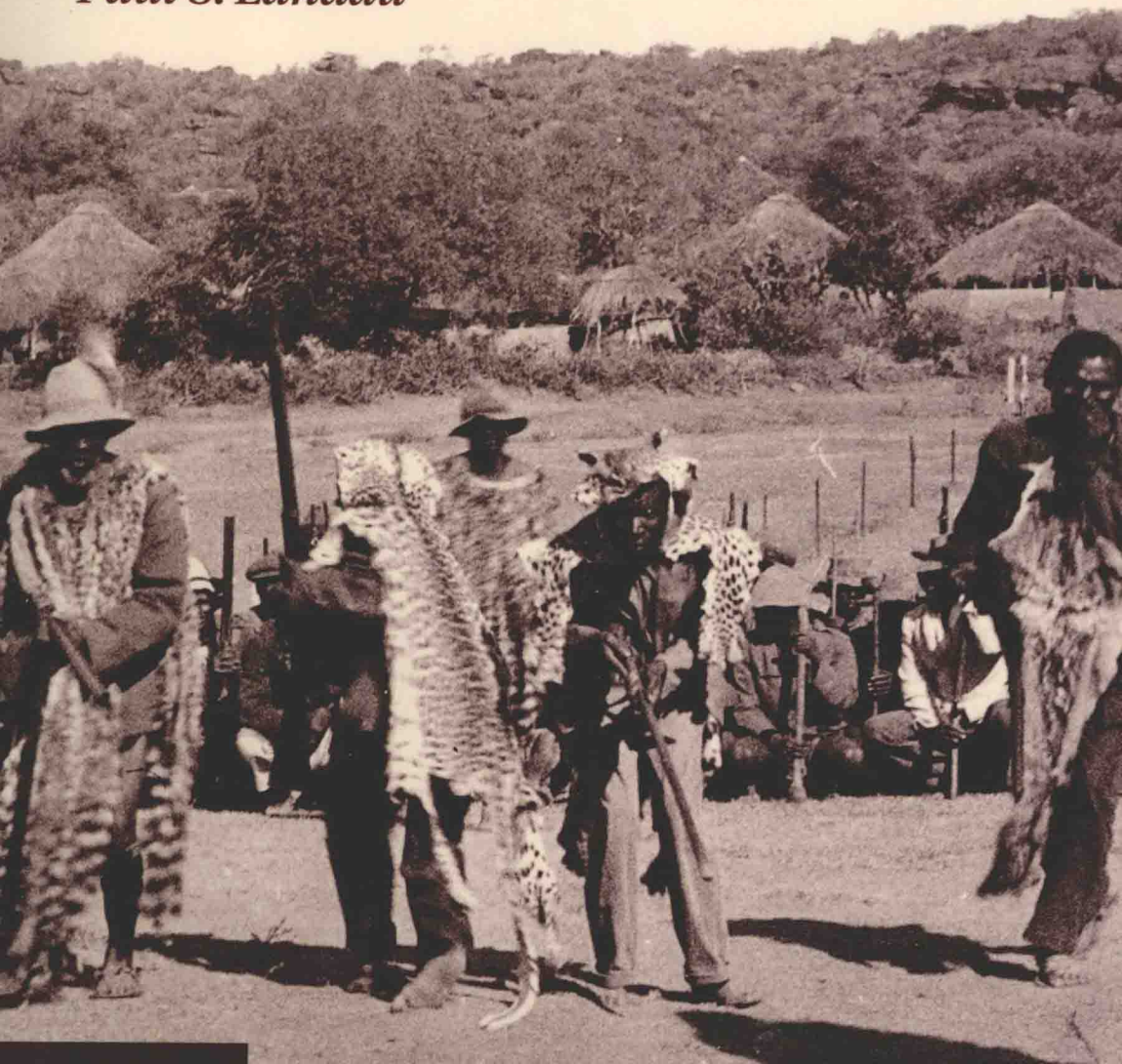


Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948

Paul S. Landau



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA
www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521179263

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First published 2010

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Landau, Paul Stuart, 1962–

Popular politics in the history of South Africa, 1400–1948 / Paul S. Landau.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-19603-1 (hardback)

1. Political participation – South Africa – History. 2. Politics, Practical – South
Africa – History. 3. South Africa – Politics and government. I. Title.

JQ1981.L35 2010

968–dc22 2010012788

ISBN 978-0-521-19603-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-17926-3 African edition Paperback

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In 1624 our forefathers lived in South Africa as heathen under [their] own chiefs.... **our race was a mixed race even then.**

A. A. S. le Fleur, address to his followers, 1896, UNISA,
E. M. S. le Fleur Collection, A. A. S. le Fleur, "Short History,"
1896, handwritten notes made by the Griqua leader.

Gumpie [Daniel Kgompini] ... held meetings [in which he] informs those attending that he is a subject of Chief Samuel Moroka.... **his discussions being on Religion and Politics badly mixed up ...**

Captain's report, South African Police, Oudtshoorn,
18 October 1921, Pretoria, SAB, JUS 528, 6515/29,
"Gumpie" (Kgompini), traveling the country
with his white employer, a salesman.

Many small tribes mentioned in tradition and history have lost their original cohesion and unity.... [T]he **diversity of peoples making up the membership** of a tribe is reflected in some instances in differences in custom.

Professor Isaac Schapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom*, 1938, Oxford: IAI, 1938;
quotes are sequential and taken from 4–5.

Preface: The Birth of the Political

This book weaves together several stories about popular politics in South Africa in the course of making the argument that those politics have been largely misconstrued. It begins, for all intents and purposes, with Chapter 1. Here, briefly, are a few of its most basic assertions for those who would like a preview. First, the case is made that the people of South Africa were historically well equipped to embrace and absorb strangers. Hybridity lay at the core of their subcontinental political traditions. Nineteenth-century European newcomers were different and attempted to repudiate mixing, politically and otherwise, albeit with only partial success. It was they who characterized, or mis-characterized, Africans as perennial *tribesmen*. Second, the book is about what happened to popular politics in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. South African modes of self-rule comprised a venerable political tradition, one that deprecated skin color and language as barriers and elevated brotherhoods, rankings, and amalgamations. The tradition preceded tribes and survived through them and beyond them. Ultimately it fed into the politics of the twentieth century, informing South Africa's growing independent Christian churches, other hard-to-catalogue popular movements, rural resistance, and eventually, even the nationalism of the African National Congress.

Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948, offers a revised view of what happened to people's efforts to mobilize themselves in their own interest through much of the colonial era. Therefore it is also an explanation for previous representations of Africans and brown-skinned people. It is a study of politics in places and moments where politics were not usually said to exist, and it is an account of that omission. It is a history of suppression, violence, and warfare, and it is about how that history changed the meaning of what people were saying when they talked about their destiny and their heritage. The book charts the eventual defeat of the majority's ability to rule themselves on the land according to their own logic; and it marks from that catastrophe two effects: the production of ethnic identity, and the formulation among peasants of the religious domain. Both geneses erased the signs of their arrival, as if ethnicity and religious worship had always been there. *Popular*

Politics is about more than defeat, however; it is about the perseverance of a complex politics, often camouflaged or shadowed by other institutions: politics in attacking tribalist assumptions, and within assertions of tribal prerogatives; politics infusing Christianity and ancestrally motivated movements; politics that confounded, sometimes by design, the attentions of appointed “Native” experts. Granting the overwhelming impact of colonialism and state racism on people’s ability to mobilize, I argue that ordinary denizens of South Africa continued to find ways to tap their own store of knowledge and praxis. They were the inheritors of a flexible and adaptable political tradition, one that was very hard to smash.

* * * * *

Quite often in historical literature, Africans are depicted as prepolitical or as politically naive, mired in irrational beliefs, and they are imagined to have stayed that way until modern nationalism began to pull them free. They are either dignified with praises for their spirituality, or said to have lived in thrall to superstitions that divided them and rendered them ineffectual, but the common thread is that religion ruled their lives. In this book, everyone’s basic rationality is assumed. Threshers and winnowers, waged farm hands, colonial officials, cooks, plowmen, tailors, chief’s counselors, schoolteachers, agitators, and preachers are all shown to have struggled to act in sensible and effective ways; they demanded that their understanding of the terrain of action around them be treated as meaningful, and they adapted to the situations around them as well as they could. Under the most difficult circumstances, these people created genuine, if sometimes transient, domains of power. Imperial and state administrators fought against them, but they did not understand them, and most of the time they did not want to. This book argues that historians today must be willing to try to see what these administrators did not.

In its coverage the book aims to elaborate South Africa’s history broadly conceived, and for that reason it may serve as an initiating text. Geographically, it is mostly about the South African highveld, and especially one part of it, the neighborhood around the “Middle” or “Willow” River (Mohokare, also known as the Caledon), an area of intensive farming and grazing for centuries. Thematically, it is about how popular sovereignties and rural mobilizations grew and declined in the elevated interior of the country. The movements and modalities outlined herein are not, most often, treated all together, under one rubric; *Popular Politics* shows how they were indeed of a piece, and how, in addition, they were (mis)classified, undermined, and fragmented into *many* pieces. The book looks especially closely at people whose descendents today are called “Coloured,” Sotho, and Tswana; but the reader will see that the simplicity of even this triptych is deceptive, the end result of nineteenth- and even twentieth-century processes and enforced points of view. The designation “highveld” works better for historical purposes. As it is used here, “highveld” indicates arable and grazing land above 1,000 meters, along with whoever lived on it. Finally, the main narrative thread of the book connects the chiefships of the highveld in

the Hart–Vaal watershed, the Caledon River Valley, and Thaba Nchu, with the “Samuelites,” a peasant movement so-named by the South African historian S. M. Molema. In considering the Samuelites, the general themes of the book are revisited in a concrete and approachable narrative.

The first chapters will show how a historical political praxis gave rise to the great mixed nineteenth-century chiefships on the highveld, and how the same forces helped create the Christian Griqua and filled the pews of the first large Christian churches. Later on, it will be shown that these continuing traditions, although deprived of much of their material basis, ultimately fed many of the peasant movements and organizations in the 1920s, and even some workplace-based associations, including not only the aforementioned Samuelites but also “Garveyism,” South Africa’s independent churches, and the massive International Commercial Workers’ Union or ICU.

The drive to cooperate, mobilize, and thrive in communities on the highveld did not survive unscathed. Instead, it was fractured and channeled into usable forms by peasants and by the state in the difficult circumstances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Eventually policemen had to monitor public assemblies to keep proper distinctions in place: meetings had to be religious, or cultural, or tribal, but never political, never concerned with changing people’s situations in this world. For a brief period in the 1920s, as the alienation of the land in the fertile valleys and plateaus of the highveld was completed, the old tradition of heterogeneous mobilization surged back to life, dragging discursive fragments out of their places of exile. Like other contemporary movements on the highveld, the Samuelites, a focus here, moved young men to espouse a personal and inner commitment to change. They demanded a return to power over the land and rejected the tyranny of state-supported landlordism and tribal administration. Alarmed, the administrative bureaucracy acted to suppress them and, where possible, to obscure their contours and revise their message.

In telling the story of a South African logic, a popular politics never quite comprehended by empire, never fully engaged, it has been especially important to write entirely in English. Some works of social history that explore “emic” or insider perspectives are reticent to translate fully, relying on foreign terms to lend an irreducible concreteness to ideas. In most cases, however, foreign terms are opaque signs to the English-language reader. In telling history here, in bringing the processes described as much as possible to a wider readership, I translate everything that is spoken at first usage, including so-called tribal names in their pretribal incarnations. With English words as with African-language words, when they are offered, capitalization is avoided. This is to acknowledge the preeminence of speech as opposed to writing, in which no such distinction exists. Hence, to draw these usage guidelines together in a single set of examples, one will read court, or “kraal and court,” for *kgotla*; lords, not Lords, for *dikgosana* or *Makgosi*; chiefdom, not *moraf[h]e* or *kgosing*; crocodile and people of the crocodile, not *kwenā*, or *Kwenā*, or Crocodile, and so on. After their first appearance, court, chiefdom,

crocodile, and other ordinary words are given further meaning by recovering the history surrounding their usage, not by explaining to the reader how they were used. An exception: *métis* is an exterior word, imposed to group together a range of people who did not designate themselves as a group. And, in addition, the names of persons are mostly left untranslated and are capitalized. By and large, however, the reader may count on seeing translated (English) terms and will be able to grasp the book's arguments by them. In the same spirit, this book refuses to "correct" the spellings of the past and to substitute modern ethnic labels for past, variable spellings. "Sechuana" is for instance used (and capitalized), rather than Setswana, which is a false synonym. The variety of indigenous spellings should not burden the reader, however, because – to repeat the point – he or she is not required to learn any of them.

Further conclusions emerge serially, in each of the six chapters of the book, although the impatient reader can skip to the very end, where I convert them into simple assertions. The first two chapters to follow will demonstrate, broadly, that the political was indeed born deep in the southern African past: it was not a stage that arrived with the demise of chiefs and chiefly loyalties, nor with the first European administrators, nor the coming of Cape-educated young men. Highveld herders and farmers jockeyed with one another to mobilize and mix in newcomers and to legitimate their preferred hierarchies and alliances, participating in a discernible tradition with a deep history. They spoke comprehensibly enough, beginning in the era when they were not yet ambiguous – not yet neither one thing nor the other, but still only they themselves.

Acknowledgments

In all chapters to follow, I participate in a serial dialogue with others' interpretations, some acknowledged in the text or in footnotes, but not always. Many scholars whose work has colored my analysis and my choices of examples, or predicted my interpretations in aspect and tone, or paralleled key parts of my thinking, are noted only once or twice in the text, then left behind, even though my debt is ongoing. I owe as much to those whose work I criticize as to those with whom I agree: to the pioneering ethnographers, missiologists and otherwise, who created the world of knowledge in which I situate myself. As a historian, I owe a debt especially to anthropologists of South Africa, in South Africa, Britain, and the United States, and to their scrupulous and indispensable studies.

The project has relied on the tail end of grants and funding from the Fulbright program of the U.S. government, and then more substantially on funds from Yale University (and the Yale Center for International and Area Studies), from the University of Maryland and the University's Driskell Center; and from the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. I worked in many archival repositories and lived in several places while researching this book, and I cannot thank everyone who helped me, but I must single out Ruth Forchhammer of the Serowe, Khama III Museum; Michelle Pickover of the Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand; Rosemary Seton of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London; Gilbert Mpolokeng of the Botswana National Archives in Gaborone; the Reverend T. Phokontsi of St. Paul's Church in Thaba Nchu; the Reverend Margaret James of the Methodist Mission Center in Harare; John Gay and the Reverend Gay of Maseru; the Reverend W. S. P. Khiyaza and Mr. L. A. Tapela of Thekwane (near Plumtree); the staff at the National Library in Cape Town and at the Zimbabwe National Archives in Harare; and Sandra Rowoldt (now Rowoldt-Shell) of the Cory Library at Grahamstown, the last for consistent, repeated, and timely assistance.

Bob Harms at Yale University offered indispensable support to me at critical junctures of the project, as did Sue Cook, Charles Mironko, and James C. Scott; also at Yale, Wiebe Boer, Mieke Ritsema, Thomas Dodie McDow,

Eric Allina-Pisano, Fiona Vernal, and Roger Levine, graduate students at the time, were invaluable to me. The Africanist librarian Moore Crossey requires a paean recalling another scholarly era. Baruteng Onamile, Rachel Matlhare, and Bruce Bennet were crucial to my research in Botswana and in South Africa. In Johannesburg, Isaak Niehouse and Sandra Waldman, and in Washington, D.C., Joost Wellen, helped me translate Dutch and Afrikaans. At Maryland, Stephan Palmié (now at the University of Chicago) and Saverio Giovacchini, Richard Price, and Hillary Jones offered readings and comments. At various stages, aid and comfort have come from Shula Marks, David Bunn and Jane Taylor, Adam and Jessica Kuper, and Norman Etherington. My thanks go to Elizabeth Elbourne, for a gracious read-through of an early version of several chapters; Carolyn Hamilton and Diana Jeater for early and so critical support; Part Themba Mgadla, Thomas Spear, and Isaac Schapera; and last, and especially, Julie Livingston, for readings and crucial, timely encouragement; Neil Parsons, for opening his home, thoughts, and archaeological sites; and Jan Vansina, who has offered intermittent guidance to me for twenty years, and whom I thank partially with this book, with all its shortcomings.

Elements and sections of chapters have been presented as spoken and circulated papers, over a decade, at Yale University, Harvard University, the University of Botswana, the University of Georgia in Athens, the University of Minnesota, the University of Wisconsin, Johns Hopkins, Brigham Young University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Rutgers University; in three African Studies Association meetings and a Northeastern African Studies Association meeting in Burlington, Vermont; and in further forums outside the United States, in Cape Town, South Africa; Quebec, Canada; Perth, Australia; Gaborone, Botswana; and at Oxford University. Remarks, assistance, readings, encouragement, or cautions pertinent to this book, in these and other forums, have come from Bill Bravman, Tim Burke, Colin Murray, John L. Comaroff, Simon Dagut, Robert Edgar, Bobby Hill, Martin Legassick, Florence Bernault, David Coplan, James Campbell, Clifton Crais, Jim Denbow, Saul Dubow, Sumit Guha, Patrick Harries and his students at Basle; Pier Larson and Jane Guyer and their students at Hopkins; Karen Millbourne, Barry Morton, Tefetso Mothibe, Atieno Odhiambo, and Edward O'Neill; and Charles van Onselen, Terry Ranger, Ciraj Rassool, David Schoenbrün, Luise White, John Wright, and Andrew Zimmerman.

This book is dedicated to Emily. Without her it would not have been worthwhile.

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page viii
<i>Preface: The Birth of the Political</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
1 Eyewitness Engagements (Highveld political discourse at the start of the 1800s)	i
2 History before Tribes (Partnership, alliance, and power)	42
3 Translations (Missionaries and the invention of Christianity)	74
4 The Incipient Order (Moroka's reign, 1828–1880)	108
5 Mixed People (The Samuelites, the Griqua, and other subjectivities, 1880–1928)	162
6 Twentieth-Century Tribes	214
<i>Primary and Archival Sources</i>	251
<i>Bibliography</i>	257
<i>Index</i>	285

Figures

1.1	The South African highveld, showing the 1,000-meter line. After a map drawn by the author.	page 21
1.2	Vaal-Vet-Valsch (Nta)-Harts headwaters, mapped with the modern “N-12” highway from Kimberley to Vereeniging. After a map drawn by the author.	26
2.1	Great Zimbabwe: The famous World Heritage Site stone ruins near Masvingo, Zimbabwe: the stone pillar. Photo by author.	43
2.2	Map of S-group, and 1,000-m. lines in southern Africa, marking the highveld and the Zimbabwean highlands, with place names. After a map drawn by author, using various sources, including Connah, “A Question of Economic Basis”; Denbow, “The Toutswe Tradition”; Huffman, <i>Handbook</i> ; and Ellenberger, <i>History of the Basuto</i> .	48
2.3	Kaditshwene’s center courts: stone walls and rondavels at “kgosing” (chief’s place). Courtesy of Jan Boeyens. A similar map appears in Boeyens, “In Search of Kaditshwene.”	65
4.1	Map of the “Middle” River (Mohokare, or Caledon) Valley, so-called in the era of its emergence as Moshoeshoe’s agrarian heartland. After a map drawn by the author, using maps in Sanders, <i>Moshoeshoe</i> , and Ellenberger, <i>History of the Basuto</i> .	111
4.2	Moroka’s people’s trek to Thaba Nchu, 1832–1833. After a map drawn by the author, using maps in Etherington, <i>The Great Treks</i> , and Molema, <i>Chief Moroka</i> .	113

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 4.3 | Gustav Fritsch, photograph; Hugo Büchner, copper engraving: Tafel XX: “Ba-kuéna, Barolong,” from <i>Die Eingeborenen Süd-Afrika’s Atlas</i> , 1872. | 148 |
| 5.1 | Map of Tati District, 1915. After a map drawn by the author, from “Plan of the Tati Territory,” Botswana National Archives, Assistant Commissioner, 5/32, Revised Survey. | 175 |

Eyewitness Engagements (Highveld political discourse at the start of the 1800s)

Over the centuries, in the middle of what eventually became South Africa, hundreds of thousands of people lived and labored. They were farmers and livestock-keepers, warriors and poets. They spoke the same language, or incrementally distinguishable dialects of it; they moved about among themselves, married one another, and ranked their princely houses together.

Theirs was a history of settlement on verdant hills, of men and women building a world of ranked communities with cross-cutting loyalties and long-range connections to the Limpopo basin to the north, and the foothills of the Drakensberg range and the grasslands to the east. As the highveld's agrarian towns expanded, they brought together into their midst households, and sometimes whole communities, from the wider world. Most professional travelers could make themselves understood with little effort. Prestigious healers and specialists in rituals, rain-makers, militia-scouts, and cattle-herders covered great distances; women often married away from home, sometimes far away. As a result, authority and culture were disposed across the highveld and its enclosed river valleys in a widely comprehensible tradition, shading up even onto the Zimbabwean highlands on the northern side of the Limpopo Valley. Within this context developed multiethnic chiefships and chiefly partnerships.

Most accounts of South Africa's past summon up a different picture from this, however: a world of *tribes*. Tribes may be designated ethnic groups, or peoples, but the treatment is the same. In its purest form, the tribe constitutes the claim that popular mobilizations among African people were apolitical, customs-determined phenomena. Each tribe has its own heritage, dating back to its split with its parental branch, or to its own unique seed. "Bantu-speakers," separate from "the Khoisan," are hypothesized as having invaded the subcontinent three or six hundred years ago as proto-tribes, "the Hurutshe-Kwena" and "the Kgatla-Rolong," or another such grouping. One also finds "the Tlokwa," "the Sia," "the Phuthing," "Koni," "baThalerwa," "BaPhalane," "Phogole," more and more of them the further back one goes.¹

¹ Beyond the variations on the inclusion of the definite article, note the preferred orthographies' variants re *ba-* / *Ba-* etc. or not – *ba* meaning "people of."

The tendency to tribalize South Africa's past runs deep. It is there, in the very earliest written records from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which constitute the source material for this chapter of this book.² It is still there in the ongoing effort to restore land-rights to South Africans by projecting recent ethnic belonging into the distant past.³ Here it will be argued that agrarian South Africa before the mid-nineteenth century was built not by tribes, but by active pioneers and state-makers. A history of their activities and mobilizations must, however, also chart the development of the tribal idea and its eventual epistemological triumph. The story of the tribe must be understood in the context of the history of the actual political assertions of the people.

Whether the interpretation advanced here is entirely correct, the aim has been to push toward a necessary reorientation begun by other historians but not yet nearly completed. Who is the political actor in South Africa's history? At the beginning of the nineteenth century, European South Africans still commanded only a beachhead or two on the ancient African southern sub-continent. Who should be the South African political "we," if not the actual inhabitants of the country, the ancestors of black and brown complected people who constitute the greatest part of its citizenry today? What then can be recovered of their political praxis?

BORDERLANDS

Below we approach the highveld from the Cape's flat stretches and bands of hilltops, drifting up to it in the early 1800s, in a reconsideration of key texts generated at the interface of important early encounters. We might begin however by placing all southern Africa in its widest context. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were tumultuous times. People threw off their anciens régimes, rallied in the streets, raised up dictators, enslaved foreigners, and industrialized their cities. The Cape of Good Hope was a part of this world, standing astride global commerce east and west, hosting the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the English in its harbors, changing hands thrice because of the Napoleonic Wars.

The European Cape settlement lay at the margins of the lives of most South Africans. For continental Europeans, similarly, South Africa was the

² For this chapter and Chapter 3, I draw on books and papers of many missionaries and some travelers, including William C. Willoughby, E. W. Smith, Roger Price, John Mackenzie, Eugene Casalis, Prosper Lemue, John Edwards, Samuel Rolland, D. F. Ellenberger, Andrew Smith, William Shaw, Thomas Arbousset, Robert Hully, W. J. Burchell, John Shrewsbury, James Stuart, William Colenso, Daniel Lindley, Henry Callaway and others, and especially on John Campbell, Samuel Broadbent, T. L. Hodgson, Anne Hodgson, Robert Moffat, James Archbell, and John Cameron. Citations to these and other primary sources have been minimized but of course not eliminated.

³ Elize S. van Eeden, "The Role of History with Regard to Evidence in Land Claims as Officially Proposed: A Case Study on the Farm Deelkraal IQ 142, North West Province," *South African Historical Journal*, 57 (2007), 179–200. The "baHuruthse" [*sic*] is mistakenly given by the otherwise astute author (in text and note, p. 184).

“antipodes,” the “austral” sphere, a place of wilderness. The Cape’s privileged class was, especially in its subordination of laborers, what David Hume was talking about when he condemned “useless luxury.” Dutch settlers bound families of indigenous people to their estates, and long after 1800, Cape Town remained an outpost from the previous century. Many of the Colony’s people lived in desperate circumstances. Captive women had to suffer drunken sailors demanding satisfaction in their own quarters, the slave lodge, a building set at the very center of official colonial Cape Town – its heart. Some of the servants of this evolving racial order got away and survived as well as they could: the so-called Hanglips were the first of many such maroon communities.⁴

Approaching the nineteenth century, these castoffs, together with the Cape herders often called Khoikhoi, created a widening zone of negotiation and force. In it men hunted elephant ivory and ostrich feathers, bartered, raided for slaves, pillaged, hustled beads, gunpowder and tobacco, and defended their families. Americanist historians have introduced the word “borderlands” to signal this kind of region. A borderlands, unlike a line or a front, as in “frontier,” suggests a space governed by interactive, overlapping, and incomplete authorities.⁵ In the borderlands, wildlife dwindled, trade thrived, and customs were violated and renewed. Such a domain grew north and east of Cape Town, toward the Fish and Kei Rivers, over the Karoo, up toward the Orange River, and pressed at the base of highveld farmers’ settlements.

⁴ David Hume, “Of Luxury,” retitled “Of Refinement in the Arts,” *Political Discourses* (London: 1752); on the Cape’s in-between-ness: Gavin Lucas, *An Archaeology of Colonial Identity: Power and Material Culture in the Dwaars Valley, South Africa* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2004); prostitution in the culture of Cape Town: Robert Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony, 1750–1870: A Tragedy of Manners* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 127–8; prostitution is missing from the excellent *Cape Town, the Making of a City, an Illustrated Social History* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998), ed. by Nigel Worden, Elizabeth van Heyningen, and Vivian Bickford-Smith; for the Hanglips; Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 54 ff.; and Gerald Groenewald, “A Mother Makes No Bastard”: Family Law, Sexual Relations and Illegitimacy in Dutch Colonial Cape Town, c. 1652–1795,” *African Historical Review*, 39, 2 (2007), 67.

⁵ Patricia Limerick, *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York: Norton, 2001); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Richard White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A New History of the American West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); Jay Gitlin, “Becoming West: Toward a New Meaning for Western History,” in William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past* (New York: Norton, 1993), 3–29; and James F. Brooks, “Violence, Justice, and State Power in the New Mexican Borderlands, 1780–1880,” in Richard White and John M. Findlay, *Power and Place in the North American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 23–60. An excellent use of “frontier”: see Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, eds., *The Frontier in History: South Africa and the United States* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981); the debate about the “frontier” as the key influence on Afrikaner outlook is related in Martin Legassick, “The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography,” in Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, eds., *Economy and Society in Preindustrial South Africa* (London: Longman, 1980), 44–79.

The European officials who first controlled Cape Town knew barely anything about any upcountry people. Governor Jan van Riebeeck in his diary in 1661 spoke of “Brickje,” a term supplied to him by Khoikhoi who traded and grazed up and down the Cape. The word remained in use through the eighteenth century. It meant “goat people” in its literal translation (*biri-qua*), but in view of the purely bovine ideal of the Cape (Penninsular and Gonaqua) Khoikhoi, goats probably only indicated the domain of arable farmers. Under the same rubric, *briqua* apparently meant not only highveld chiefdoms but also the ornamented, elaborate chiefships associated with seventeenth-century Zimbabwe-related sites.⁶ Essentially *briqua* were “populous settled farmers,” so far unseen.

The first pioneers from the Cape into the midst of these farmers were more of the European settlement’s escaped servants, joined by outlaws (*drosters*), European “transfrontiersman,” and last, self-proclaimed racial “bastards.” Here they will be termed “métis.” A man named Classe Kok was an early example of a métis pioneer, reaching inland Khoikhoi, “Giriguriqua” people. His surname, “cook,” tells us what he did in Cape Town and of his subservient status there. From 1713 on, Kok’s progeny grew in number, helping to constitute a major chiefly lineage on the southwestern highveld.⁷

Soon enough one found more and more métis men with Khoikhoi; they wore trousers and shirts, and they traveled armed. Many of them undoubtedly saw themselves as colonists rather than indigenes – even when they were forced by circumstance to put up Khoikhoi-style *werfs*, smoke their meat in the Khoe manner, and marry Khoikhoi wives.⁸ But they also had no desire to

⁶ Lichtenstein gives Beriqua and recognizes it as a Khoe term; Hinrich Lichtenstein, *The Foundation of the Cape* [and] *About the Bechuanas*, ed. and trans. Otto Spohr (Cape Town: Balkema, 1973 [originally published 1807]), 63 ff., and Christopher Saunders, “Early Knowledge of the Sotho: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Accounts of the Tswana,” *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library*, 20 (1969), 60–70. In *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 246, Nancy Jacobs points out the naming *matsaroqua* but sees it as Lichtenstein’s. Zimbabwe-related: see Chapter 2.

⁷ Nigel Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist and Khoisan on the Cape’s Northern Frontier* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), and “The Orange River Frontier Zone, C. 1700–1805,” 21–109, in *Einiqualand: Studies of the Orange River Frontier* (Cape Town: Andrew Smith, 1995), 42–5 esp., and Timothy Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996), 32–58.

⁸ The notion of métis as a core status rather than a marginal attribute draws on Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and Jean Loupe Amselle, *Metisso Logics* (New York: Routledge, 1989); and Thomas Arbousset and François Daumas, *Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the Northeast of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope ... In the Months of March, April and May, 1836*, trans. John Brown (Cape Town: Struik, 1968 [1846]), who compare South African “Bastaards” with South American “Métis.” As an obviously imposed term, a plural noun, and occasionally an adjective, métis is also suitably vague: herein it entails products of the Cape and highveld borderlands, Khoe-, Dutch, Portuguese, and sometimes Sechuana- (the parent of Sesotho and Sepedi and Setswana today) speaking people, intermixed culturally and/or biologically, and *oorlamsch*, ex-slaves, “Korana,” “Half-Castes,” Bastards (*bastard*), *Binnelanders*,