream', and Lance Fallaw's 'From the Cape to Cairo' (see Foster; Wright, *Stimela*). Poetry also thematized the role of the train during the South African War (1899–1902); examples include Rudyard Kipling's 'Bridge-guard in the Karoo' and John Runcie's 'Crossing the Hex Mountains' (see Wright, *Stimela*). This literature linked the train to imperial, industrializing, and urbanizing ambitions, particularly in relation to colonial expansion, the claiming of space, and mineral mining. This early, chiefly white writing often treats the train as a symbol focused on its capacity to carry colonialists who bring imperial ideas of civilization.

More romantic visions were also employed in early South African writing depicting train travel. Poetry and travel writing connected observations of the passing landscape with philosophical reflection (Foster; Wright 'Intro'), often linked to colonial ideas (Foster). The power of the locomotive was idealized through poems praising it or lamenting the death of the steam train (Wright, 'Intro'). The former is accomplished in older poems like B.W. Vilakazi's 'Woza Nonjinjikazi' ('Come! Monster of steel') or praise-poetry such as Demetrius Segooa's 'The Train' (translated from Sesotho), which centres on the strength and power of the train (Wright, 'Intro'). Poetry mourning the steam train is also 'about the passing of a way of life' as can be seen in Don Maclennan's 'Lament of the Locomotives' (Wright, 'Intro' 7). As Peter Merrington notes in a review of Laurence Wright's impressive volume *Stimela: Railway Poems of South Africa* (2008), '[t]he popular imagination that has shaped itself in response to rail travel and the phenomenon of the great steam locomotive seems fundamental to twentieth-century society' (116).

Praise of the power of the train comes with an awareness of its damaging role in modernity, especially in writings by black South Africans. Wright describes how Segooa's and, in particular, Vilakazi's poetry register the role of the train in labour migration and the destruction of rural and traditional ways of life ('Intro'). Examples of liberal write writing in which the train 'assumes the status of a portent' also exist (M. Wade 77). Here, the train often serves to assemble disparate communities in South African society only to show how separated they are; 'this may be read as a liberal critique of the historical forces of industrialization which are embodied in the train as symbol' (M. Wade 80). Michael Wade highlights Gibbon's *Margaret Harding* as a significant text in this regard and Gibbon as possibly 'in the vanguard' of such critique (80).

During apartheid, earlier connotations of the train with industrialization and the mobility of black labour in service of white capital intensified. Now literature turned to more directly commenting on how the train facilitated spatial segregation, and to record and formulate protest against this. A particular concentration on the train as a motif in literature and other cultural products accumulates around black writing from the 1970s-1980s and focuses on the dual function of the train as furthering oppression by moving people across segregated landscapes – thus facilitating racial separation and capitalism – and as providing a space and serving as a symbol for resistance and liberation (Alvarez; Barnard;

Gibson; Jones; Wright, 'Express'; 'Iron'). Therefore, Wright notes, 'the train as a representation of political momentum, an icon of mass mobilisation and social solidarity, has been widely accepted in popular culture for many years' ('Express' 2).

The commuter train in literature has received by far the most scholarly attention; critics have written about its role in facilitating South African mining, industrialization, modernization, and apartheid's racial segregation through its daily transport of black labourers from townships to the centres of work (Alvarez; Barnard; Jones; M. Wade; Wright, 'Express'; 'Iron'). Apartheid protest poetry as a genre has particularly employed the train in such critique, for example Mafika Gwala's 'The Train is Coming', T. Mseleku's 'The TransBophuta-Venda Bomber Express', or Mongane Wally Serote's 'Third World Express'. The short story has also focused on the train's role in expediting apartheid, with notable examples being Nadine Gordimer's 'The Train from Rhodesia', Can Themba's 'The Dube Train', and Mbulelo Mzamane's 'Dube Train Revisited'.

Apart from the commuter train, Sorcha Gunne identifies the long-distance train as significant for 'narrative representations of the train and its social and cultural implications' in South African literature (150). The long-distance train fulfils a role in bringing black labour from rural areas to the cities, particularly in relation to mine labour. Additionally, it facilitates travel from South Africa into exile (Gunne 150–153, 167). The focus on the 'arrival from abroad' trope engages the long-distance train in a function that remains somewhat understudied, namely the train as transport for the individual traveller from the city to the rural place during the pre-apartheid period, and how this journey is employed in relation to the mobility of ideas of race.

A continuity is noticeable, then, in literary depictions of the train's involvement with industrialization, the transport of labour from the rural space to the city, the consequent transfer of modernity between places, and its effect on traditional culture. This can be seen in the so-called 'Jim Comes to Joburg' trope, which tells of a young black man's entry into the corrupting city (Gray 61). Classic examples are R. R. R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy*, Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy*, published two years before *The Path of Thunder*, but there are also more recent versions of this story, such as Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, where the train's role in the narrative has been replaced by minibus taxis, more symbolically relevant for the 21st century.

In scholarship on South African literature, the train as the mover of ideas has so far been understood primarily through its function as a space and container for passengers who come together or apart around ideas, ideologies, or power struggles. As literature and other cultural products have investigated different aspects of the daily commuting experience (especially during apartheid), from the forming of religious community in the photography of Santu Mofokeng's 'Train Churches' (Alvarez) to threats of sexual violence in Miriam Tlali's short story 'Fudu-u-u-a!' (Alvarez; Gunne), the mobility of ideas has been connected to the complexities of community formed on the train itself. In this article, I focus explicitly and specifically on how the train has functioned in literary depictions as a facilitator of the mobility of ideas from the urban to the rural space through the individual – even lone – traveller. Hitherto, ideas of race have not been extensively discussed in relation to how the travel of ideas has been facilitated by the railway. The focus on the train as enabling the mobility of ideas of race is therefore a necessary extension of and complementation to the scholarly attention on how ideas of colonization and civilization travelled with the railway in pre-apartheid literature. Finally, a comparative

angle will allow me to investigate the development of the 'arrival from abroad' trope over time, from early Union literature to writing published on the cusp of apartheid.

The 'Arrival from Abroad' in *Margaret Harding*: Crossing Between Worlds

The train features only marginally in Gibbon's *Margaret Harding*, as providing the way in and out of the rural Karoo setting of the story (a semi-desert area in South Africa stretching between the Western, Eastern, and Northern Cape Provinces), yet it serves a crucial role in how it moves people from the urban to the rural space. It is hence 'of great structural importance' to the narrative (M. Wade 78). The train is depicted only in the second chapter, when the local Afrikaans-English 17-year-old farmboy Paul goes to the train station, no more than a country siding, to pick up the eponymous character Margaret, a young, white, upper-middle-class woman arriving from England to spend time recuperating at a sanatorium in the Karoo. The train comes back indirectly throughout the novel, most significantly in the last chapter, when Margaret prepares to leave the Karoo and South Africa. The train thus facilitates arrivals and departures. In the introduction to the 1983 reprint, P. D. Williams argues that '*Margaret Harding* is not a novel of travel, concerned with journeying for its own sake. The microcosm of Sanatorium-farm-veld remains a constant stage for the action' (vii). Honing in on the train shifts focus from location to movement and, crucially, to the connections between places that mobilities enable.

The train in movement serves to reinforce both a connection and a juxtaposition between the Karoo setting and the world beyond it. Paul is the initial focalizer, and when he drives up to the station in horse-cart to collect Margaret, his thoughts dwell on the train. The Karoo is a familiar, even quasi-familial place that Paul 'knew … in all its aspects for a neighbour' (1). The travellers on the trains passing by, however, reveal the Karoo's place in the larger world as they merely 'giv[e] a perfunctory glace to the Karoo which Paul knew as the world' (12). Paul is aware of the insignificance of the Karoo, and consequently of the allure of other places; the trains passing by 'were linked in his mind with the names of strange, distant cities', 'freighted with the romance of far travel' (12). These faraway places, and the passengers arriving from and going there, are in Paul's mind unknowable and maybe even not entirely real: the trains present 'mystery of windows lighted dimly through drawn curtains' (13) with passengers 'arriving from the void on one hand and bound for the void on the other' (13). The train as a mobile entity connects the local, material, and real Karoo with the fantasy of other worlds of the city and beyond.

Two characters interrupt this dichotomy by arriving from the unknowable – the South African city, and further beyond, England – to the Karoo and then getting off the train to stay, thus bringing the faraway into the rural space: Margaret and Kamis, the son of a then so-called native South African chief executed by the British colonial forces, who was taken to England as a child and educated to become a doctor and is now arriving back to help educate black South Africans. It is immediately clear that Kamis and Margaret are different from the local people. Paul tells Margaret that 'nobody like you ever came here before, ever. They always went on in the train' (23). He describes her as a 'marvel', 'wonderful', 'foreign' and with the 'appearance of enlightened virginity' and sees her arrival as signifying a miracle: '[t]he slow dawn was suddenly magical, and the stillness was the hush that attends miracles' (21). When Paul first meets Kamis during his trip to the station, he addresses Kamis 'in the "Kitchen Kafir" of his everyday commerce with natives' (14),[4]

but quickly realizes that Kamis is different from the black men he is used to: Kamis 'was a man with properties even stranger than his speaking English' (15). A shepherd has previously described Kamis as mad to Paul, which invests Kamis with characteristics of an oracle: 'Paul was not very clear as to what it meant to be mad, beyond that it enabled one to see things unseen by the sane' (15). Kamis is, indeed, represented as a 'quasi-messianic figure' (Williams xiii). Margaret and Kamis, arrivals from 'abroad', are positioned in the narrative as miracle and oracle – bringers of inconceivable wisdom, truth, and action.

Margaret and Kamis carry with them progressive ideas about racial relations. The reader is made to understand that Kamis's so-called madness, as perceived by the shepherd, lies in him going against expectations placed on black men at the time and place in question. Kamis does not accept ideas of racial inferiority, insisting on a friendship with Margaret, who he meets through Paul, on a role as a secret art tutor to the uneducated but artistically inclined Paul, and as a doctor attempting to help the local populations. Williams describes Kamis as a 'mythological figure', a 'theoretical construct', a 'figure-head and a plot-manipulator' (xiv), and speculates that Gibbon created such a virtuous and perfect character that intervenes in key moments in the plot but is not given 'the portrayal of an inner world together with the claims of an outer world' (xv) to 'present a denatured, deracinated black' (xiv). Kamis needs to carry the burden of representation to convince the potentially unconvinced colonial or British reader that black people in South Africa deserve rights, and that racial hierarchy is a false idea.[5]

If Kamis represents the 'perfect black person', Margaret is the fierce but moral champion of the oppressed. Williams characterizes her as part of 'a long line of British women, actual and fictional, who refuse to bow to public opinion and external pressures as they champion the cause of moral principle and justice, and support the oppressed and the underdog' (xvii). Margaret serves to demonstrate why relations across racial boundaries are perfectly acceptable and natural, and why they should be the future of South Africa. As Stewart has argued, Gibbon sees South Africa's future in 'a resolution of racial conflict' (107). Margaret's friendship with Kamis is portrayed in a non-threatening light, built on a 'Hobhousian sense of mercy, her recognition of him as a person, her feeling of pity … for his plight, and her outraged sense of justice for the privations he has needlessly had to suffer' (Williams xvii). Thus, the novel thematically centres on racial hierarchization and prejudice and relations across racial boundaries.

At the time of the publication of *Margaret Harding*, one of the most prominent racist fears about relations across perceived racial boundaries was the spectre of 'miscegenation', whose problem 'to the racialist mind' was 'the sexual act between white and non-white' and the '"coloured" population in which it resulted' (Blair 583). It is in this context that Gibbon carefully plays around with the sexual component of interracial relations. As Peter Blair points out, sex between a white woman and a black man had been banned in 1902, so an erotic scenario between Kamis and Margaret would have been 'not only taboo, but illicit' (590). This potential only hovers in the background of the story, remaining unfulfilled, but it is nevertheless over the case of a white woman who has married a black man that Margaret chooses to most explicitly argue against racial hierarchization and Social Darwinism, used by her fellow white patients at the sanatorium to condemn the marriage. Gibbon 'becomes one of the first writers in South Africa to transcend the ideology of Social Darwinism implicit in most colonialist fiction', something he does both through 'the opinions expressed by the characters in *Margaret*

Harding and in the substance of the plot itself' (Stewart 104). Margaret serves as the novel's moral compass; as soon as she is introduced in the narrative at the railway station, hers is the most consistent and prominent point of view in the novel, and her 'consciousness has a comprehensiveness, an "ultimate concern" about the coil of events and their moral implications' (Williams xvi).

Progressive ideas of race are, then, invested in characters that are outsiders. It is Kamis's and Margaret's foreignness to the local setting that enables them to embody these ideas, and their arrival by train brings these ideas to the rural locale. There are characters in the novel who have immigrated from England and who express conservative racist views, but they are depicted as having largely become part of the local environment. England is suggested to be the source of progressive attitudes: Kamis has attained his education there, and Margaret is portrayed as the 'epitome of Anglo-Saxon beauty, grace and femininity, the Rose of England' (Williams xvi).

For most of the rural characters in the novel, however, the 'arrival from abroad' could come from any city or foreign place. There are many instances in the text where Cape Town and London, and even England, are confused for each other, as in the scene where the character Bailey describes Cape Town, and Mrs. du Preez, even though she is originally from London, asks if he is speaking about England (173). Cape Town also serves as an extension of England through the ships that connect the two. Kamis retells his experiences of racism and xenophobia in Cape Town: a story that starts already on the ship from England, and he then draws parallels between the Thames Embankment in London and the jetty at the end of Adderley Street in Cape Town, further merging the two places (76–78). By blending the cities, Gibbon highlights that they are equally foreign for the Karoo population, and he also shows how the colonial extends from England to Cape Town, by ship, and then with the help of the railway further into South Africa's hinterland. The presence of racist white South Africans on the England-Cape Town ship, however, also intimates that a particular brand of South African racism is radiating out from the veld to beyond South Africa.

This outsider perspective on race is needed in the narrative because it is suggested that it is too hard to imagine breaking the colour barrier from within. The South African mindset is shown to be too entrenched in Social Darwinist and segregationist thinking. The novel continuously clarifies that South Africa – particularly its white population – suffers from a pronounced anxiety around race: 'There is an instinct in the South African which makes him conscious, in his dim, short-sighted way, that over against him there looms the passive, irreconcilable power of the black races' (68) – an unknowable force enclosing the Karoo. Black South Africans, conversely, are shown to suffer from such an internalized sense of racial inferiority that they cannot accept Kamis as an educated black man who speaks English. Kamis comments that 'I knew well before I left England that I should have difficulties with the whites, but I hadn't allowed for practically the same difficulties with the blacks' (78). Paul is the only character internal to the Karoo landscape who befriends Kamis and does not seem to have explicit racist ideas, but he is positioned as an outsider: 'On the Karoo, people said of him that he was "old-fashioned"; one word is as good as another when folk understand each other. The point was, that it was necessary to find some term to set Paul apart from themselves' (20). Despite his outsider status, Paul does not have the necessary knowledge and perspective to formulate an anti-racist ideology. He is portrayed as childlike and innocent, and therefore naïve of the

workings of society. This is shown when he tells a white policeman that Kamis is his friend, with no idea of the consequences such a statement from a white boy might have for Kamis. Paul needs the 'imported' ideas from the 'imports' Kamis and Margaret to inform his reactions and shape an ideological understanding concerning race.

In this tension between the 'arrival from abroad' and the local community, the train station serves as a mediating place, or as Gibbon writes, 'for Paul it had the significance of a threshold' (12). M. Wade argues that the train station in fiction is 'the only trope powerful enough to assemble the microcosm' of disparate people of the racially stratified early 20th century South African society, but the railway is a 'dualistic' trope that 'brings together … only to set apart' (78). This is conveyed in Gibbon's description of the country siding:

> Within the station there was the usual expectant group under the dim lamps, the two or three men who attended to the tank, a Cape Mounted Policeman, spurred and trim, and a few others, besides the half-dozen or so mute and timid Kafirs who lounged at the end of the platform. (13)

Beyond assembling the racial microcosmos of South Africa and setting out its separations, the station is a threshold between the city and the countryside that, through the train, grants access to another world of racial togetherness and ideology: 'Upon the brink of that world of which the station was a door, he [Paul] had encountered a kindred spirit [in Kamis]' (16). Paul's 'alienation from his surroundings and his desire for escape' (M. Wade 77) is mediated through the train station as the purveyor of dreams.[6] The station is a concrete space anchoring clashes of ideologies mobilized by the train and its passengers, arriving from locations unknowable to the rural Karoo: 'the station lights were blurred like a luminous bead on the thread of railway that sliced without a curve from sky to sky' (12).

If the 'arrival from abroad' is a destabilising force to the local community, who brings new and unwelcome ideas about interracial relations from outside, *Margaret Harding* fudges the point that the transference of ideas is a two-way process, and that the train can serve to foster exchange in both directions. In investing progressive racial ideas in England, *Margaret Harding* is mostly blind to the role English colonialism played in instilling racialized ideas in South Africa, though its critique of white South Africans' racism and the racist ideas expressed by some characters immigrated from Europe implies some limited awareness. Furthermore, despite the clearly liberal attitudes that the novel conveys, it is still caught up in contradictory ideas about race. The novel is entrenched in ideas of race as biological and physical and assumes the inferiority of the black man in general due to his perceived physical characteristics. As Williams puts it, Gibbon 'senses his attitude is illogical and prejudiced, but throughout the book he will refer to black features in these terms [repugnance and revulsion]' (xi). *Margaret Harding* illustrates how '[f]or South Africa at large, railways have arguably been the most socially prominent, incisive, and powerful agency articulating the country's troubled and uneven accession to modernity' (Wright, 'Iron' 4).

The 'Arrival from Abroad' in *The Path of Thunder*: Merging Worlds

Abrahams's *The Path of Thunder* was published on the eve of apartheid, 37 years after *Margaret Harding*. A great deal has changed in the intervening years, and these changes are significant for how the 'arrival from abroad' trope is deployed. South Africa moved

further away from the UK, consolidating its sovereignty, and prominent laws curtailing black people's rights were introduced, including the Natives Land Acts 1913 and 1936, the Native Affairs Act 1920, the Native Urban Areas Act 1923, and the Immorality Act 1927, the latter prohibiting interracial sexual relations between black and white people outside of marriage. Fears of interracial sex played a key role in politics in the 1920s and 1930s. The 1929 election became known as the 'black peril' election, stirring up fears over black men sexually assaulting white women, and in the 1934 election D. F. Malan campaigned against so-called mixed marriages (Dubow 7). The National Party came to power the year *The Path of Thunder* was published, campaigning under the 'apartheid' slogan.

Despite the different contexts in which the two novels were published and the fact that they were written by authors from very different backgrounds (Abrahams a 'coloured' man born in South Africa,[7] Gibbon a white man born in Wales), there are striking similarities in how the texts use the trope of the 'arrival from abroad'. Like in *Margaret Harding*, the train hardly features in *The Path of Thunder*, appearing in the first two chapters only, and as a shadowy promise of escape in the final pages of the book. Still, the train serves as the integral device which brings the educated Lanny back from Cape Town to his rural Karoo home, Stilleveld, to enact change in the local poor 'coloured' community through education. The station, a 'little siding' (14), gathers, again, a microcosm of South African racialized society – although, as Richard Rive points out in the introduction to the novel, the rural valley becomes the primary 'symbolic microcosm of South Africa's segregated society' (v) – quickly establishing the racial hierarchization that rules in the rural Karoo: 'The ticket collector stared at him [Lanny], a cold hostile stare. And suddenly Lanny remembered. This was not Cape Town' (16). Here as well, the station symbolizes the threshold between the city and the rural areas, with the attendant racial ideologies: 'Remember, Lanny, he told himself, no social intercourse with white people here' (16). The train brings Lanny from Cape Town, and with Lanny come more liberal ideas of race and interracial interaction: '[h]e has brought his Cape Town manners with him' (16). As in *Margaret Harding*, any distinction between Cape Town and an undefined 'abroad' is minimal. Lanny remarks to himself when he has arrived at the station in the Karoo that 'this is South Africa' (17), and that Cape Town 'seemed as though it were in another world' (15). The two novels, thus, employ a very similar trope of the train as the conveyor of the 'arrival from abroad' who carries with him or her foreign ideas of race and interracial relations that disrupt local rural racial hierarchies and segregationist practices. In each novel, the station serves as the threshold between the two worlds, setting up the segregationist microcosm, introducing its disruption, and granting access to other worlds through its travellers.

However, the two texts also present significant differences. *The Path of Thunder* is written by a 'coloured' author, depicting the issues of interracial relations from the perspective of a 'coloured' character.[8] Where Kamis lacks interiority, Lanny's is the primary narrative perspective in *The Path of Thunder*. Through the use of a third-person narrator, access is also granted to the interiority of Lanny's secret girlfriend, Sarie, adopted daughter of the local white landowner. As such, *The Path of Thunder* depicts the interracial relationship from both parties' points of view, granting more agency to both. A larger measure of agency and equality in the relationship is also achieved because Lanny and Sarie are explicitly pursuing a love relationship based on mutual attraction, and not a friendship like Kamis and Margaret where potential sexual undertones are coded as coming primarily from Kamis, who gives Margaret flowers and kisses her hand.

As in *Margaret Harding*, in *The Path of Thunder*, Cape Town is constructed as foreign by contrasting it with the rural Karoo, presented as the true South Africa. However, England no longer features as the centre for education and liberal thought. Lanny was sent to be educated in Cape Town, and his ideas that challenge Stilleveld come from there. In fact, before Lanny disembarks in the Karoo in Chapter Two, he steps out of the train station in Cape Town in Chapter One, having deposited his suitcases for the impending trip. The reader is then treated to a description of how good Lanny's life in Cape Town has been, a city that has space for a thriving 'coloured' community, and where his friend Larry can bring 'his pretty Jewish girl, Rosa' to a party without any trouble (12); a sharp contrast to the hostile Cape Town that Kamis encounters. In *The Path of Thunder*, Cape Town is also much more clearly a concrete place that the train connects to the Karoo. While in Gibbon's novel the train arrives 'from the void' and is 'bound for the void' (13), the railway in *The Path of Thunder* explicitly leads to Cape Town: 'Behind him, and sloping down toward the sea and Cape Town, ran the railway line' (20). Despite the investment of liberal ideas on race *in* South Africa – Lanny is born in Stilleveld, educated in Cape Town, and influenced by a 'coloured' and mixed community in the city – freedom for Lanny and Sarie as a couple can, in an increasingly racially segregated and discriminatory South Africa, only be imagined abroad. As they prepare to escape in the final pages of the novel, they plan to take the train to Cape Town since '[f]rom there things will be easier' (224), and they envisage to continue on to 'Portuguese East Africa' to live freely (223). As a gateway to escaping abroad, Cape Town is still to some measure connected with the foreign, as opposed to the rural space that is imagined as the true South Africa. Nevertheless, enlightened England of colonial-era writing by the British subject Gibbon is supplanted by African enlightenment in the vision of the South African writer Abrahams. Ideas challenging racial prejudice move much more clearly between urban and rural South Africa, with no need to involve Britain – Cape Town is conceptually much closer to the Karoo than in *Margaret Harding*.

Building further on these ideas, Stilleveld, despite first appearances, is revealed to already contain the interracial desires that Lanny supposedly brings with him. The fact that a 'coloured' community is in focus raises the spectre of interracial sex (as pointed out by Blair). The 'coloured' community is carefully depicted as native to Stilleveld, 'the birthplace of a new people' (31). This 'birth' resulted from sex across racial boundaries between local as well as foreign people: 'a lonely farmer out on his farmland might see the beauty of the daughter of one of his natives, or it might even be the wife; of perhaps a friend visiting him from far-off Cape Town saw her; or just a white wanderer passing in search of fortune and a home … ' (31). This telling of history gestures towards the imbalanced power structures in these relations, if not to outright sexual assault. However, the novel also includes two consensual interracial sexual relationships that have played out in the past: one between the local 'coloured' man Sam and a local Afrikaner girl, Sarie (the namesake of Lanny's girlfriend), and the other between Lanny's mother and an Afrikaner man (setting up Lanny as the offspring of an interracial relation), who is also the father of the Afrikaner man whose adopted daughter Lanny now is a relation with. Lanny's sister Mabel also reveals to him that 'I have a white boy' (33), an Englishman on a temporary visit. These relations personalize interracial sex and desire and challenge the implication of the primary plot that interracial relations are an imported idea from the city.

In *The Path of Thunder*, the trope of the 'arrival from abroad' is reworked, influenced by changes in society and a different authorial perspective. Here, the trope is more attuned to the complex realities of the interaction between the rural and the urban and also aware of the material difficulties of black South Africans' free movement. Moreover, in *The Path of Thunder*, the trope of the 'arrival from abroad' is more anchored in South African viewpoints on racial relations, resisting the need to 'import' revolution, at least from the always already implicated ex-colonial power.

Conclusion: The 'Stickiness' of Ideas and People

The 'arrival from abroad' trope could be understood as a reverse 'Jim Comes to Joburg' trope. The differences are stark; for example, while the latter focuses on the experiences of black male characters who are often poor, the former foregrounds a set of characters who are all privileged in terms of education. Nevertheless, between the tropes there is a reversal of direction of travel from the urban to the rural, and instead of leaving poverty to seek fortune in the city the traveller brings prosperity acquired through education to the countryside, and modernity proves to be beneficial instead of destructive. Importantly, though, while the 'Jim Comes to Joburg' trope is chiefly concerned with the effect place has on character – the urban corrupts – the 'arrival from abroad' is primarily concerned with character's effect on place – the ideas that he or she brings with that change the local rural community.

The 'arrival from abroad' centres and investigates the notion that '[m]obilities of ideas are often driven by personal mobilities' (Kallis 201). *Margaret Harding* and *The Path of Thunder* approach the train in relation to the power of the individual differently than poets and writers of short stories, who focused on the role of the commuter train in racialized capitalist exploitation and segregation. Wright argues that what he calls the 'political or revolutionary metaphor' of the train in Southern African literature carries an emphasis on collectivity through its medium of 'mass transportation or mobilisation', and that through such a focus on a collective mobility the train comes to signify a 'powerful movement towards a new socio-political order' (*Express* 3). The 'arrival from abroad' trope focuses on change as located in an individual journeying by him or herself for a specific purpose, not mass mobilization through commuting. Here, the train is the conveyor of the lone traveller, breaking out from his or her community – at home and abroad – to ignite change somewhere else, single-handedly. Scholarship has largely focused on the labour migrant, a figure typical for colonial and apartheid literature, but has overlooked the lone traveller. Through the 'arrival from abroad' trope the train becomes a means for the individual to challenge and undermine the colonial project embodied in the rural space.

Kamis and Margaret are otherworldly truthsayers, an oracle and a purveyor of miracles, and although they come together, they are ultimately alone in their missions. Lanny is similarly alone in his return to Stilleveld to enact change in his local community. Locating revolutionary ideas in individuals means that change is fragile. *Margaret Harding* ends with both Kamis and Margaret leaving. Kamis goes to fulfil his mission of betterment by attending to an epidemic of smallpox 'among the natives in the Transkei' (315). Margaret goes back to London, as she was always destined to do, without getting too closely entangled in the local community and their issues. As Ford, another patient at the

sanatorium, tells her, '[y]ou're a bird of passage, just perching for a moment on your way through, and you mustn't eat the local worms' (96). Paul intimates that he will leave as well, although this remains an unfulfilled desire. M. Wade points out that the train can represent 'the transience of relationships within the microcosmic communities it brings into being' (80). As the characters advocating for change to segregationist racial ideologies and practices leave, how much actually changes in the local community? Reading *Margaret Harding* as political and didactic, change is meant for a potential reader who agrees with South Africa's ideas of racial hierarchization and separation.

The Path of Thunder ends with Lanny and his girlfriend Sarie both killed for their love before they can escape, by the white landowner Gert – Sarie's adopted uncle and, as it is revealed, Lanny's half-brother – and Viljoen, Gert's overseer. This tragic ending could be recovered into a 'ritual of catharsis' Jean-Philippe Wade reasons, drawing on J.M. Coetzee (J-P. Wade 69), who has argued in an essay on South African author Alex La Guma that 'love conquers evil through tragic suffering when such suffering is born witness to in art; its covert content is the apolitical doctrine that defeat can turn itself, by the twist of tragedy, into victory' (Coeztee qtd. in J-P. Wade 69). However, Jean-Philippe Wade contends that Abrahams's novel resists such an individualized liberal reading, a reading which *Margaret Harding* perhaps leaves open through the locals' resistance which breaks up the relationship of Margaret and Kamis. An epilogue where Lanny's and Sarie's deaths are blamed on Lanny in a newspaper report of 'a young Coloured teacher … run amok', who killed Sarie and several people before he could be 'finally … shot down' (241), prevents 'the possibility of whites reading the story in such a redemptive manner' (J-P. Wade 69). It also forces outside realities into the narrative the locals now self-consciously have to tell about themselves. As such, Lanny's threat to racial hierarchization and the oppression of black South Africans through his unwillingness to compromise in fulfilling his cross-racial romantic and sexual desires can still be read as having political implications: 'far from appeasing white fears, the educated Lanny is ironically seen as more of a threat because of his desires for the "many other things" which, in the South African context, are nothing less than radical demands' (J-P. Wade 63). However, the novel itself is in this reading pessimistic: 'the entire novel has argued that any individualising attempt at reconciliation (whether in the world of politics or in the reader's response) is bound to fail' (J-P. Wade 69).

When the train is not used as a medium of mass transport, the mobility of ideas becomes connected to only one person or two, and is thus much more vulnerable to that person's relation to her or his context. Discussing the mobility of ideas, Aristotle Kallis explains that the 'stickiness' of ideas, their ability to '"stick" or not in particular spatiotemporal settings' (205), 'relies both on at-tention (literally to stretch *towards*) and at-traction (to draw *together*) of human agents inside the local context to the idea' (206). While the progressive characters of *Margaret Harding* and *The Path of Thunder* – Kamis, Margaret, Paul, Lanny, and Sarie – stretch towards the inhabitants of the Karoo, these inhabitants do not successfully reach back, and ultimately the two groups are not drawn together. Progressive ideas towards race are portrayed as belonging to the travellers who bring them to a new place. They also carry them away again when they leave or die, there is hence no 'stickiness' between these ideas and the rural localities to which they are introduced by the 'new arrivals'. This is particularly the case of *Margaret Harding*, where progressive ideas are linked to an 'abroad'/England with which connections are

much more dependent on the traveller, while in *The Path of Thunder*, progressive ideas are associated with Cape Town, which the Karoo is much more entangled with. Moreover, through point of view and focalization, Margaret and Lanny, in particular, stretch towards the reader and achieve at-traction and stickiness of ideas. Change of attitude about racial relations is aimed at the reader, not the South African rural context, which in both novels prove ultimately non-receptive to the new ideas mobilized by the train.

Scholarship on *The Path of Thunder* and, especially, *Margaret Harding*, is surprisingly scant. However, both novels have much to offer in terms of enriching an understanding of how race and interracial relations have been imagined in the first half of 20th century South African society and culture. The trope of the 'arrival from abroad' allows for a consideration of how challenging ideas of race have been understood as mobile, travelling from the foreign and the urban space to destabilize the rural locale. The train, as an ambivalent but noteworthy signifier of modernity, has been written as the ideal carrier of these new ideas of race and racial togetherness embodied in its individual traveller. This article has demonstrated the value of reading *Margaret Harding* and *The Path of Thunder* through the trope of the 'arrival from abroad'. Applying this trope to a wider range of 20th century South African literature would be worthwhile for achieving a deeper understanding of the mobility of ideas of race and their connection to space, travel, modernity, and community.

Notes

1. Also published under the title *Flower o' the Peach*.
2. In this article, race is understood as a social construct, and words associated with race and racial categories should be read as within scare quotes to mark their unstable, context-bound, and contested character.
3. *Voortrekkers* were Dutch-speaking people who participated in organized migration from the British Cape Colony into the interior of Southern Africa in the mid-1830s, usually travelling by ox wagon.
4. In quoting from the novel, I include the racial terms that are used in the original text, although they are now often considered offensive. Their usage should not be mistaken for mine.
5. *Margaret Harding* was first published in the British publisher Methuen's Colonial Editions, which were sold in British colonies.
6. The longing to escape from the countryside, to take the train to the city, is a common dream of upward (and outward) mobility in literature (Storey 25; Wirth-Nesher 39-40).
7. I mark the contentious status of 'coloured' as an identity category by using scare quotes.
8. Although both Abrahams and his character Lanny are 'coloured', I will at times refer to both as 'black', drawing on Black Consciousness and using black in a political, collective sense to include all 'non-white' identities.

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