

# On Returning To Where the Heart Is

June 27, 2014

*[Ed. note: This essay by James Kilgore was the winner of the Daniel Singer Prize for 2013. Kilgore lived in South Africa from 1991-2002. During that time he was a fugitive from U.S. justice living under the pseudonym "John Pape." He worked as an educator and researcher for unions and social movements. In 2002 he was arrested on the streets of Cape Town, then extradited to the United States where he served six and a half years in prison. In July 2012 he returned to South Africa for the first time since his arrest. Here he presents his reflections on the journey.]*



My connections to the “land of Mandela” and his African National Congress (ANC) sustained me during my years of incarceration. Part of it was maintaining the links to my wife Terri and our two sons who still lived there. But it was more than that. While the democratic South Africa may not have lived up to our expectations, the flow of letters, postcards, books, and pictures from Cape Town and Johannesburg was a constant and much needed reminder that the entire planet did not function with the misanthropy and racial hatred of a California state prison. A better world was possible.

Once I paroled in 2009, I was determined to go back for a visit. It took me two years to get a passport. Then the South African government declared me an “undesirable immigrant” because I had lived there under a false name. A mini-campaign by my friends and lawyer convinced the Minister of Home Affairs that I was a desirable after all.

Once I had the green light, I wasn’t quite sure what South Africa would hold for me. Would it feel like the wonderful, comforting, engaging, and complicated home that it once was? Would I have anything to talk about with old friends and comrades? They, after all, had been carrying on with their normal lives during the intervening period. They hadn’t climbed up onto a steel bunk every night and wondered if they would ever see life again outside a concrete box. They had been drinking their Rooibos tea, eating samoosas and pap, taking their kids to school and watching them grow up. We had travelled down very different paths. Even Terri, who would be coming with me and had spent five years there with our children after my arrest, wasn’t sure how this visit would all turn out.

The travel itself went smoothly. I wasn’t on any hit lists, didn’t get pulled into any dark rooms by men in suits and sunglasses asking who I was visiting or if I planned to return to the United States. Laura and Rick, our most stalwart friends, were waiting at the airport. We shared hugs, smiles, laughter, followed by the tedium of retrieving bags, getting a sim card for the cell phone.

As we headed down the freeway toward Cape Town, everything looked at once totally familiar and foreign. The shacks were still there, by their thousands. At least they hadn’t built walls to hide them. I began to recall that part of the psyche of South Africa is living with the intensity of the contradictions. Poverty is in your face, even in the suburbs. At every traffic light, around every corner someone lurks, flaunting their desperation—selling combs and sculptures that no one really wants, slapping water on your windshield before you have time to tell them not to bother, diving into a dumpster to sort through the day’s pickings. Then there is the ample cohort of “tsotsis” [thugs] ready to simply jump on you and implement their own vision of democracy. Unlike the U.S., South Africa has not yet perfected the art of tucking poverty away so thoroughly.

We get off the freeway and enter South Africa’s suburban fortress. There are new

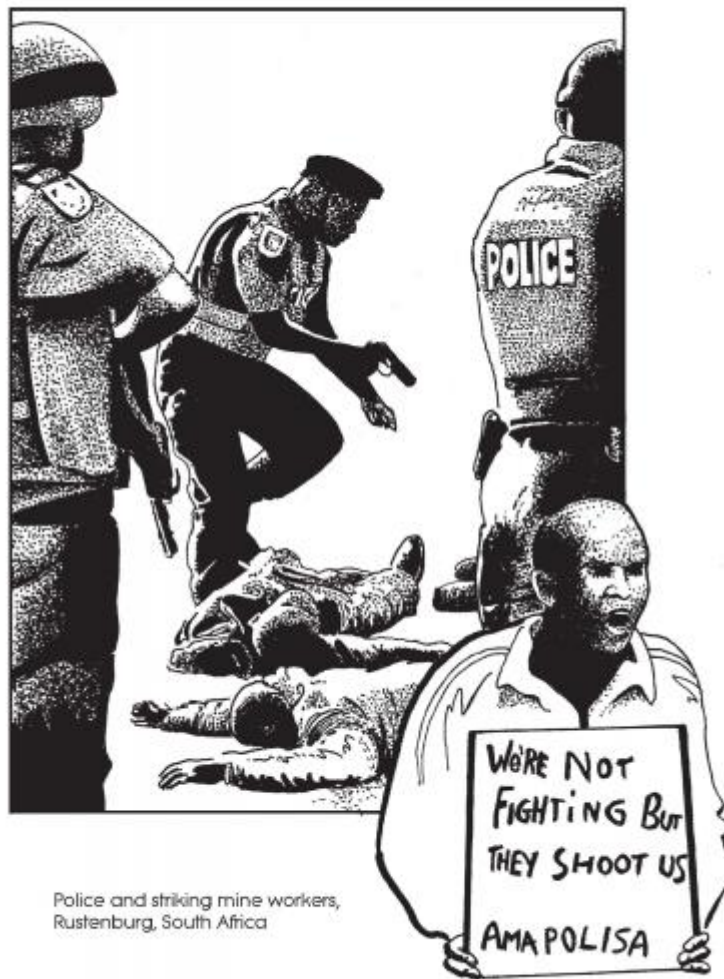
developments—more electric fences, more gated communities demanding a thumb print for entry. But then electric fences are familiar territory for me. I slept behind them for more than six years—only they were designed to keep me in rather than keep others out.

For my first few hours this all seems newly strange to me, as if I've landed in a place where I've never been at all. But after a day my old life resurfaces. I feel like John Pape again. I retrace old steps, walk past the house where I was arrested, a quiet dead end street. The last time I was there, November 8, 2002, a line of police cars and plain clothes detectives had created the first and only traffic jam on Dunluce Ave. I recall my then eight-year-old son as he stood confused next to me while the police closed in. The officers were polite, not like they are in the U.S. or in the townships of South Africa. They let me hold onto him. I felt his little heart pounding in his chest. At least I had the chance to whisper in his ear that I loved him. He didn't know how to respond.

On day two I return to Community House, where I'd worked for five years at the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG). We did education and research for unions and social movements. During those years, we thought we could triumph, not in a full-blown revolutionary sense, but in squeezing out major concessions for the poor—housing, electricity, water, education. We never quite believed that the movement that produced Mandela, Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, and Lillian Ngoyi could totally abandon its roots.

By 2012, Community House has transformed. This once dingy building now carries the status of National Heritage site. An influx of state lottery money has yielded striking murals of local struggle heroes on the now shining walls. As I walk through the building, life size images of the martyrs—Imam Haroon, Ashley Kriel, Neil Aggett, and many others—greet me. Something has gone right.

I have been invited by my successor at ILRIG, Lenny Gentle, to sit in on the organization's mid-year review meeting. It's a strange way to re-connect, but it works. I dutifully take notes, reassured that in spite of it all, the ILRIG people still care about the working class. As the proceedings carry on, various familiar faces peak through a window into the meeting room. They have come to greet me. I bounce up and go outside for hugs and shrieks of disbelief. They all tell me I haven't changed, that I look the same. I don't quite believe them. I have changed but it's their way of saying they know I have survived prison and I am still that same John Pape they once knew. By reappearing I have reminded them that I am still on their side.



Police and striking mine workers,  
Rustenburg, South Africa

In the meeting Lenny and the others talk much like we did a decade ago, searching for the resistance to the neoliberal path the government has chosen, identifying which social movements show potential and how education and research might help them. Service delivery protests take place nearly every day in South Africa, Lenny reminds us, but the problem is that they “lack structure,” he says. Another issue is the energy many activists devote to supporting various factions of the ANC. Lenny argues that the factions all stand for the same thing. A counter view asserts that the factions actually represent different groupings on the ground, that it is important to know why this broad ANC church is now producing dissident voices.

They call on me for a few words. I can only add that I am pleased to see that such debates still continue. I inform them there are no discussions with this kind of passion and insight in Champaign, Illinois, where I now live. “I never found them in prison either,” I add. They smile.

After ILRIG our trip takes a different course altogether. Terri and I run away to Nature’s Valley, a magnificent resort area seven hours east of Cape Town. It has been almost a decade since I have climbed a hill, walked in a forest or dipped my toes in the ocean. We don’t have such things in Champaign, and High Desert State Prison offered no hiking or swimming opportunities.

Terri and I spend a week there with friends surrounded by this thing called “nature.” The corn fields of Illinois recede. We are gradually finding our place together in our New South Africa. We take time

to hold hands, let the damp of the forest seep into our momentarily comfortable togetherness. “I wish the children were here,” she says. Somehow this can’t be “our” South Africa without them. But our two boys are grown up now. Our older son has just graduated from college and gotten a job in China. Our younger boy finished high school in May. They have grown too old to share sentimental moments with parents. Still, as we walk through the forest, it seems they should be tagging along behind us asking about the names of the trees and the songs of the birds.

After a week in the wilderness, we return to business as such. I am here to connect with old friends and comrades but also to talk about various things—my books, my experience of the last nine years, mass incarceration in the United States. Terri has important research to do on apartheid education.

My “tour” begins at the Book Lounge, a cozy shop in the center of Cape Town struggling to survive in the era of Kindle. The owner sets up about a dozen chairs, saying that only nine people have responded to their RSVP. Eighty-five people show up, mostly the ageing white left, my comrades from the unions, the social movements, the NGOs. As I open my talk, I’m overcome by emotion. I falter when I start to thank people for all their support over the years and try to remind them how important family and friends are. The tears come when I mention Terri and my sons. I have instructed the crowd that if I cry they must blubber with me in solidarity. They do, at least enough to get me back on track. I tell them how I wrote *Freedom Never Rests* in prison, that it is about the struggle of people in a fictitious town in the Eastern Cape to get water, and that I got the idea to write it when I saw steaming hot water pouring out of a shower at Dublin Federal Detention Center and no one bothered to stop the flow for a month. People in U.S. prisons could fill their cups of water with impunity while the poor of South Africa had to pay for every penny. Smiles and congratulations come from the crowd. I sign books, forget to eat dinner, go for drinks afterwards.

Two nights later it’s heavier, back to Community House for what I call a “report back.” The crowd is mostly black. Some trade unionists sing songs and toyi-toyi, the South Africans’ fabled struggle dance. Their song proclaims me a “communist,” a high form of praise for the man they know as “Comrade John Pape.” I morph deeper into that identity, as I wend my way through my arrest, my landing in the “new apartheid” of the California state prison system where even the showers and phones were segregated, where the hegemony of the white supremacists was so extreme that if I dared to give a black person a sip of water from my glass, I would be stabbed by someone with a swastika or SS lightning bolt tattooed across his forehead. I tell them how I survived all this by teaching math and running workshops on the global financial crisis—taking the experience I had with popular education in South Africa to the prison yards of the U.S. There is lots of head nodding. Racial segregation is familiar territory to them. So is fighting back. I feel home here, much more like John Pape than this other person who carries my birth name.

The next day, I meet with two ILRIG people to plan a workshop on “criminalizing the poor” for unemployed youth in Khayelitsha, Cape Town’s biggest black township. Crime is crippling the community people tell me, mob violence is taking the place of the justice system. “People have lost faith in the police,” one youth says. “They never come. Now the residents are killing those who steal their things.” Others claim all the police do is kick them out of the meager shacks they are able to construct from scrap materials, then kick them off whatever small piece of ground they subsequently claim. I’m not sure what I have to say to youth from these communities. I know about the inside of prisons in the United States but I have never lived in a shack, never seen my children sleep by the side of the road with no food, but I agree to do what I can. We set the workshop for my last week in South Africa.

I walk home, rehearsing in my head what I might say to these youngsters, walking along the side of a busy thoroughfare with no sidewalks. Two youth sidle up to me. One asks me for money but I sense these are not beggars. I dig into my pockets and give them a couple Rands. “Give us all your money

or we will rob you," he says. I dig deeper, clearing out my remaining few coins. "What about your bag?" he asks. I assure them there is nothing there but papers. He looks at my finger. "Give us the ring," he says. I tell him it's my wedding ring. I leave out the part about how Terri wore this ring around her finger for six and a half years while I was in prison, that one of the first things she did when I got out was put it back on my finger. "Give us the ring or we're gonna shoot you." Luckily I am older and wiser because he is a very small man and this wedding ring is perhaps the only possession I have that is worth fighting for. I am almost laughing at myself, a hardened "convict" so to speak, reared in the prison dogma that says if you let someone disrespect you today, you'll be disrespected by everyone forever. I never got "punked" or robbed in prison. No one ever laid a hand on me. I learned how to stand my ground but now I give in. I slide the ring off and it's over. Three minutes later a cop car pulls in behind me. The thieves are long gone by now. The cops pull over another young black pedestrian and pat him down. They let me walk past. I don't say a word. I don't talk to cops.

Terri doesn't balk when I tell her the bad news. As usual she sees the big picture. A ring, even with all the sentiment attached, is still just a piece of metal. Rick tells me that someone was murdered on a bus not long ago for refusing to give a thief their wedding ring. I have a cup of tea and a rusk, a great South African tradition, and move on.

From there our trip becomes a blur of speaking engagements, interviews, radio talk shows, and delightful dinners with old friends who ply us with home-brewed prawn curries, bobotie, and South African merlot. Each night surpasses the previous in cuisine and overindulgence. I repeat my Community House performance for a similar crowd in Johannesburg where we lived for six years. Once again there are hugs, smiles, books to be signed, gushing expressions of support and solidarity.

I take time out to visit my friend Ighsaan's new project in the decaying downtown area of Germiston, about 15 miles east of Johannesburg. He has set up something called the "Casual Workers' Advice Office (CWAO)" —an effort to serve the fastest growing sector of the working class—casuals, part-timers, contract workers employed by labor brokers. The traditional unions don't quite know how to service them and don't seem to care. Ighsaan's office is a thrust of idealism in a non-idealistic time. Having worked nearly twenty years in an NGO educating workers and community people, he has sidestepped opportunities for promotion or securing a pension. He earns no salary, lives with the support from his partner, and hopes that somewhere, someone with a bit of money will realize this is work that needs to be done.

Things are quiet at the CWAO. Two admin assistants do something on computers and one woman comes in for advice. Ighsaan tells me of the biggest day yet, when the CWAO helped some postal workers win a judgment and some 300 of them danced and sang in the street in front of the office. He hopes there will be more days like that in the future as the word of the office's presence spreads. I try to remain as hopeful as he is for we are birds of a feather in a certain way, still knocking our head against the wall when we've lost so many more battles than we have won. As I hear him talk I ask myself if I have any real chance of living to see the target of my present passions, mass incarceration in the U.S., undergo substantive change. I don't bother to ponder it in those terms. For characters like Ighsaan and myself the victory is in the small steps and in knowing you are still fighting the good fight. Setting aside money for retirement or medical insurance in our old age is an elephant we don't allow to enter our room.

From Johannesburg we go to Durban and land in the company of Patrick Bond, an old friend and academic expert on South African financial markets and many other things economic and otherwise. In his whirlwind style Patrick has arranged a meeting for us with a few Zimbabweans in the middle of downtown Durban. Just an "informal" thing he says. Since Terri and I spent most of the 1980s in

Zimbabwe we are anxious to hear what these people have to say.

We arrive at a rundown apartment building in the city center. They've filled the courtyard of the building with stacks of metal shipping containers, now converted into houses. They've cut openings in the metal siding to fit windows—a mini-refugee camp which houses 35 people.

The residents and a few friends gather in the courtyard while a Zimbabwean tells them they have brought a writer all the way from the U.S. to speak to them. He holds up a copy of my book, *We Are All Zimbabweans Now*. In Shona, I hear people saying they are tired, that it is time to eat and they want to leave. The speaker continues, then finally introduces me. I am scared to death, feeling like I've been parachuted to another planet and then forced to deprive these exhausted people of their dinner. I dig deep and suddenly the Shona that I used to speak reasonably well back in the 1980s starts pouring forth. I apologize for stealing them away from their dinner, tell them back in the early days of Zimbabwean independence I would have never dreamed people like them would end up living in shipping containers in downtown Durban, unable to survive either economically or politically in their country of birth. Suddenly the crowd perks up. I pass the baton back to the M.C. The discussion carries on for another two hours. This is not about the writer from America but rather about their lives in South Africa and how they must organize to fight back. They are victims of police harassment, of xenophobic attacks by local residents. They have become accustomed to being called "makwerekwere" and other derogatory names by South Africans, of being accused of stealing local women. Many have vocational qualifications—lab technicians, motor mechanics, teachers—but here they cut peoples' grass or sell packets of sweets on the street. Their life is a petty hustle to earn enough money to survive and send a few cents of surplus back home. They talk about the need to organize the other Zimbabweans in Durban, in the rest of South Africa. There is optimism in this dark, oil-stained space. They collectively vow that they will get back home, like all refugees must do from time to time to maintain their sanity and sense of identity. But of course no one can answer the two key questions that determine their future: when will President Robert Mugabe die or leave power and what will come next? As the meeting winds down, one of the men asks me to close up the session. I try to convey in my linguistic masala how inspiring they are, how their determination to carry on in such a situation is remarkable. I close by assuring them "muchawina" – you will win. Of course no one can be certain that they will but it is the best thing to say.

Time to return to Cape Town to that workshop on crime for the youth. I don't tell the group the story about getting robbed on the way home from the meeting. I decry the vagaries of the school to prison pipeline—the lockdowns, the drug searches, the fancily titled cops in U.S. schools known as Student Resource Officers (SROs). I tell them how I am presenting this message because I fear that some people in South Africa might be tempted to follow the American model, to go the way of "zero tolerance." I assure them that this is simply a way of criminalizing the survival activities of the poor, in the same way the so-called squatter camps where many of them live are regarded as lawless communities by the authorities.

In the discussions, one participant assures me that he can phone in and get a pizza delivered much faster than he could ever get the cops to come if a crime was in progress. These youth can rattle off names of friends who have died either in gang warfare or at the hands of the police. One young man tells us that when he walks the streets late at night, he fears the police much more than the drug lords. "They can beat you up, take your things," he says. "Anything is possible." I'm tempted to reference the apartheid days here, to find out if things are better or worse. But these people are 18-22 years old. They were toddlers or pre-schoolers when Mandela won the first election in 1994.

Like the Zimbabweans, they close their meeting with the determination to come together again, to begin to take on these issues. Then they disperse, rushing to the plates of chicken and rice that ILRIG has provided. The next day the local paper announces that Cape Town is considering a

proposal to place police officers in schools in five “troubled” areas. The idea has come from a visit by someone in the local government to the United States.

Our day to return “home” arrives and we are back on the plane to Champaign, where there is drought, 105 degree temperatures. Our sons are waiting for us. Terri and I reflect on our journey. She mentions something we didn’t notice at the time. “We have never laughed that much in our entire time in Illinois.” We usually associate South Africa with rage, outrage, or crying. But for us there was also another dimension.

We try to figure out why. The most important experiences of our adult life took place in southern Africa, our meeting, our marriage, the birth and raising of our children. We experienced the upbeat early years of independence in Zimbabwe and the transition from apartheid in South Africa. We lived life bigger than reality in those days. We were part of making history. We even wrote textbooks for schools entitled *People Making History* which landed in two thirds of Zimbabwe’s high schools.

Now decades and many complicated journeys later, we live on a smaller, more joyless, but far less dangerous stage. We can walk our dog at two a.m., drive to the other side of town in fifteen minutes. Life is easy, smooth, but something is missing that can never be inserted into the equation of central Illinois or perhaps anywhere in the United States for that matter. That big part of us that still lives in South Africa remains like a big Trust Fund from which we can draw money only by going to the bank and making a withdrawal. There is no internet link to dispense emotion or feelings for friends and comrades. That kind of capital only accumulates through fighting complex battles together and emerging at the other side if not in triumph, at least intact and with the self-satisfaction that you have been on the right side. In the end, this is what makes you able to laugh together, even if it is laughing to keep from crying.

Two and a half weeks after we return to the United States the South African police shoot 34 miners dead in Rustenberg. In the wake of the shootings, the U.S. press reminds us these miners were armed with spears and knives and were charging the police. They also note that these killings look a lot like what used to happen under apartheid only this time the police are black. But they refuse to see the essential truth: that what the police did in Rustenberg is the result of bigger choices made long before. In South Africa, the government chose to abandon redistributing wealth and power to the historically oppressed. Instead, the new rulers opted for the trickle down and a few drops of redistribution have not proved adequate to upend the horrors of history.

Those police bullets cast a grim shadow on our joyous journey to South Africa. Our momentary connection to the past has been severed by new tragedies in a now seemingly distant land. We cannot capture that moment from Champaign. *A luta continua*, says the southern African slogan for the ages, the struggle continues. For the moment, all we can do is holler out the response, “*a luta*” from afar. Perhaps no one will hear our cries but we will keep hollering them anyway, at the top of our lungs.

## Footnotes