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Olive Schreiner's Racialization of South Africa

PAULA M. KREBS

I

Feminist critics in the 1980s resurrected the reputation of Olive Schreiner, portraying her as a feminist foremother, the creator of perhaps the earliest New Woman in English-language literature, the tragic Lyndall of *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Attention to Schreiner's feminism has led critics to focus on her fiction and her theoretical work *Woman and Labour* (1911) to the exclusion of much of her other writing. This essay aims to redirect attention to Schreiner as a South African—an English South African writing for British audiences in a time when relations between the two countries, one an imperial power and one a settler nation, were troubled. Schreiner's writing about her homeland attempts to shape British perceptions of South Africa and so to shape British-South African relations. Schreiner tries to envision a political future for South Africa within a British imperial culture that is already in decline by the turn of the century. She attempts to define a South Africa of the future by distilling a cultural identity called "South African" out of a region of disparate and sometimes hostile communities. South (or, perhaps more properly, southern) Africa in the period leading up to the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 consisted of British colonies and protectorates in uneasy alliance with Boer republics. Schreiner tries to shape a cultural identity that is South African rather than English-South African or Afrikaner, and that takes account of Zulus and "Bushmen" without actually incorporating them into the concept of the nation. In Schreiner's writing of the Boer War period we see how languages of race are invoked to create a nation out of two peoples—a nation of one white race in a land of many African races.

In the 1890s Schreiner wrote a series of essays about her homeland for British audiences. She considered the essays "personal" writing ("simply what one South African at the end of the nineteenth century thought, and felt, with regard to his [sic] native land" [*Thoughts on South*

Africa 14]). The essays and Schreiner's more overtly political tracts of the same period (*The Political Situation* [1896] and *An English-South African's View of the Situation* [1899]) reveal the importance of race to considerations of national identity at the turn of the century. In Schreiner's writing about her homeland, she steps in as an English South African to mediate between Boer and Briton on the eve of the Anglo-Boer War. Her definitions of race rely on both socialism and evolution, in what Saul Dubow has called "a curious mix of political radicalism and biological determinism" (72). But the discourses of evolution and socialism prove incompatible in Schreiner's analysis of late-Victorian imperialism, with the result that even this most progressive of Victorians is incapable of envisioning a truly multi-racial or non-racial future for South Africa.¹

In turn-of-the-century Britain and South Africa, many definitions of "race" were in circulation at once, with race-as-ethnicity, race-as-nationality, and race-as-color each tied to a particular discourse and political purpose. Then, as now, the concept of race was politically charged yet virtually indefinable. During the Anglo-Boer War, a war between two white peoples for control of a land whose population was primarily African, definitions of race that distinguished between the two white nations took on more significance than definitions of the African races of South Africa, and Schreiner's contributions to the debates point up the significance of the racializing of white populations at the turn of the century. To construct a future for South Africa in a time of conflict between Briton and Boer, Schreiner has to create a national identity that eliminates such "racial" concerns as those that divided the two groups. She must racialize South Africa—define the characteristics of its separate groups—in order to construct a future, "blended" white South African who inherits the characteristics of both groups.

Schreiner, however, was able to look ahead to a day in which the Afrikaners and British would not hold all the cards in South Africa. In *An English-South African's View of the Situation*, she noted that no "white race" had ever "dealt gently and generously with the native folks" (26) in South Africa, and that

[t]here is undoubtedly a score laid against us on this matter, Dutch and English South Africans alike; for the moment it is in abeyance; in fifty or a hundred years it will probably be presented for payment as other bills are, and the white man of Africa will have to settle it. . . . [W]hen our sons stand up to settle it, it will be Dutchmen and Englishmen together who have to pay for the sins of their fathers. (27)

This forecast betrays a lack of faith in a natural evolution of South African society to the control of white peoples. Evolution will take care of the differences between Briton and Boer, but it cannot take care of the other kind of racial difference in South Africa—the one between white and black. For Schreiner, the erasure of the Boer in the evolution of South African society is not paralleled by an erasure of Africans.

Although she sees the South African race of the future as a white race, Schreiner is incapable of discussing her nation's future without considering Africans. She sees the possibility of a non-British, non-Boer white South Africa because she thinks of the British and Boer "races" in social Darwinist terms. Africans cannot be part of the future South African because Schreiner's writings describe Africans not in terms of social Darwinism but in terms of the other major discourse available to her as an English South African progressive—political economy: she sees Africans as the working class of the new South Africa. The irony of Schreiner's use of social Darwinism is that the language of evolution was most commonly used to discuss African inferiority to Europeans in late-Victorian Britain. Schreiner, however, uses evolution to account for Boers and turns instead to political economy to account for Africans.

Strategically, her choices were subtle. If she had argued for a South Africa in which all races interbred, she would have lost political credibility in both South Africa and Britain. Neither white South Africans nor white Britons were likely to look forward to a future in which white and black intermarried. But a future in which Briton and Boer eventually melted into each other to form a strong white breed of vaguely British-flavored South Africans was an evolutionary result that was palatable. South Africa could be an America that remained loyal to the mother country. Schreiner could not argue for a future in which the Boers were a political entity because Boer political strength was the threat about which Britain was most worried in the late 1890s. Instead, the Boers became a racial entity, to be absorbed in an evolutionary progression. The threatening political category becomes a nonthreatening racial category.

By the same logic, Africans moved from racial category to political category. One of the most common ways to discuss Africans in this period of high imperialism was, of course, in the language of evolution. Colonialism was justified by the language of social Darwinism: Africans were lower on the evolutionary scale than Europeans and

in need of guidance, direction, and encouragement so that they could eventually reach the Europeans' level. In her essays on the Boers and South Africa, Schreiner refuses the prevailing discourse of evolution for discussing Africans; instead, she defines Africans as a political and economic category, as a class. This reversal enables her to avoid the fraught area of miscegenation while taking Africans seriously as a political group. Schreiner's strategic construction of categories enables her to posit a future in which Africans remain important for South Africa but not as South Africans. They will do the manual labor for the future South African, who is white. And they will then be entitled to the rights of working classes worldwide. Giving in to fear of miscegenation, Schreiner simultaneously argues for Africans' political and economic rights and eliminates them from her vision of the ideal South African.

II

Schreiner understood her own inability to sympathize fully with the majority of the population in her country, and she knew how racism and other ethnocentrism were reproduced. She knew, for example, that she had to explain to her English readers how it was that she could sympathize with the Boer. In the introduction to the essays that were eventually collected as *Thoughts on South Africa* she writes:

Neither do I owe it to early training that I value my fellow South Africans of Dutch descent. I started in life with as much insular prejudice and racial pride as it is given to any citizen who has never left the little Northern Island to possess. . . . I cannot remember a time when I was not profoundly convinced of the superiority of the English, their government and their manners, over all other peoples. (15)

Schreiner explains her prejudice against Boers as "racial pride" and goes on to illustrate her "insular prejudice" against Boers with this example:

One of my earliest memories is of . . . making believe that I was Queen Victoria and that all the world belonged to me. That being the case, I ordered all the black people in South Africa to be collected and put into the desert of Sahara, and a wall built across Africa shutting it off; I then ordained that any black person returning south of that line should have his head cut off. I did not wish to make slaves of them, but I wished to put them where I need never see them, because I considered them ugly. I do not remember planning that Dutch South Africans should be put across the wall, but my objection to them was only a little less. (15–16)

This story is about Africans transgressing what Carolyn Burdett has called Schreiner's "apartheid wall." Why would Schreiner think she was using it to illustrate her prejudice against Boers?

In her essays about the Boers, Schreiner was working against British anti-Boer feeling that had originated early in the nineteenth century, when Britain took possession of the Dutch-occupied Cape of Good Hope. Boer rebellions against British rule, with its regulations about the treatment of African servants, had cropped up periodically through the first part of the nineteenth century, culminating in the Boers' 1837 Great Trek into the "unoccupied" lands beyond the Orange and Vaal rivers, where they set up independent states after bloody battles with the Zulus in Natal. The first significant British skirmish with the Boers came in 1881, when the Boers, after humiliating the British at the Battle of Majuba Hill, won back the sovereignty of the Transvaal, which had been annexed by Britain four years before. British public opinion maintained that the Boers were stubborn, cruel to their African servants, and trapped in the seventeenth century. By the end of the century, British anti-Boer sentiment had taken on increasingly anthropological tones. "A Situation in South Africa: A Voice from the Cape Colony," by the Reverend C. Usher Wilson, which appeared in *Nineteenth Century* just after war was declared in 1899, rebutted the defenses of the Afrikaner that came from Schreiner and other "pro-Boers":

The Boers are supposed to be a simple, pastoral and puritanical people, who plough their fields and tend their cattle during the day, and read their Bibles at night. . . . Truly, distance lends enchantment. Instead of this the Boers are nothing more nor less than a low type of the *genus homo*. . . . In self-sought isolation they have tried to escape the tide of civilisation. (522–23)

The description has a vaguely scientific air, but it also employs another discourse—that of the necessity for "civilising" Africa. Various British entrepreneurs and explorers had throughout the century justified incursions into Africa by citing Africans' need for civilisation, which was billed as Christianity but more often meant commerce (with Britain). The Boers were a special case. Descended from Europeans, they were already Christian. However, while Christian, they were still agricultural and decidedly not modern.

Schreiner's characterization of the differences between Boer and Briton was both sentimental and scientific. In the introduction to *Thoughts on South Africa*, she recounts her childhood reluctance to eat

sweets given to her by a Boer child and her refusal to sleep in a bed that had been slept in by a man she mistakenly believed to be “a Dutchman” (15). As a child, she thought that Boers were dirty. Later, she came to think of them as incompletely civilized. Perhaps the most controversial of her descriptions of the Afrikaner for a British audience was her essay called “The Boer,” which appeared in the *Daily News* and the *Fortnightly Review* in 1896, although it had been written in 1892.² Its appearance followed directly on the Jameson Raid, the ill-fated attempt by Cecil Rhodes to stir up the English in Johannesburg to armed rebellion against the Boer government of the South African Republic. Schreiner’s essay presents the Boer, the descendent of early Dutch and French Huguenot settlers, as a survival of the seventeenth century. She describes the Boers as completely cut off from the intellectual life of the rest of the world for two hundred years.

Schreiner does not, however, participate in the evolution-inflected discourse of degeneration. Degeneration theorists declared that the Boers had, through their isolation and their too-close contact with Africans, backslid as a European race.³ Schreiner’s purpose is to create a sympathetic British perception of the Boers as a pastoral race whose uncomplicated love of the land would mix well with British intellect and progressive spirit to make the South African of the future.

South African critics of “The Boer” charged that Schreiner had focused too much on the up-country Boer, the descendent of the early Dutch voortrekkers, rather than the better educated Capetown shopkeeper, who spoke both English and Afrikaans. But Schreiner had chosen farming Boers because she saw them as most uniquely South African. “[T]he Boer, like our plumbagos, our silver-trees, and our kudoos, is peculiar to South Africa,” she explains (65). The real South Africa, in Schreiner’s estimation, was to be found in the species of human, like the species of plant and wildlife, that had developed in response to the conditions of the country.

Much of “The Boer” is devoted to explaining how the language of the Afrikaner, the Taal, had stifled intellectual development in the Boer:

[S]o sparse is the vocabulary and so broken are its forms, that it is impossible in the Taal to express a subtle intellectual emotion, or abstract conception, or a wide generalization; and a man seeking to render a scientific, philosophic, or poetical work in the Taal, would find his task impossible. (87)

Schreiner speculates that the “clipped” patterns of the Taal arose from the attempts of the Huguenots to speak Dutch after they were forbidden by the Dutch settlers to speak French. Schreiner’s focus on the shortcomings of the Boers’ language has a familiar ring for students of Victorian writings on the Celts. Celtic languages had been discussed in much the same terms—they were corruptions of earlier languages, and they isolated and restricted the people who spoke them. An 1866 leader in *The Times* attacking Matthew Arnold’s championing of Welsh cultural heritage used the same arguments with which Schreiner would criticize the Taal thirty years later:

The Welsh language is the curse of Wales. Its prevalence and the ignorance of English have excluded, and even now exclude, the Welsh people from the civilization, the improvement, and the material prosperity of their English neighbours. . . . [T]he Welsh have remained in Wales, unable to mix with their fellow-subjects, shut out from all literature except what is translated into their own language and incapable of progress. . . . Their antiquated and semi-barbarous language, in short, shrouds them in darkness. If Wales and the Welsh are ever thoroughly to share in the material prosperity, and, in spite of Mr. Arnold, we will add the culture and morality, of England, they must forget their isolated language, and learn to speak English, and nothing else. (qtd. in Dawson and Pfordresher 161–62)

In her discussion of the Taal in “The Boer,” Schreiner never makes this final move; she never calls for the abolition of the Taal and its replacement with English. But we can see it coming. Boers still believe in witchcraft and biblical literalism because they missed out on the European Enlightenment. Once they start to blend with the English, they will inevitably start speaking English and thus have access to Western rationalism and Enlightenment ideals. These will naturally sweep away the vestigial prejudices of the Boers and result in a powerful twentieth-century civilization with Boers and Britons blended as one South African people.

Schreiner constructs the Boer-Briton union as positive, despite her professed fondness for the Boer, because she sees the melding of the two in terms of nationalism and evolution, not imperialism. The evolution of a South African nation, formed of Briton and Boer, is a natural and desirable development. Eric Hobsbawm points out that in the late nineteenth century, when

the only historically justifiable nationalism was that which fitted in with progress, i.e. which enlarged rather than restricted the scale on which human economies, societies and culture operated, what could the defence of small peoples, small languages,

small traditions be, in the overwhelming majority of cases, but an expression of conservative resistance to the inevitable advance of history? The small people, language or culture fitted into progress only insofar as it accepted subordinate status to some larger unit or retired from battle to become a repository of nostalgia and other sentiments. (41)

This is the position, derived in significant part from her reading of Herbert Spencer, to which Schreiner assigns the Boer within the new nation of South Africa in the twentieth century. Her formulation of a civilized Boer assimilated into an English South Africa created a nation with close ties and loyalties to Britain while disallowing actual imperial acquisition of the region.

That Schreiner could be anti-imperialist and yet see the Anglicizing of South Africa as natural and good is consistent with evolution-influenced political progressivism at the turn of the century such as that of J. A. Hobson, who saw the “civiliz[ing]” of the “lower races” as a good thing, but only if it were not imposed by capitalism. According to Hobson, if, as a result of contact with white people,

many of the old political, social, and religious institutions [of “lower races”] decay, that decay will be a natural wholesome process, and will be attended by the growth of new forms, not forced upon them, but growing out of the old forms and conforming to laws of natural growth. (280)

Schreiner constructs the Boers as a race, defining what makes them unique, in order to hold on to those characteristics for her future South African citizen. She can skirt the issue of Boer treatment of Africans because the language she uses to describe the Boer race is the language of social Darwinism, not “politics.” So the Boer she creates is a sentimentalized portrait of a people through whom one, as a future South African, might want to trace one’s heritage but among whom, in the twentieth century, one would not want to live.

III

While the position Schreiner assigns to the Boer in an English South Africa arises from an evolutionism that ultimately erases the Boer as a national and cultural identity, the positions within the new South Africa that Schreiner assigns to Africans are more problematic still. Although the language of evolution was commonly used in discussing Africans in the late nineteenth century,⁴ and although Schreiner herself

uses that language when it is convenient to explain some aspects of Boer-African history, she relies much more heavily on political economy than evolution in her analysis of Africans' place in South African society. At the time of the Boer War, black South Africans were foremost an economic issue for Schreiner.

The Political Situation, which Schreiner wrote with her husband, who delivered it at the Town Hall of Kimberley on 20 Aug. 1895, is directly engaged with South African politics, addressing specific Cape legislation. In constructing Africans as a working class comparable to European working classes, Schreiner calls for rights at the same time as she reassures her readers that she is not ignoring the question of race. She argues against compulsory labor for Africans, which had been made necessary by taxation (12–14). “In South Africa,” she declares, the “Labour Question” “assumes gigantic importance, including as it does almost the whole of what is popularly termed the Native Question; the question being indeed only the Labour Question of Europe complicated by a difference of race and colour between the employing and propertied, and the employed and poorer classes” (108–09). She offers two alternatives for white attitudes toward African workers:

[T]he one held by the Retrogressive Party in this country regards the Native as only to be tolerated in consideration of the amount of manual labour which can be extracted from him; and desires to obtain the largest amount of labour at the cheapest rate possible; and rigidly resists all endeavours to put him on an equality with the white man in the eye of the law. The other attitude, which I hold must inevitably be that of every truly progressive individual in this country, is that which regards the Native, though an alien in race and colour and differing fundamentally from ourselves in many respects, yet as an individual to whom we are under certain obligations: it forces on us the conviction that our superior intelligence and culture render it obligatory upon us to consider his welfare; and to carry out such measures, not as shall make him merely useful to ourselves, but such as shall tend also to raise him in the scale of existence, and bind him to ourselves in a kindlier fellowship. (109–11)

The return of evolutionary language here reassures Schreiner's readers that she is not discounting “racial” differences that make Africans inferior to Europeans. She can argue for “equality with the white man in the eye of the law” without being accused of arguing that Africans were equal to Europeans in “intelligence and culture.”

Schreiner goes on to link the plight of African workers with that of workers worldwide, declaring that the person who takes up the attitude supportive of African workers

will find himself in accord, not merely with the Progressive Element in this country, but with the really advanced and Progressive Movement all the world over. In fact, I go so far as to think that the mere subscription to the latter mode of regarding the Labour and Native question would constitute an adequate test in this country as to a man's attitude on all other matters social and political. (111)

To be politically progressive in South Africa is to advocate rights for African workers. Whether conscious or not, the strategy is fascinating. Schreiner pulls out the evolutionary references only where necessary to deflect opposition to the political point. If she is to make a strong case for economic and political rights, she cannot risk losing the argument by allowing her reader to think that she is arguing for immediate social equality as well. At the same time, her long-term vision clearly includes such a possibility. In *Closer Union*, in 1909, Schreiner appeals to white self-interest to ask South African citizens to think of a new kind of future: "As long as nine-tenths of our community have no permanent stake in the land, and no right or share in the government, can we ever feel safe? Can we ever know peace?" (52). She wants white South Africans to consider that not only their safety but also their own humanity depends on the extent to which they allow for the humanity of African workers: "We cannot hope ultimately to equal the men of our own race living in more wholly enlightened and humanised communities, if our existence is passed among millions of non-free subjected peoples" (53). She declares that the state is a white state but must win the loyalty of blacks and must provide opportunities for Africans to "take their share in the higher duties of life and citizenship, their talents expended for the welfare of the community and not suppressed to become its subterraneous and disruptive forces" (49).

Indeed, her predictions in *Closer Union* are chilling in their accuracy:

[I]f we force him permanently in his millions into the locations and compounds and slums of our cities, obtaining his labour cheaper, but to lose what the wealth of five Rands could not return to us; if uninstructed in the highest forms of labour, without the rights of citizenship, his own social organisation broken up, without our having aided him to participate in our own; if, unbound to us by gratitude and sympathy, and alien to us in blood and colour, we reduce this vast mass to the condition of a great seething, ignorant proletariat—then I would rather draw a veil over the future of this land. (50)

Schreiner's political analysis, which she opposes to the personal reflections of her articles on the Boers, stresses the African's position and the necessity for twentieth-century South Africa to stop treating African workers as a subordinate race and start treating them as a working class with rights commensurate with working classes everywhere, including the right to class mobility. Although she never goes so far as to advocate miscegenation, she hints that the South Africa of the distant future would be plagued no more by the Native Question because Africans will have been "raised" in the scale of existence to a place alongside Europeans.

Schreiner defines the turn-of-the-century racial problem as the failure to acknowledge that distinctions between black and white peoples "form a barrier so potent that the social instincts and the consciousness of moral obligation continually fail to surmount them" (*The Political Situation* 296). Schreiner asserts that

only in the case of exceptional individuals gifted with those rare powers of insight which enable them, beneath the multitudinous and real differences, mental and physical, which divide wholly distinct races, to see clearly those far more important elements of a common humanity which underlie and unite them, is the instinctive and unconscious extension of social feeling beyond the limits of race possible. (296)

She does not include herself among these exceptional individuals, for she is aware of her shortcomings in relations with Africans. Scientific, evolutionary differences, the "real differences . . . which divide wholly distinct races," overcome her politics. A social problem, racism, arises from a "real" condition, the "limits of race." Schreiner's acknowledgement of racial barriers is at least in part a defense of the Boers, an argument that all European-descended peoples are limited in their dealings with Africans. Given those limitations, Schreiner asks, why should we trust British capitalists any further than Boer farmers in their dealings with Africans? Here, where the concept of race is used to link white peoples rather than to separate them, race is nevertheless used in defense of the Boer.

Schreiner's "personal" essay "The Problem of Slavery" contains more on Africans than any of her other pre-Boer War writings, although Schreiner presents it as an essay not about "native races" (106) but about the Boers. In "The Problem of Slavery," Schreiner delineates the differences among the many African peoples in South Africa, as she had differentiated among the Dutch, Huguenot, and English whites in

the region in her essay on "The Boer." She is careful to point out that the black peoples in South Africa were not slaves:

It would have been as easy for the early Boers to catch and convert into beasts of draught the kudus and springbucks, who kick up our African dust into your face, and are off with the wind, as to turn into profitable beasts of burden our little, artistic Bushmen, or our dancing Hottentots; and our warlike Zulu Bantus from the East Coast would hardly have been more acceptable as domestic slaves than a leash of African lions. Then, as now, when submissive slaves are desired in South Africa, they have to be imported; we do not breed them. (116)

Schreiner asserts the superiority of the various South African peoples over the Central Africans who were the staple of the European slave trade. But as she glorifies the social structures of South Africa in her essays, Schreiner must also take account of the recent profound changes in those social structures, such as the near-total disappearance of the Bushman (San) people in South Africa.

To account for the loss of the Bushman, Schreiner needs a discourse of evolution, invoked to justify the actions of the Boers. One African group becomes extinct in a social Darwinist encounter with a superior people. Schreiner's first loyalty is to the future white South Africa. She must win sympathy for the Boer in Britain and create a climate in which Britons would look forward to a future South Africa with blended Briton and Boer. To that end, the elimination of the Bushman must be justified. Later we will see Schreiner switch terms in her discussion of Africans, defending them against white economic exploitation. But that defense can only be made against a generic white South African, not against the Boer. The Boer is not a political entity but a racial one; the African is a racial entity only when necessary to account for Boer excesses such as the slaughter of the Bushman.

Schreiner's "The Wanderings of the Boer" (1896) lined up the Boers alongside black Africans as the legitimate owners of South Africa. Of the Boers Schreiner wrote,

[T]hese men, and the women who bore them, possessed South Africa as no white man has ever possessed it, and as no white man ever will, save it be here and there a stray poet or artist. They possessed it as the wild beasts and the savages whom they dispossessed had possessed it. (160)

In this passage, Schreiner appears to deny the Boers the status of "white." The Boers have the right to the land because "they grew out

of it; it shaped their lives and conditioned their individuality. They owed nothing to the men of the country and everything to the inanimate nature around them" (160). White men can possess South Africa if they are poets or artists, but the Boers are neither. Their title to the land is organic, like the title of "wild beasts" or "savages."

Inextricably linked to the land of South Africa, the Boer earned title to it in a "fair" fight ("Wanderings" 152) with Africans (the Boers used no superior technology, no maxim guns). The Boer victory was, therefore, a triumph of the fittest. By placing Boer and black South African on a similar level, able to engage in a "wild, free fight on even terms" (*An English-South African* 26), a "merciless, primitive fight," "fair and even" ("The Wanderings of the Boer" 152), Schreiner constructs the Afrikaner-African struggle as an example of evolution in action. The Boers must have been further up the evolutionary scale than Africans because the Boers, in a kind of natural selection, had won. Evolutionary discourse conveniently allows Schreiner to ignore Boer policies of repression of Africans in political and domestic contexts. She casts Boer-African battles as biological instead of political, although we know from *The Political Situation* and other writings that she was quite capable of seeing black-white relations as problems of economics and politics.

The battles Schreiner describes in *An English-South African's View of the Situation* and those in "The Wanderings of the Boer," although presented in similar terms, are actually against two different African enemies—the Zulu and the Bushman. In *An English-South African*, the Boer battle against the Zulu is a "free, even stand-up fight" (26). The Zulu people are dispossessed of their land, but they remain in South Africa, interacting with, and often working for, the Boers. In "The Wanderings of the Boer," however, Schreiner describes a more brutal result of Boer-African battle. The Bushman's "little poisoned arrow" is "inevitably" wiped out by the "great flint-lock gun" (152). A more advanced race physically replaces one "a million centuries of development" behind its "kinsman" (153). The language of evolution provides a handy mechanism with which Schreiner can justify Boer genocide against the Bushman.

By awarding the Boer moral title to the land, gained in a tooth-and-claw evolutionary battle, Schreiner legitimizes the Boer right to govern in the republics threatened by Britain. This justification of Boer conquest comes at the same time as Schreiner is declaring, in *The Political Situation* (1896), that the "Native Question" (111) is the

most politically significant issue in South Africa. It was hard to praise the Boer on that issue, as Schreiner knew. Describing the Boers in evolutionary, biological terms allows Schreiner to avoid describing them in terms of their historical behavior towards Africans in South Africa, whether it was land-grabbing, denial of political rights, or use of the strap on farmworkers. In both of her descriptions of the Boer-African “fair” fights, Schreiner emphasizes that South Africa need not be ashamed of either party in the fighting—that is, South Africa need not be ashamed that the Boers have dispossessed or destroyed Africans. Only an evolutionary argument could have allowed Schreiner to make such a case.

Although Bushmen have been physically eliminated from the future South Africa in Schreiner’s evolution-justified vision, they are not totally absent from Schreiner’s new nation-race. In shaping her vision of the new blended white South African, Schreiner incorporates the Bushman metaphorically. Just as Arnold had located art and spirituality in the Celt, Schreiner locates it in the African Bushman. He (the Bushman artist is always male in Schreiner’s writings) brings to the new South African nation the sensibility that the Boer lacks. In the “Plans and Bushman-paintings” chapter of *The Story of an African Farm* and in “The Wanderings of the Boer,” the Bushman lives on after virtual extinction through the cave-paintings that remain. Schreiner’s eulogy in the essay is worth quoting at length:

Ring round head, ears on pedestals, his very vital organs differing from the rest of his race—yet, as one sits under the shelving rocks at the top of some African mountain, the wall behind one covered with his crude little pictures, the pigments of which are hardly faded through the long ages of exposure, and, as one looks out over the great shimmering expanse of mountains and valleys beneath, one feels that the spirit which is spread abroad over existence concentrated itself in those little folk who climbed among the rocks; and that that which built the Parthenon and raised St. Peter’s, and carved the statues of Michael Angelo in the Medici Chapel, and which moves in every great work of man, moved here also. That the Spirit of Life which, incarnate in humanity, seeks to recreate existence as it beholds it, and which we call art, worked through that monkey hand too! And that shelving cave on the African mountain becomes for us a temple in which first the hand of humanity raised itself quiveringly in the worship of the true and the beautiful. (“Wanderings” 153–54)

Waldo, the artist-figure in *The Story of an African Farm*, elaborates on the artistic inclination of the Bushman, who

did not know why he painted, but he wanted to make something, so he made these. He worked hard, very hard, to find the juice to make the paint; and then he found this place where the rocks hang over, and he painted them. To us they are only strange things, that make us laugh; but to him they were very beautiful. (49)

The Bushman lives on in his paintings as a connection to a transcendent spirit of art. The poet or artist, whose claim to the land is aesthetic, is closely allied with the African, the “artistic” Bushman and “dancing” Hottentot, if not the “warlike” Bantu, of “The Problem of Slavery.” But if the non-African artist has a mystical tie to the artistic Bushman, this tie can only be metaphorical and spiritual, since in Schreiner’s construction of South Africanness, the Bushman is *only* art, no longer a human to be reckoned with.

The Boer elimination of the Bushman, according to the “fair” fight model, was only proper, in evolutionary terms, but Schreiner’s vision for South Africa had to include the spirituality represented by the Bushman. Such racial traits as the Boer affection for the land can be passed on directly, because the South African of the future would be a physical mix of Boer and Briton. Art, however, is African, not Afrikaner, and so cannot be inherited by the white South African. One of Schreiner’s biggest fears for South Africa is miscegenation, the social problem presented by the “Half-caste” (“The Problem of Slavery” 146). Thus art, or spirituality, must move into the realm of the mystical.

Schreiner links the non-African artist with indigenous Africans by virtue of their respective ties to nature. Although she grants the Boers no artistic abilities, Schreiner does see the Boers as having the special appreciation for the land that comes from having “possessed it as no white man ever had possessed it.” In the Boer “the intellectual faculties are more or less dormant through non-cultivation” (“Wanderings” 174), but the Boer appreciates nature. Handicapped by the Taal, the Boer “has no language in which to re-express what he learns from nature, but he knows her” (187). The Boer cannot be a poet, but

[n]o one with keen perception can have lived among the Boers without perceiving how close, though unconscious, is their union with the world around them, and how real the nourishment they draw from it. (188)

Schreiner’s language of the “unconscious” connection to nature is the language of western writing about “savages.” The Boers are not yet civilized enough to understand their own connection to the land. Their

aesthetic, spiritual, and intellectual limitations meant that the Boers were not the ideal inheritors of the land of South Africa. But their love for the land and their strong religious faith, Schreiner proposed, were elements worth absorbing into the South African of the future.

IV

To discuss turn-of-the-century British or English South African views of Africans separately from views of Afrikaners is to misunderstand the meaning of race in relation to nation in the late-Victorian context. Schreiner—a British intellectual who lived only a few years in Britain, a rural South African who called Britain home—was a product of the British Empire at the end of the century. Her writing about race and empire was some of the first writing from South Africa to be taken seriously in Britain, seen as a threat by some and as a vision by others, and her complicated readings of the roles of the English, Africans, and Boers in a new South Africa are among the most nuanced of the 1890s. In positing a future united nation of South Africa rather than a collection of Boer republics and British colonies, Schreiner had to create that nation on a racial basis. The “blended” white race of the united South Africa would evolve from the union of the two distinct white racial elements of nineteenth-century South Africa. The language that discusses race in terms of nation and vice versa allows Schreiner to envision her twentieth-century South Africa without strife between Briton and Boer: the two races simply evolve into one race.

This same racial thinking, however, with its emphasis on biologism and its concurrent fears of miscegenation, prevented Schreiner from positing a new South Africa that would blend the groups twentieth-century readers most readily think of as races—that is, blacks and whites. In Schreiner’s future South Africa, black and white groups are linked by economics, while white and white groups become linked by evolution. Schreiner’s vision of the fusion of Boer and Briton relies on evolutionary discourse about race and ethnicity when it discusses the social identity of the nation, while it relies on political definitions of race as class when it discusses the political and economic future of the nation. Schreiner carefully threaded her way through the complexities of racial definition at the turn of the century to arrive at a position that allowed her to advocate for the Boer, excusing Boer crimes against Africans while still calling for the rights of Africans in

a new South Africa. This paradoxical position was possible because for Schreiner the evolution of Boer and Briton would create a South African who was not a Boer, who had evolved beyond the limitations of the Boer, be they spiritual, aesthetic, or political. Evolution allowed her to be rid of the Boer, and politics (and aesthetics) allowed her to keep the African. Schreiner's progressive political agenda meant that she could use the period's unstable definitions of race to make the Boers a race, make Africans a class, and see a future for South Africa in which a blended white people worked to replace African civilizations with copies of European ones. The limitations of Schreiner's position on race or class are evident; nevertheless, her vision of a bloody future for her nation if it did not take her advice proved all too accurate. Instead of de-emphasizing racial separations, as Schreiner advocated, South Africa under segregation and then apartheid reinforced racial divisions. Whether or not definitions of race are ever clear-cut, separation according to such definitions has proved, as Schreiner warned, ultimately destructive.

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NOTES

¹Dubow has pointed out that, among historians of South Africa, "liberals" have "den[ie]d the existence of any intrinsic relationship between capitalism and apartheid" and "have sought to avert largely justified accusations that English speakers—some of whom formed part of an identifiable South African liberal tradition—played an instrumental role in the formation of segregationist ideas earlier this century" (4). What is ironic about Schreiner is that although she can be seen as part of that liberal tradition because of her links to evolutionist ideas about Africans, she is nevertheless significant in her early attention to the absolute connection between capitalism and racial segregation.

²"The Boer" and the other Schreiner essays to which I refer are collected as *Thoughts on South Africa* (1923), and it is to that edition that all citations refer.

³Anne McClintock describes the Victorian preoccupation with degeneration and its ties to class and ethnicity in Britain (46–51), and Saul Dubow outlines twentieth-century South African fears about "poor whites" and degeneracy (166–80). For more on Victorians and degeneration see Daniel Pick.

⁴See, for example, Greta Jones's discussion of *Social Darwinism and English Thought: The Interaction Between Biological and Social Theory*, Douglas Lorimer's *Colour, Class and the Victorians* and "Theoretical Racism in Late-Victorian Anthropology, 1870–1900," and Nancy Stepan's *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960*.

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