

Introduction

This is a story of faith, hope and a distinct lack of charity. The faith and the hope belonged to the few hundred Khoekhoe families who from 1829 on came to live in the Upper Kat River Valley, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, and attempted to build their livelihoods there. They were doing this in a war zone, as they acquired the land to form a human shield between the amaXhosa and the Cape Colony.¹ Nonetheless, they managed to transform the valley from open waste to fertile farmland. None of them became rich, by the standards of the Cape at the time, but many achieved a modest degree of comfort. And this was not all. In the conversations they had with the British clergymen who worked among them, they developed a specific South African political position, an inclusive nationalism that is the direct ancestor of that which rules South Africa today. And they fought. Three times they found themselves in the wars between the British colony and the amaXhosa, and three times they

¹ On the wars see Christopher Saunders, “The Hundred Years’ War: some reflections on African Resistance on the Cape-Xhosa Frontier”, in D. Chainawa (ed.), *Profiles of Self-Determination* (Northridge: California State University, 1976); Clifton C. Crais, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance in Pre-industrial South Africa: The Making of the Colonial Order in the Eastern Cape, 1770–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Noel Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa’s Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992); Jeff Peires, *The House of Phalo: A History of the Xhosa People in the Days of their Independence* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1982); Martin Legassick, *The Struggle for the Eastern Cape, 1800–1854: Subjugation and the Roots of South African Democracy* (Johannesburg: KMM, 2010); Tim Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1996); for the context see Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard Mbenga and Robert Ross (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, from the Earliest Times to 1885* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

were considered the finest soldiers on either side. Once, in 1846, they prevented what was a not too severe defeat for the British forces from turning into an imperial catastrophe. When Andries Botha and the rest of the Kat River militia rescued the ammunition wagons of the British army, they ensured that the battle of Burns Hill would not become one of the defining disasters of British colonial history.

None of this was supposed to happen, at least not in the eyes of the mass of white colonists. Khoekhoe – “Hottentots” as they were contemptuously known – were not supposed to act on their own behalf, nor to become respectable, prosperous farmers. They were not supposed to develop their own political thought. They were certainly not supposed to extract the British army from a great hole of its own making.

This, then, was the lack of charity, the inability on the part of the British colonial rulers of South Africa, and of the mass of the settler population, especially those who identified themselves as English, to accept the possibility that the Khoekhoe were as successful, as powerful and as articulate as the men and women of the Kat River had turned out to be. This was an assumption born of racism, but also a racism that, paradoxically, was fed, not by being confirmed by experience, but precisely by being denied. It was the achievement of the Khoekhoe at the Kat River and elsewhere, and for that matter the success of the amaXhosa in resisting colonial advance, that exacerbated white racism, until it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the Kat River Settlement, as it was called, were allowed to succeed, then the existential justification for colonialism, that of bringing civilisation to a land where the inhabitants were incapable of precisely that, would fall away.

Almost all the people who first came to the Settlement were at least partially of Khoekhoe descent. In the course of time they were joined by more people, of other ethnic heritages, but until the mid-1850s, the Settlement had an exclusively Khoekhoe character, at least in colonial theory. Thereafter, following on a rebellion against British colonial rule by a proportion of the Kat River people, the racially exclusive nature of the Settlement was broken up by the British, after all the available land was handed over to whites. The result was a radical shift in the nature of society within the valley. In essence, then, this is a history of a region of South Africa approximately 800 square kilometres in extent over a period of less than three decades. At most the population of the valley was some 5,000 people.²

² Although this is the first academic book on the Kat River Settlement, it is certainly not the first study that has been devoted in whole or in part to the valley. See Tony Kirk, “The

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In many ways, then, this work falls into the category of microhistory, that is to say the detailed mining of a particularly productive lode of historical source material, working with an attention to detail on a small scale in order, as Keith Wrightson has recently put it, “to explore things otherwise inaccessible.” Microhistory is thus the historians’ equivalent of the village study based on anthropological fieldwork, although generally with a time dimension that anthropologists often miss.³ It is, again to quote Wrightson, “concerned with the close examination of the particular, ... precisely because such specificity can illuminate larger issues.” In this, provided due attention is paid to the historians’ duty to put what they write in a broader context, (and not to stray too far from the immediate context), the local and the detailed can have a significance well beyond their apparent parochialism. This seems to work best when historians are “reflexive and ... open” about what they actually do. They should engage readers in their dialogue with the sources, and also be self-conscious about the rhetorical, generally narrative strategies they choose in the construction of their arguments. I would like to think that Wrightson’s own self-conscious comments, which I read after this book was all but complete, can find their resonance in what follows.⁴

In one way, though, this book does not follow the classic pattern of microhistory. Microhistories tend to be about picturesque but seemingly irrelevant corners of the globe. Studies of those places and people that

Cape Economy and the Expropriation of the Kat River Settlement”, in Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore (eds.), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London: Longmans, 1980); idem, “Progress and Decline in the Kat River Settlement, 1829–1854”, *Journal of African History*, XIV (1973), 411–28; J. C. Visagie, *Die Katrivieredersetting, 1829–1839*, Ph.D. thesis, University of South Africa, 1978; J. S. Marais, *The Cape Coloured People, 1652–1937* (London: Longmans, 1939), 216–46; Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2002); idem, “‘Race’, Warfare, and Religion in Mid-nineteenth-century Southern Africa: The Khoikhoi Rebellion against the Cape Colony and Its Uses, 1850–58”, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, XIII (2000), 17–42; Clifton C. Crais, “Slavery and Emancipation in the Eastern Cape”, in Nigel Worden and Clifton Crais (eds.), *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and Its Legacy in the Nineteenth-century Cape Colony* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 271–89; Crais, *White Supremacy*.

³ It is thus not surprising that one of the notable African works of microhistory is in fact based very largely on the documentation produced by a major anthropological research project. See T. C. McCaskie, *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village, 1850–1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

⁴ Keith Wrightson, *Ralph Taylor’s Summer: A Scrivener, His City and the Plague* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), xii–xiii. In this he is i.a. referring to E. P. Thompson, “Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context”, *Midland History*, I (1972): 41–55.

historians have traditionally thought of as important, however detailed, do not generally find themselves included in this genre. There is a qualitative difference in the reception of the study of the Pyrenean village of Montailou and that of the Court of Versailles, however similar the level of detail may be. Menocchio the miller is treated differently from his fellow Italian Machiavelli.⁵ Now, this book is a history of a relatively small number of people in what is today an impoverished backwater of the country, fairly irrelevant except to those who have lived there, and their descendants. Nevertheless, it was in its time, above all during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, both metaphorically and literally at the centre of much of what was most significant in the creation of colonial South Africa. To see why, it is instructive to consider the alternative ways in which the history of racial and social stratification in South African can be investigated. Clearly, there has long been the major distinction, within colonial and post-colonial South Africa, between the rich, the white and the powerful, on the one hand, and the poor, the black and the relatively powerless on the other. In a broad sense, South African history has been about the establishment and the maintenance of, and the attempts to break down, this dichotomy. This famously led to the most celebrated, and acrimonious, of arguments within South African history, that known as the “Race–Class Debate.” This was primarily about the complicity of capitalism in apartheid, with a whole set of corollaries for the politics of opposition and for the building of post-apartheid South Africa. This is not the place to rehearse those arguments.⁶ What matters in this context is that hiding behind that great ideological conflagration was another debate, relating the importance of the pre-industrial period for later forms of racial stratification in the country. For a while the consensus followed Martin Legassick’s famous demolition of the older claims that responsibility for the racial attitudes of white South Africa in the

⁵ The references are of course to E. B. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montailou: The Promised Land of Error*, translated by Barbara Bray (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1978); E. B. Le Roy Ladurie with Jean-François Fitou, *Saint-Simon ou le système de la Cour* (Paris: Fayard, 1997); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

⁶ The classic texts of this debate were probably F. A. Johnstone, “White Prosperity and White Supremacy in South Africa Today”, *African Affairs*, 69 (1970): 124–40; Harold Wolpe, “Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid”, *Economy and Society*, 1 (1972): 425–45; Merle Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid: South Africa, 1910–1984* (London: Gower/Maurice Temple Smith), 1985. It may be that the time has come for a well-contextualised intellectual history of South African historiography and related fields in the 1970s and 1980s.

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twentieth century was to be found among the Afrikaner farmers of the frontier, in their relation to the Khoekhoe and San, above all.⁷ In partial reaction to this, there was the attempt, particularly by Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee in the symptomatically entitled *Shaping of South African Society*, to locate “the origins and entrenchment of European domination” during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but in the heartland of the Cape Colony, the South-West Cape, rather than on the frontier.⁸

The Shaping of South African Society reflected the beginnings of a revitalisation of the colonial history of South Africa. This has become a field that has grown very considerably, and, to its benefit, has been prepared to see the history of the Colony in its own terms, and not merely as the forerunner, or not, of apartheid. Nevertheless, out of this have come a number of arguments that are particularly germane to the history of the Kat River. They can be grouped under two main categories. The first has been claim most cogently developed by R. L. Watson, that white racial attitudes became sharper and more vehement precisely in the aftermath of the emancipation of slaves in the 1830s.⁹ Things should not be exaggerated. Watson himself had earlier provided evidence of virulent racism well before emancipation, significantly above all on the part of English Settlers.¹⁰ Against this it is clear that the attempts to maintain control over a labour force when the legal basis for exploitation had disappeared entailed a major shift in the establishment of a racial, as opposed to a legal, stratification.

The second line of arguments has centred on the Eastern Cape and the confrontation between the Cape Colony and the amaXhosa. In an older historiography this long confrontation was the core of South African

⁷ Martin Legassick, “The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography”, in Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore (eds.), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London: Longmans, 1980), 44–79.

⁸ Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee, “The Origins and Entrenchment of European dominance at the Cape, 1652–c. 1840”, in Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee (eds.), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1840*, 2nd ed. (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1989), 521–66.

⁹ R. L. Watson, *Slave Emancipation and Racial Attitudes in Nineteenth-century South Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012); cf. also, Dik van Arkel, Chris Quispel and Robert Ross, “Going Beyond the Pale: On the roots of White Supremacy in South Africa”, in Robert Ross, *Beyond the Pale: Essays on the History of Colonial South Africa* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1993), 69–110.

¹⁰ R. L. Watson, *The Slave Question: Liberty and Property in South Africa* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991), especially 130–1.

history.¹¹ For a while the conflict was marginalised, but in recent times a number of authors have reasserted the centrality of the long conflict on the eastern frontier of the Cape Colony – alternatively on the western frontier of Xhosaland – in the broader processes of South African, and indeed British imperial, history. On the one hand there have been those histories of the conflict written much more from the Xhosa perspective than their distant predecessors.¹² On the other are those authors, notably Clifton Crais and Richard Price, who have stressed that the ideas that the British had of Xhosa society, and to a lesser extent those the ama-Xhosa held of the British, were of crucial importance for the way in which the conflict developed. Thus for Crais, the main question was to unravel how “European representations of the African inform policy, encourage imperial expansion and, ultimately, legitimate colonialism and a racial capitalism in South Africa”.¹³ For Price, indeed it was the construction of a colonial knowledge system, both on the part of the missionaries and of colonial administrators and the military, that drove on the processes of colonial conquest, in this, the first area where the British had to work out how to rule a functioning, agricultural African society.¹⁴

In this book, I am arguing something similar, but not entirely congruent, with the views of Crais and Price. In essence they are both concerned to demonstrate how the knowledge system of the colonised both developed and, at least in Price’s work, moved further away from might be seen as reality – admittedly he would not be so crude as ever to believe that there was such a thing as an evident, incontestable reality about any social order. This is a strong argument, but there is a corollary, most succinctly expressed by Dean Swift when he wrote of philosophers “who find/ Some favourite system to their mind/ In every point to make it fit/ Will force all nature to submit.” At least with regard to the Kat River Settlement both proponents and opponents of the Khoekhoe were actively engaged in moulding Khoekhoe society until it fitted into their vision of how it should be. If the Kat River Settlement, as it was called, were allowed to succeed, then the existential justification for colonialism, that of bringing

¹¹ See above all Sir George Cory, *The Rise of South Africa*, 6 vols. (originally published London: Longmans Green, 1910–1940; reprinted Cape Town: Struik, 1965).

¹² Notably Peires, *House of Phalo*; idem, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–7* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989); in a more popular vein, Mostert, *Frontiers*.

¹³ Crais, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance*, 2.

¹⁴ Richard Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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civilisation to a land where the inhabitants were incapable of precisely that, would fall away. Or for others, the belief that the Khoekhoe were capable of being moulded into civilized and Christian beings was the only justification for colonialism. In neither case were the Khoe themselves seen as the prime actors in their own drama.

These arguments, and this angst, were of course not limited to the Eastern Cape, or indeed to South Africa. Deep in the justification of Empire, as expounded by John Locke, was the idea that Europeans, specifically Englishmen, could claim land that was not put into full use by the people living on it. Land could be owned only if it was improved. There is a massive literature on this trope, and the extent to which European colonists really based their claims to territory on the fact of the *terra nullius* – land without owners – in the Americas and Australia.¹⁵ It does not matter, in this context, whether this was actually what John Locke thought, or at what stage the principle became enshrined in the law of the white colonies.¹⁶ At least in South Africa, and indeed throughout the British Empire, by Ordinance 50 of 1828, race could no longer have any bearing on legal status. The possession of land and any other legal right was equally open to all free British subjects.¹⁷ Even before this, the British justified their possession of the Cape by conquest from the Dutch, rather than by the nature of their relation with the Khoekhoe and the San. Ideologically the main use of the idea of a “Vacant Land”, a pervasive trope in colonial thinking, was the claim the Bantu-speakers – thus

¹⁵ For example, James Tully, “Rediscovering America: The *Two Treatises* and Aboriginal Rights”, in Tully, *An approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 149–55, 166–71; Barbara Aneil, *John Locke and America: The Defence of English Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Andrew Fitzmaurice, “The Genealogy of *Terra Nullius*”, *Australian Historical Studies*, 38 (2007), 1–15; idem, “Liberalism and Empire in Nineteenth-century International Law”, *American Historical Review*, 117 (2012), 122–40; Allan Greer, “Commons and Enclosure in the Colonization of North America”, *American Historical Review*, 117 (2012): 365–86.

¹⁶ Paul Corcoran, “John Locke on the Possession of Land: Native Title vs. the principle of *Vacuum domicilium*”, Paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association, Monash University, 24–26 September 2007. Retrieved 5 June 2012 from <http://arts.monash.edu.au/psi/news-and-events/apsa/refereed-papers/political-theory/corcoran.pdf>; Stuart Banner, “Why *Terra Nullius*? Anthropology and Property Law in Early Australia”, *Law and History Review*, 23 (2005): 95–130; Lauren Benton and Benjamin Straumann, “Acquiring Empire by Law: Roman Doctrine to Early Modern European Practice”, *Law and History Review*, 28 (2010): 1–38.

¹⁷ In 1838, the qualification of freedom became irrelevant, with the ending of slavery and its short-lived “apprenticeship” aftermath.

including the amaXhosa –arrived in South Africa only at about the same time as the Europeans, and were thus just as much, or as little, conquerors and intruders as the whites.¹⁸

Those for whom such justification was needed were primarily the British immigrants to the Eastern Cape, those known as the 1820 Settlers. This was a group of around 4,000 Britons, including the women and children, who were brought into the Eastern Cape by the British Government in order to make the region safe, and to speed its economic development, and also to alleviate social conflict in post-Waterloo England. It was expected that they would farm in concentrated settlements. Within a short time, however, the great majority had come to live in the towns, particularly Grahamstown, or were setting up the wool farms and trading businesses throughout the area, and would dominate its economy and, they hoped, its politics.¹⁹ Those of the settlers who had never read John Locke – probably very close to 100 percent – or dealt with the legal niceties of colonial possession, were nevertheless convinced of their right to the land, as their intellectual leader, Robert Godlonton, repeatedly proclaimed.²⁰ Part of that conviction derived from the opinion that the Khoekhoe had made, and could make, no transformation in the landscape so as to own it. It was this presumption that the Kat River Settlement was challenging.²¹

What the history of the Kat River Settlement allows above all is the possibility to investigate the borders between the major socioeconomic and racial blocks, so as to see how the lines of division were created and controlled. Thus on one side of the racial divide, but on the other of the

¹⁸ Clifton C. Crais, “The Vacant Land: The Mythology of British Expansion in the Eastern Cape, South Africa”, *Journal of Social History*, 25 (1991): 255–75.

¹⁹ Arthur C. M. Webb, “The Agricultural Development of the 1820 Settlement”, M.A. thesis, Rhodes, 1975; Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth Century South Africa and Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

²⁰ Robert Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony, 1750–1870: A Tragedy of Manners* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 63; see also Basil A. Le Cordeur, “Robert Godlonton as Architect of Frontier Opinion, 1850–1857”, *Archives Year Book for South African History* (hereafter AYB), 1959, II; of a mass of material on the 1820 Settlers, perhaps the most useful are Basil A. Le Cordeur *The Politics of Eastern Cape Separatism, 1820–1854* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1981) and M. D. Nash, *Bailies’s Party of 1820 Settlers: A Collective Experience in Emigration* (Cape Town & Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1982). See also Keegan, *Colonial South Africa* for a broader description of the role of the settlers in the creation of a capitalist economy.

²¹ David Bunn “The Sleep of the Brave: Graves as Sites and ‘Signs in the Colonial Eastern Cape”, in Paul Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (eds.), *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 56–89.

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economic, were those known in South Africa as poor whites. Much of the history of Afrikaner nationalism has centred on the ideological and practical work needed to police this boundary, to ensure that those who were considered to be white and Afrikaans remained in, or were brought into, the correct side of what was seen from above as a major cleavage but that was in fact a very uncertain line. In contrast there were those who were on the black side of the colour line, but who could make a claim for social and political acceptance on other grounds, particularly those of religion, prosperity and generally respectable style of life, and also because they supported the colonial project, often in military terms, in the many conflicts of colonial conquest. Many of the adherents of mission Christianity fulfilled these criteria, but many of the inhabitants of the Kat River Settlement did so to a degree for which there are few, if any, parallels until much later in the history of the country. In other words, the study of the Kat River provides unrivalled opportunities to see how the lines of social stratification were actually established in the nineteenth century. There were of course other such groups that made evident the boundaries of the social order, most notably the Griquas, those captaincies of Khoekhoe and white descent that controlled the regions north of the Gariep River for the first three-fifths of the nineteenth century.²²

This, then, is, I would hope, the reason why the history of the Kat River has to be retold, and why it matters for the general history of at least South Africa, and in its way that of other parts of the British Empire. It is not, of course, typical of the history of the Cape Colony, let alone of South Africa. At the very least it would be difficult to find another piece of the South African countryside, of comparable size, about which so much could be written. And in all sorts of other ways, the Kat River Valley has a history that is most unlike that of the rest of South Africa. It was not a random choice on my behalf to look in great detail at this particular place, nor indeed the fact that such detail is indeed possible, even though I have a certain sympathy for the argument that the reconstruction at the finest possible mesh of the lives of any people in the past has

²² Indeed, the Griquas of Philippolis, in what is now the Free State, were the subject of the first academic work I ever wrote, and in that sense, and in others, writing about the Kat River, with its many links both conceptual and personal to the Griquas, has felt like returning to my academic roots. Robert Ross, *Adam Kok's Griquas: A Study in the Development of Stratification in South Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); see above all, now, also Martin C. Legassick, *The Politics of a South African Frontier: The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana, and the Missionaries, 1780–1840* (Basel: Baseler Afrika-Bibliografie, 2010).

considerable humanistic attraction. Moreover, there are no other places in South Africa where the opinions of those who were to fall on the wrong, that is to say the dark, side of the country's racial divide were so regularly recorded, at least in the first half of the nineteenth century, and so unmediated – of course never totally unmediated – by colonial individuals and institutions. These last included missionaries, newspaper editors and government officials and organisations. They may have filtered what was recorded, and often translated it, in terms of language, idiom and genre, but the messages that emanate from the valley do represent, to a very surprising degree, the voice of the Kat River Settlers. Thus the colonial newspapers, most notably the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, edited from Cape Town by John Fairbairn, and, surprisingly perhaps, *The Graham's Town Journal*, edited by Fairbairn's (and the Khoekhoe's) enemy Robert Godlonton, both at times contain a considerable quantity of testimony by the Kat River people. So do the government archives in Cape Town, and, as could be expected, the records of the missions, notably the London Missionary Society in London.

Thus the history of the Kat River is not only the history of the ways in which others viewed the valley's inhabitants, but equally the ways in which the Khoekhoe viewed those who had opinions about them. It was not a dialogue of the deaf. The Khoekhoe knew all too well what was said about them, and were selective in their opinions of the whites, approving of some of those of European descent and very decidedly not of others. Some of the whites, notably a few of the missionaries and one or two senior officials, were in full conversation with the Kat River Khoekhoe. Others may have known, or correctly surmised, what the Khoekhoe thought of them, and it made them uncomfortable. They correctly suspected a lack of what they considered due deference, and attempted to impose it. The result was not happy.

It was recognised at the time how the Kat River Settlement was testing the borders of race. Throughout the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and slightly longer, the Kat River Settlement was at the centre of Cape Colonial history, in at least three ways, while there was a fourth that became apparent only much later. First, it was established as a result of the wars between the Cape Colony and the amaXhosa, and continued to be a major part of this conflict, by far the longest and the bloodiest in South African history. Much of these wars were fought out about, and in, the territory of the Settlement, and by its inhabitants. This mattered. Second, those who were attempting to build up the racial order of colonial society, and those who were opposing these measures, clashed