

**Belonging as Simultaneously Both a
Statement of Identity and of Political Power**

**L.J. Mitchell, *Belongings: Property, Family and Identity in Colonial South Africa
(An Exploration of Frontiers, 1725-circa 1830)***

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This remarkable account of the colonisation of the Western Cape begins with an evocative sense of place: the source of the Olifants River in the Cedarberg Mountains. The river is the geographical, social and political frontier in relation to which Mitchell constructs her account of the colonisation of the early eighteenth century.

In tracing the detailed records of land tenure, financial transactions, legal proceedings and family lineage in the area from 1725 to 1830, Mitchell painstakingly etches the ways in which land, material possessions and social relationships became the means by which a gradual consolidation of settler identity and socio-political dominance unfolded in the Cedarberg. The idea of belonging as simultaneously both a statement of identity and of political power, begins with accounts of the earliest Trekboers staking claims to land from Khoikhoi and San. While the shift in land tenure was a key moment in history with a precise date, the unfolding of colonisation it precipitated was complex and convoluted – a dynamic that Mitchell traces through documenting the varying fortunes of people whose lives and belongings are reflected in archival records of the time.

Mitchell's ability to use rigorous analysis of statistical data to construct a narrative history of a particular time and place, is one of the most satisfying aspects of reading this book. It invites the tracing of overt narratives emerging out of what archival records contain, but also the surfacing of hidden implications such as the possible impact for people already living on the land at the time, as well as the significant social and economic roles of settler women.

The methodological challenges of balancing traditional and postmodern approaches to historical research are skilfully and carefully worked out. Her journey

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as a researcher engaging with archival records becomes one of the many unfolding narratives of the text – a strategy that invites the reader to become part of the ongoing work of understanding the role of narrative in history by interrogating their own work and research.

Another strength of the narrative approach that Mitchell uses, is the way that it places the idea of frontier orthodoxy at the centre of the entrenchment of colonial cultural hegemony through the appropriation of land and labour oppression. While land tenure acted as the catalyst for colonisation, the research lens Mitchell brings to bear on archival records suggests that an orthodox settler identity established itself as the dominant social and geographical determinant around which white settlers, slaves, freed slaves, Khoisan and people of mixed race increasingly structured and shaped their lives during – and, arguably, beyond – this time in South African history. It is the gradual and complex development and entrenchment of this cultural hegemony that provides the compelling narrative trajectory of the book.

The hard copy of this book is a partial representation of Mitchell's work, as it forms part of the Gutenberg-e online history series established by the American Historical Association and Columbia University Press. While efforts to incorporate multimedia methods of documenting and accessing research are to be commended, the fact that this research is about the history of a context where access to digital media is difficult for many students needs to be acknowledged or addressed in some way in this publication and the way in which this research is disseminated.

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