Over the last three centuries, spatial patterns in sub-Saharan Africa have changed radically. Underlying those changes have been greater integration with global markets and ideas; a massive expansion of population and a widespread physical relocation of people; fundamental shifts in labor processes and capital investment in the natural and built environment; and basic modifications in political structures and processes. About 750,000,000 people now live in sub-Saharan Africa. Whereas urbanization levels were quite low in the 18th century, more than one-third of all people now live in cities, and half soon will. The majority of people are now Muslims or Christians, whereas in 1700 that was true only in a few areas. In the 19th and, especially, 20th centuries, large-scale mineral industries came into existence, farmers converted wide swaths of territory to cash crop production, and foreign companies and settlers established extensive plantations and farms. In response, millions of Africans became migrant laborers. In a familiar story, European colonizers divided the continent by laying down boundaries and establishing new systems of authority and law within them; from the mid-20th century on, African leaders inherited those units. Even where the national project has been notoriously unsuccessful, the bounded territorial state remains the model. National identities have arisen where they did not previously exist, and people have generated and mobilized ethnic, religious, and regional identities, partly to contest state power and resource distribution.

There have been few efforts to conceptualize those changes using spatial analysis, particularly while also incorporating the new social history literature. Earlier, I theorized the spatial history of tropical Africa from the late 18th century to the 1920s (Howard 2005a). This article expands the geographic reach of my analysis to southern Africa and the time frame to the late 20th century, and applies other analytic

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tools.2 This essay seeks to understand how global and regional forces have affected local spatial patterns, how people have shaped space locally and regionally within the constraints of the larger forces, and how space itself has been an active factor in history.

**Conceptual Framework**

There are several ways to conceive of space: physical, social, and analytic. Physical space is what physicists study, surveyors measure, and people cross. Social space is defined by materiality, relationships, perceptions, and meanings. Analytic space consists of abstractions people use to understand the complexities of physical and social space, usually by applying formal conceptual tools. Of greatest importance here is social space, but social space is linked with physical and analytic space. From my perspective, physical space becomes social space as people create relationships by interacting with one another, building and naming things, giving meaning to particular places, perceiving the similarities and differences among places, discoursing about the relationship of people distributed over space—and so on. All such acts are contested, but general agreement or understanding about social space may be reached among a given group of people, at least temporarily.

It is usually not very fruitful, however, to interpret the past or present by using the rather vague terms “space” and “social spaces.” The notion “social space” lacks precision. It is better to define and use consistently such concepts as place, network, and region. To talk precisely about place involves examining, for instance, actions-in-places, meanings of physical structures, the ways power shapes places, and how social reproduction occurs around places (Agnew 1993). To understand relationships among people spread over territory, it is necessary to describe and interpret both the patterning and content of peoples’ networks and to look at how associations, institutions, and power shape the actions of spatially dispersed people. Regions are created and sustained through people’s mobility and exchanges, by investments in places and territorially extensive technologies, and by flows of all types. Regions, in one sense, are analytic concepts; they are “discovered” by scholars and others who assemble data and look for pat-

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2 North Africa has not been included.