

FOREWORD

This study appears almost three decades after Nelson Mandela's inauguration as president of South Africa in 1994. At the time of its publication, all readers aged around thirty and younger, will have lived in a world where this country has "always" had a Northern (since 2003, Limpopo) province and in which the "Transvaal" and "homelands" or "Bantustans" are concepts from history.

It is a book about the making of a province. It is an intricately layered story about how things, thoughts, and practices once new and contested, sometimes remain controversial, however, oftentimes, over time, also become 'taken for granted'. It is about how our ways of seeing the world, although we might think of them as stable, are constantly adjusting. It is about the ways our view of the world is comprised not only of observation, but also of participation, as much in ritualised collective behaviours as through our individual agency and our ability to influence outcomes. This is what visual culture scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff refers to as *visuality* and *counter visuality*:¹ the extent to which we either lead or follow in the way our history is being imagined and reimagined as an unfolding of a succession of images towards an idealised future. When we understand the making of these visualities the way Mahunele Thotse explains them—as an amalgamation of governmental, communal, and individual processes of knowledge-making, remembering, and forgetting—we will be able to view our identities as more fluid, and yet embrace them with more confidence, with a stronger sense of the parameters of what was, what is, and what might become possible.

Thotse presents his arguments within the context of international scholarship on the role of public monuments in the making of national identities. As such, his study contributes to public history and historical memory studies, and it will be read as a welcome new contribution by fellow researchers in these fields. The study also contributes to the historiography of the trans-Vaal area.² Chapter Three provides a thorough and systematic assessment of the research conducted on the conflicts between African local polities and Boer and British invaders as from the nineteenth century. Many of these studies were submitted as dissertations and theses at the University of

1 See *The right to look. A Counterhistory of Visuality*. (Duke University Press, 2011).

2 Because the area comprised a province of South Africa for the greater part of the twentieth century and before that, was administered for roughly the last half of the nineteenth century as an entity that had accumulated a rich material archive of documentary evidence, it makes sense in historical research to continue to think of the geographical area north of the Vaal River as constitutive of an area of study.

Pretoria and as such, the chapter offers a glimpse of the historical scholarship produced at this institution from the 1940s onwards. By extracting material from these (mostly Afrikaans) studies, Thotse displays the extent to which the scholarly gaze had shifted in less than a century from “seeing” the local African communities as the “problem” to viewing the colonising forces as the aggressors. From the earliest studies, analysing “campaigns against” African polities through to the more recent ones critically engaging with the presence and the policies of Boer and British settlers and administrators, the scholarship culminates in the issues still pertinent today: land and leadership.

Thotse’s study is as much a cultural history of the political as a political history of the cultural, of the very particular version of a “southern modernity”. Limpopo province encapsulates: The product of a modern, negotiated political settlement, with a democratically elected government, it builds its founding myth on (defeated) “traditional” warrior kings from a precolonial dispensation; incorporating thanksgiving to the ancestors and cleansing rituals into ceremonies presided over by the provincial premier. The apparent contradictions in this sentence are key to a glint of insight into our own South African condition. Modernity entails the ability to recognise the chosen path as “different” from the past and yet to identify certain realms of our continued existence as “traditional”. We need myths and rituals to reconcile the two; to act our part, to play at “being both” modern citizen and anchored-to-the-past-human-being.

As such, the warrior king sculptures are rightfully at the core of Thotse’s interest; they embody the complexities of the modern South African state within the Limpopo province: the dual tensions of on the one hand, white control relinquished and on the other hand, black traditional leadership harboured in provincial and national government structures. Perhaps this explains why the warrior kings have been imagined and sculpted in a paradigm so different from our modern perceptions of masculine civility—in all probability even the modern aspirations of the warrior kings themselves according to the historical record (contrary to the bare torsos and recurrent display of animal skins and traditional weapons in the statues, visual, and material sources show us that these leaders appropriated western attire and embraced new technologies). However, for the “trick” we, living in the here and now, must perform moving forward while keeping an eye on the rear view mirror of the past, we need to assert ourselves; affirm our dignity, perform our distinctness, somehow make our distance from past visible that must, somehow, have been different from the present. And this, if I am not mistaken, is what Thotse, with an overwhelming display of erudition and informed reasoning, argues: We (as individual members becoming human through our association with many different groups—family, clan, tribe, faith community,

career, province, nation) have the power to observe with a keener eye, investigate more deeply, and choose with more discernment how we wish to act our part in the drama of the present-soon-to-become history. Rather than being 'tricked' into them, we *can* investigate, and we may *know* how, the myths we live by have been constructed.

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14 August 2023
