

The Construction of Difference: Land, Labor, and Racial Ideology in South Africa- S Dubow

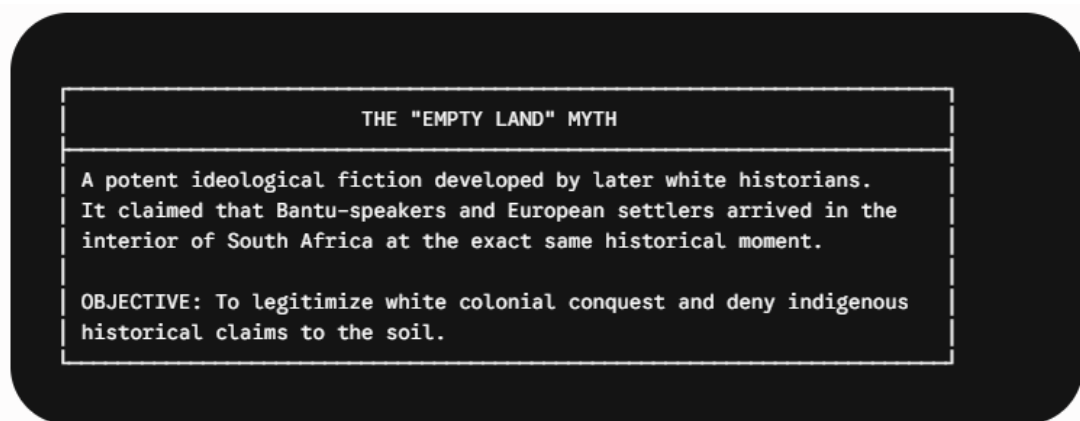
To understand the history of South Africa is to observe a complex, centuries-long laboratory of identity formation, structural dispossession, and the institutionalization of racial hierarchies. For decades, traditional historiography treated South Africa's past as a simplistic, inevitable clash between binary racial groups. However, a more rigorous analysis reveals that the categories of "race" and "belonging" were deliberately constructed and re-constructed over time to serve changing economic and political configurations of power.

From the fluid encounters of the early Cape frontier to the rigid, state-enforced segregation of the twentieth century, South Africa's past is defined by how diverse peoples were systematically categorized to facilitate the control of land and labour.

1. The Original Inhabitants and the "Empty Land" Myth

Before European sails appeared on the horizon, the southern tip of Africa was home to deeply rooted, distinct socio-economic communities.

- **The Khoisan:** In the western and central regions, the indigenous population comprised the **San** (highly skilled hunter-gatherers) and the **Khoikhoi** (pastoralists who managed large herds of cattle). Collectively known as the Khoisan, their concepts of wealth and land were fluid, rooted in seasonal migration and ecological balance rather than private enclosure.
- **Bantu-Speaking Agro-Pastoralists:** To the east and north, across the summer-rainfall zones, lived iron-working, Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists (the ancestors of the Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, and Tswana peoples). They practiced a sophisticated mix of agriculture and cattle-keeping, organized into centralized polities with complex systems of chieftainship and law.



2. The European Influx: From Refreshment Station to Imperial Hegemony

European intervention in South Africa occurred in two distinct historical phases, driven by entirely different global imperial agendas.

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) Era (1652)

The Dutch did not arrive in the Cape with an grand mission of conquest. In 1652, Jan van Riebeeck was dispatched by the VOC merely to establish a **fortified refreshment station** to provision ships traveling the trade routes between Europe and the East Indies.

However, the economic logic of the station quickly mandated expansion. To reduce costs, the VOC granted land to *vrijburgers* (free burghers)—released company servants who became independent farmers. This initial, seemingly minor economic shift ignited a process of systemic land encroachment, destroying the pasturage of the Khoikhoi and initiating their corporate collapse through disease, warfare, and forced assimilation into the colonial labour pool.

The British Imperial Intervention (1795 / 1806)

During the Napoleonic Wars, Great Britain seized the Cape to secure the strategic sea route to India. Unlike the mercantile, cost-averse VOC, the British brought a modern, interventionist imperial state.

British rule introduced a volatile mix of **free-market capitalism, anglicization policies, and evangelical humanitarianism**. When the British abolished slavery across their empire in 1834, they alienated the Dutch-descended farmers (Boers). The Boers viewed British legalism and the nominal legal equalization of Black and white inhabitants as an intolerable subversion of the natural, divinely ordained racial order. This resentment triggered the **Great Trek** of the 1830s, an organized migration of thousands of Boers into the interior to establish independent republics free from British interference.

3. The Asian Influx: Global Empires and the Multi-Tiered Racial Hierarchy

The introduction of Asian populations to South Africa underscores how the region was integrated into wider networks of global imperial labour.

The Early Cape Malay Community

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the VOC banished political dissidents, convicts, and enslaved labourers from its territories in the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia and Malaysia) to the Cape. This diverse group forged a distinct cultural and religious identity as the **"Cape Malay"** community, introducing Islam to southern Africa and contributing significantly to the development of the Afrikaans language.

Indentured Labor and "Passenger" Indians (1860s)

In the mid-19th century, British colonists in Natal established a booming sugar plantation economy. However, they faced a critical shortage of compliant labour, as local Zulu kingdoms remained economically independent and fiercely resistant to plantation work.

To solve this, the colonial government utilized the British Empire's global network of **indentured labour**, importing over 150,000 contracted workers from India between 1860 and 1911.

- **Indentured Workers:** Bound by highly exploitative, low-paying five-year contracts, these workers endured brutal conditions on the sugar estates.
- **"Passenger" Indians:** Following the labourers came free Indian immigrants—predominantly Muslim merchants from Gujarat—who established successful commercial networks across the country (including a young lawyer named Mahatma Gandhi).

The presence of the Indian population complicated the emerging South African state. They occupied an ambiguous, uncomfortable middle tier in the racial hierarchy—neither white colonizers nor indigenous Africans—which the state continuously struggled to categorize, restrict, and segregate through discriminatory trading and residential laws.

4. Settler Realities: The Fragmentation of White Identity

White settler life in South Africa was never monolithic; it was fractured along class, cultural, and linguistic lines.

- **The Boer / Afrikaner Frontier Experience:** In the interior republics (the Transvaal and the Orange Free State), Boer life was defined by pastoralism, isolation, and a strict, patriarchal interpretation of Calvinist Christianity. Surrounded by powerful African polities, they developed a precarious **frontier mentality** that equated white survival with absolute racial mastery and the strict subordination of Black labour.
- **The British Settler Experience:** In contrast, British settlers predominated in the urban, commercial centres of Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, and Durban. Their lives were modelled on Victorian middle-class norms, centred on trade, civil administration, and professional legal structures.

While British liberals often championed a rhetoric of "civilizing missions" and a colour-blind, property-based franchise in the Cape, this humanitarianism was highly paternalistic. When their economic interests were threatened, British capitalists proved just as eager as their Boer counterparts to implement coercive labour practices.

5. Shifting Relationships: The Crucible of Racial Capitalism

The relationships between South Africa's diverse groups evolved from fluid, pragmatic frontier interactions into an institutionalized, rigid system of segregation.

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the frontier was a space of shifting alliances. Boers, Griquas (peoples of mixed ancestry), and African chiefdoms frequently traded, intermarried, and formed military coalitions against mutual rivals. Race was a powerful marker, but it had not yet ossified into a totalizing, bureaucratic apparatus.

The true catalyst for modern segregation was the **Mineral Revolution**—the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley (1867) and gold on the Witwatersrand (1886).



Deep-level gold mining required immense capital expenditure, and profits depended entirely on keeping labour costs artificially low. To achieve this, the British imperial state and the mining corporations collaborated to systematically strip African communities of their economic independence.

Through the implementation of **hut taxes** (forcing Africans into the cash economy) and the **Pass Laws** (restricting Black freedom of movement), African men were transformed into a cheap, disposable army of migrant labourers. They were housed in prison-like, single-sex mining compounds, physically segregated from the white urban populations.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Saul Dubow's analysis reminds us that South Africa's history is not merely a tale of prejudice, but an account of how **ideology was mobilized to justify economic exploitation**. The convergence of Dutch pastoralists, British imperialists, Asian labourers, and dispossessed indigenous societies created a deeply fractured social matrix. The legal systems of segregation—and later, Apartheid—were not ancient tribal hatreds, but modern, bureaucratic mechanisms designed to manage these disparate groups, ensuring that white political and economic hegemony remained absolute.