



# transforming the frontier

PEACE PARKS AND THE POLITICS OF NEOLIBERAL  
CONSERVATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Bram Büscher



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TO STACEY







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## preface



“Where to travel” and “what is worth seeing there”  
is nothing but a way of saying in plain English what  
is usually said under the pompous Greek name of  
“method,” or, even worse, “methodology.”

**Bruno Latour**, *Reassembling the Social*

Whether “method” and “methodology” are pompous words or not, I believe that the metaphor of traveling is a good way to describe the research journey that led to this book and the arguments contained in it. The journey started in 2002 when an initial backpacking expedition through southern Africa exposed me to the concept of a Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA). The area in this case was the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, the southern African showcase, which, according to a poster at an entrance to the Kruger National Park, was to connect South African, Mozambican, and Zimbabwean conservation areas. The excitement about this new development was palpable. During a three-day safari in the Kruger, I saw many maps, posters, and signs heralding this new frontier in conservation. Conservation, the message seemed to be, was finally going to pay its dues and take care of biodiversity *and* people on a massive new scale. The Great Limpopo, in particular, was going to reestablish old animal-migration routes, and this “world’s greatest animal kingdom” would also bring in more tourists and economic benefits to local communities. But that was not all.



TFCAS were also going to enable southern African nations to cooperate more amicably and more effectively. According to the slogan of one organization that appeared on all the posters, TFCAS are “the global solution” and thus required a fitting name: “peace parks.”

Peace parks, and how they are implicated in contemporary frontiers of conservation, are the topic of this book. When starting the research for this book in the framework of my dissertation research, I—quite naively, I must admit—thought of frontiers mostly as international borders. But as my research journey progressed, the concept steadily acquired more connotations, many of which feature prominently in the ensuing account. As I became more aware of these connotations, my research journey was shaped by the widening and discovery of frontiers. First I recognized that I should not limit myself to the showcase Great Limpopo if I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of transfrontier conservation dynamics in southern Africa. During my initial exploratory field visit to southern Africa in late 2003, I realized that regional differences in TFCA practices were immense and that the global and regional spotlight on the Great Limpopo actually kept these from sight. Besides, its grand claims were already being investigated by a number of scholars (something that became poignantly clear when I had to wait in line for an interview with the responsible staff member at South Africa’s Department of Environmental Affairs). A chance encounter led me to consider the mountainous Maloti-Drakensberg TFCA between Lesotho and South Africa. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the region was abuzz with scholarly activity on community-based natural resource management and a big conference on this topic was organized in Johannesburg, which I attended. There I met the Lesotho coordinator for the Maloti-Drakensberg project, who invited me to join him and Lesotho’s environment minister on a trip to the eastern highlands of the country to thank local communities for their participation in the project. He wanted to show me that they took local communities seriously.

Lesotho—that tiny, sovereign “historical accident” in the middle of South Africa—proved quite an experience. After driving a 4x4 over rocky roads, passing many small villages with stone and traditional houses, wading through a river that according to my travel companions could rise so quickly following rains that we could be stuck for days if we did not depart in time, we finally arrived in Tlhanyaku village. The scene was vivid. Many villagers, wrapped in traditional Basotho blankets, sat on a grassy patch waiting for the “ceremony” to begin. The dignitaries were first brought to a



community center, where food was being prepared. Before any formal activity could start, everybody first needed to eat chicken and *moroho*, the local vegetable staple. This took a while, and once the ceremony finally commenced, the minister had not even spoken for five minutes when the rains began. It was a mere drizzle at first, so she continued explaining to the local people how the massive five-year Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project (MDTP) depended on their cooperation. The goal was to conserve the fragile mountain ecosystem along with the project's South African counterparts. The minister insisted that although the project was complex and politically difficult, it could succeed if they, the local people, participated in it, owned it. They, after all, were the real stewards of the mountain grasslands and the sources of some of the region's major rivers. Moreover, they would directly benefit from the project. After all, its second objective was to stimulate development through nature-based tourism. Then, it truly began to pour. The minister cut her speech short and we rushed to the cars. The meeting was over. We had to get back across the river because the minister could not get stuck in this remote place. As we sped off and left the villagers behind in the rain, I reflected on what the minister had said about the intervention and its challenges and knew I had found, in Bruno Latour's words, "where to travel."

The next thing was finding out what was worth seeing there and how to go about this. One thing was clear from the start: I wanted to combine long-term ethnographic field research with an eye for structural power. Approaching empirical realities in this way led me to agree with Alexander Wendt that "just as social structures are ontologically dependent upon and therefore constituted by the practices and self-understandings of agents, the causal powers and interests of those agents, in their own turn, are constituted and therefore explained by structures" (1987, 359). Obviously, this approach had repercussions on different levels. Above all, it forced me to look for, and often transcend, the frontiers between academic disciplines, methodological traditions, theoretical dispositions, and empirical realities. This seemed to be the only way to capture the political ecology of it all: to connect and analytically unravel the broader, regional power relations behind transfrontier conservation and the ethnographic realities of the MDTP; the space that Tanya Li (2007) terms the "witches brew," the situated practices of real-world actors.

Traversing methodological, theoretical, and disciplinary frontiers takes time, and as the implementers of the MDTP were coming to grips with the



implementation of the intervention, I was coming to grips with studying them doing so. My research strategy, particularly from 2005 to 2007 when I spent most of my time in the field, came close to what Latour states about interactions in the field: “Any given interaction seems to *overflow* with elements which are already in the situation coming from some other *time*, some other *place*, and generated by some other *agency*. . . . Thus, if any observer is faithful to the direction suggested by this overflow, she will be led *away* from any given interaction to some *other places*, *other times*, and *other agencies* that appear to have moulded them into shape” (Latour 2005, 166; emphasis in the original).<sup>1</sup>

Over time, while I was becoming better aware of both the overall trans-frontier conservation context and the politics of the MDP, it became easier to be “led away.” This knowledge of the overall context also helped in making informed decisions about where to be led away to. Following Li (2007, 28), I argue that this ethnography of particular “conjunctures” forms a valuable method to come to a more holistic picture of the overall “constellation,” provided—of course—that the conjunctions are selected carefully.

Central to these conjunctions is getting access to the social relations and spaces where discourses, practices, relations, and interventions are produced, felt, lived, and interpreted. Long-term ethnographic field research enabled me to get access to and study many project papers, plans, maps, memos, meetings, and activities. To complement this, I interviewed nearly all the important individuals in the MDP, as well as many key figures in the regional transfrontier conservation scene in southern Africa. Moreover, I used the Internet to collect documentary evidence. Many actors these days leave their traces online, which can provide interesting additional information. As a corollary, it proved hard to disconnect from the social relations in the field, and, in fact, I did not want to (even if I could, see Ferguson 2006, 66–68). I tried to maintain relations of critical engagement throughout the entire period while retaining the right to interpret the data. This process and its contradictions are well understood by David Mosse: “while fieldwork has changed beyond recognition—becoming ever more intensely social—ethnographic writing (interpreting, objectifying and textualising) remains a solitary process that disembeds knowing from its relationships, denying (to varying degrees) the social its claim to power, to ownership, to negotiation” (2006, 4).

But even this process can to some extent be made part of one’s meth-



odology. I tried to do so by sending notes of our conversations to interviewees so they could check my interpretations. This often led to new data and further engagements. As such, my research is in line with a shift in development studies from work based on critical disengagement (e.g., Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994) to more-recent ethnographic research committed to critical engagement with development agents (e.g., Lewis et al. 2003; Li 2007; Mosse 2004, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, however, and despite continuous engagement with informants, I retained the right to interpret the data. This is necessary to guarantee a critical approach, which “distinguishes critical theory from problem-solving theory, where the latter takes for granted the framework of existing power relations and institutions and is concerned with the smooth functioning of the system. By contrast, critical theory calls the very framework into question and seeks to analyze how it is maintained and changed” (Ford 2003, 121; see also Cox 1981). “Critical,” then (like the term “politics”) does not mean “negative.” Yet it often connotes this with the people involved in a scholar’s research. I hope, therefore, that this book will show that a balance between “critical” and “engagement” can lead to findings that are ethnographically robust yet attentive to structural power, and why this is highly necessary.

After the first year of my fieldwork, finding this balance—and dealing with its tensions—was vital to realize what became the main objective of the book: to study peace parks as a contemporary manifestation of the neoliberal governance of conservation. During this first year, I discovered that the neoliberal element is crucial; it is neoliberal conservation that is the true frontier of contemporary global conservation. The argument in the book centers on an effort to more clearly define the politics of neoliberal conservation, which coalesces around dynamics of consensus, antipolitics, and marketing. Specifically, I will argue that the politics of contemporary neoliberal conservation revolves around the framing of contradictory realities in consensus terms, which curtails the space for open discussion of different and divergent interests through various tactics of antipolitics and actively markets solutions and institutions in order to acquire and induce legitimacy, acceptance, and ownership. This argument implicates the popularization of what could be called the “postmodern frontier,” namely an epistemological struggle over what constitute construction and reality with regard to nature, conservation, and development.

These modes of politics are arguably broader than conservation; they often seem to be a general feature of the global neoliberal political econ-



omy. But nature conservation is salient here, as conservation actors try to convince audiences that our lives are still steeped in and dependent on biophysical, natural realities. The central conclusion, therefore, holds that this epistemological struggle in conservation is set to become one of the major struggles of our time; a struggle that will define the relations between humans and their natural environments for the foreseeable future. The book's relevance transcends southern Africa: it is an attempt to define and understand the contemporary frontiers of conservation and the ways in which these are changing under the influence of political-economic pressures. At the same time, the southern African context is critical; actors from this region have been crucial in influencing transfrontier conservation globally, and the context embeds the study in ethnographic and material realities that give it place-based relevance. The frontiers of conservation transcend particularities of space and place, yet they can only be understood through these particularities and their associated material and discursive contexts, conditions, and struggles.

### **Acknowledgments**

The biggest joy of traveling is meeting people and hearing their stories. During the travels that led to this book I have met and heard many. I am grateful first and foremost to those who spent time talking to me, teaching me, and giving me insight into their lives. I have tremendously enjoyed all the engagements throughout and after my research for this book, and I hope the account does justice to these engagements, even though I know some of my informants will be critical about my desire to call the framework into question and to analyze how it is maintained and changed. I respect this fully, which is one important reason why I made the informants anonymous except for those who explicitly gave me permission to use their real names. Another reason is that the book is ultimately not about my informants but about broader social and political-economic structures that they were struggling with as much as I was (and still am). An understanding of these structures requires working through these struggles, but they should not be personalized in the process. I ask of the reader, especially those knowledgeable about the study area, to bear this in mind.

Besides those who were “subjected” to my study, I owe a great debt of gratitude to all those who facilitated, cooperated, and helped me with my research and made my various stays in the region so much nicer. Thanks to



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Of course, a manuscript not only depends on those who read it and provide comments, but also on those who are part of the intellectual and amicable context within which it develops. These are truly many, and I cannot even begin to name all of those I am in one way or another indebted



to. At the risk of missing some people, I do have to mention some names. I am incredibly fortunate to be part of an international group of scholars with whom I share a broader agenda of studying the political economy of conservation. This group seems to be growing every day, but here I want to specifically mention Dan Brockington, Wolfram Dressler, Rosaleen Duffy, Rob Fletcher, Jim Igoe, Katja Neves, Sian Sullivan, and Paige West. Colleagues such as these are special and I truly feel that this book is part of the bigger project we are all involved in, even though the mistakes in it can only be attributed to me. Other dear friends and colleagues—besides the ones previously mentioned—with whom I have discussed the arguments contained in the book include Philip Quarles van Ufford, Webster Whande, Elna de Beer, Max Spoor, Ken MacDonald, Catherine Corson, Frank Matose, and Aysem Mert.

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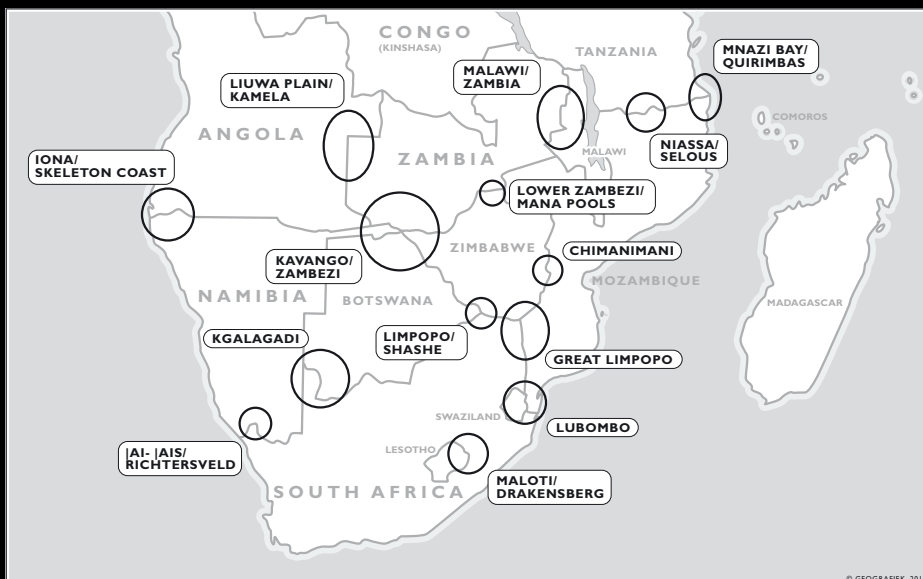
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*Quarterly* 31 (2): 259–76. Earlier portions of chapter 5 originally appeared in “Anti-politics as Political Strategy: Neoliberalism and Transfrontier Conservation in Southern Africa,” *Development and Change* 41 (1): 29–51. Finally, small portions of several chapters appeared earlier in Bram Büscher and Wolfram Dressler, “Commodity Conservation: The Restructuring of Community Conservation in South Africa and the Philippines,” *Geoforum* 43 (3): 367–76; and Bram Büscher and Michael Schoon, “Competition over Conservation: Governance, Cooperation and Negotiating Transfrontier Conservation,” *Journal of International Wildlife Law and Policy* 12 (1): 33–59.





MAP 1 Southern African region indicating existing and potential Transfrontier Conservation Areas © GEOGRAFIEK, 2012.





MAP 2 Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Area © GEOGRAFIEK, 2012.



## introduction



## FRONTIERS OF CONSERVATION

“The global solution”: this is the appealing slogan of one of the most powerful conservation actors that promotes transfrontier conservation areas or “peace parks,” large conservation areas that aim to protect biodiversity and stimulate development across international boundaries. Peace parks have become a global phenomenon. Over the past fifteen years, they have been established throughout the world and “generated a tremendous enthusiasm in the conservation community” (Mittermeier, Kormos, Mittermeier, Sandwith et al. 2005, 41). Promoted by Conservation International, the World Conservation Union, and other members of the conservation establishment, peace parks have quickly become an important conservation paradigm because “the transboundary element can act as a multiplier, greatly amplifying the benefits protected areas already provide.” These benefits include: “moving across political boundaries to protect a transboundary ecosystem in its entirety” and “reuniting communities divided by borders or allowing mobile peoples to move across their traditional territories more easily” (41). But that is not all. Peace parks add yet another element to the conservation package, namely “the capacity to reduce tensions or even to help resolve conflicts between countries, in particular those stemming from boundary disputes.” It is this peace-making dimension, according to proponents, that “enlarges the range of benefits parks provide in a



significant way” and “also provides powerful evidence for one of the central tenets of conservation—that protected areas are not only necessary to secure the planet’s ecological integrity but, more broadly, that they are an essential component of any healthy, peaceful, and productive society” (41).

In this book, I am equally interested in why peace parks have become such a popular conservation paradigm and have created such incredible enthusiasm in the conservation community. My approach is different from that of the conservation establishment, however. While I am fascinated by the answers given and will critically investigate these in the book, I am concerned more with why actors in the conservation community feel that they must portray transfrontier conservation so jubilantly. Or why others, in this case the South African nongovernmental organization (NGO) Peace Parks Foundation, believe that peace parks are “the global solution.” Transfrontier conservation areas are not simply promoted. They are presented as the new telos of conservation; conservation the way it should be. In its peace parks incarnation, so the message goes, conservation moves beyond being a vehicle to safeguard biodiversity and help rural communities prosper. It now also aims to bring peace to nations. To *all* nations, according to Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa and a patron of the Peace Parks Foundation: “I know of no political movement, no philosophy, no ideology, which does not agree with the peace parks concept as we see it going into fruition today. It is a concept that can be embraced by all. In a world beset by conflict and division, peace is one of the cornerstones of the future. Peace parks are a building block in this process, not only in our region, but potentially in the entire world.”<sup>1</sup>

We know from scholarly work that conservation and development solutions are usually framed so that they are attractive to (potential) donors (see Ferguson 1994; Mosse 2005). This, however, does not explain why advocates of peace parks have amplified their discourse to such grandiose proportions or try to position protected areas more broadly as an “essential component of any healthy, peaceful, and productive society.” Moreover, this jubilation seems strangely out of place. Protected areas have—on the whole—done little to halt global biodiversity loss, which became abundantly clear from the 2010 Global Biodiversity Outlook (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2010). Protected areas also hold a poor social record, particularly in southern Africa, the book’s region of concern. Displacements, racialized dispossession, and lack of access to resources are all intimately connected to the historical development and contempo-



rary governance of protected areas and conservation more broadly (see W. Adams and Hutton 2007; Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008; Dowie 2009; Galvin and Haller 2008; Hughes 2010). If peace parks greatly amplify the benefits of parks, might they equally amplify their shady aspects? And if so, how does this fit with the amplified jubilation that peace parks have brought to conservation?

In the tradition of political ecology, one of my foundational assumptions is that we cannot begin to address these questions and the broader issues they give rise to without placing conservation squarely within historically informed political-economic and social contexts and associated power constellations across interconnected scales and locales. It is these contexts and constellations that have framed and influenced the societies that conservation so eagerly wants to be an essential component of (and, in fact, has always been). Moreover, they have evolved dialectically with broader nature-society relations over time, thereby preconfiguring and structuring how conservation is practiced, perceived, and legitimated.

Two historically specific but intertwined sets of political-economic and social contexts are especially important for my analysis. First, the demands of a postcolonial society have rendered the “de facto extraterritorial” or “extra-sovereign” status that many parks occupy in (southern) Africa more fragile but certainly not prostrate (Mbembe 2000, 284).<sup>2</sup> Some areas are still protected from society, but this no longer means that they can ignore societal interests as they did during colonial times.<sup>3</sup> In southern Africa, community-based natural resources management has been—and to some degree still is—the political umbrella under which these demands have been articulated most forcefully (see Hulme and Murphree 2001). The second context relates to the demands of the global neoliberal political economy. These, too, have drastically changed conservation. While conservation and capitalism share a long and intertwined history, neoliberalism is truly reconstituting conservation as a tool for the expansion of capital and, in doing so, reconfiguring its ideals, practices, and representations (see, e.g., Arsel and Büscher 2012; Büscher 2009; Igoe, Neves, and Brockington 2010). In short, the book investigates how conservation actors and transfrontier interventions in southern Africa keep conservation legitimate in and functional to a postcolonial, neoliberal political economy.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, I seek to understand the politics involved in this process and the social and material struggles to which they give rise.

I fuse ethnography and political economy to understand the complex



structures and agencies that influence these processes and struggles. This combination of methods is powerful. It heeds structural political-economic questions about “control over the means of production and the structures of law and force that support systemic inequalities” while simultaneously paying attention to the contingent nature of things (Li 2007, 11). According to Paige West, this “is particularly important if one takes seriously Karl Marx’s argument about the universalizing tendency of capital but if one also sees the evidence of local articulations with capital as more creative and diverse than Marx anticipated” (2006, 266). My entry point is an in-depth conceptual engagement with neoliberalism.<sup>5</sup> Neoliberalism “has become nearly hegemonic in the most powerful national and international arenas over the past two decades,” and it needs to be engaged if political economy is to be taken seriously (McCarthy 2005, 996).<sup>6</sup>

This is especially the case for environmental conservation where many organizations and actors feel marginal compared to “big” global politics around trade, energy, and security. I heard this complaint often: politicians do not see or understand the value of conservation. It is not taken seriously as a “big issue,” while my informants believe it ultimately eclipses all other concerns. Conservation, they told me, needs to become a competitive land-use option, a market where the value of nature’s “services” would be visible and clear. Above all, I was told, conservation needs to be economically profitable, otherwise politicians and stakeholders were not going to care. Conservation actors truly felt that they had to “sell nature to save it” (McAfee 1999). This sense of political ranking adds impetus to conservation actors’ drive to appease the dominant paradigm. Neoliberal conservation is the new frontier—one that conservation actors worldwide are eager to conquer.<sup>7</sup>

Peace parks are important tools in this conquest. Their enlistment of many new actors to the cause of conservation testifies to their ability to turn contradictory political-economic realities into reified and attractive win-win propositions. This ability is the hallmark of the politics of neoliberal conservation. Thus, while neoliberal conservation reality is characterized by (racialized) dispossession, inequality, and persistent and accelerating environmental degradation (see Dowie 2009; Ferguson 2006; Gibson 1999; Kovel 2002; Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2010; Sullivan 2006), neoliberal conservation discourse “moves beyond a world of win-win solutions to a world of win-win-win-win-win-win-win (or win<sup>7</sup> if you like) solutions that benefit: corporate investors, national econo-



mies, biodiversity, local people, Western consumers, development agencies and the conservation organisations that receive funding from those agencies to undertake large interventions” (Igoe and Brockington 2007, 435).

But we must take that argument further. One of the main tenets of the book is that in a neoliberal political economy tensions between material realities and reified representations are political opportunities that must be exploited to gain competitive advantage. Transforming the frontier is not optional in a neoliberal political economy; it is a necessity. In order to gain legitimacy, credibility, and support in the conservation marketplace, actors must exploit the cracks between constructions and realities of complex and contradictory socio-ecological dynamics. This is what many conservation agents do in their struggle to influence conservation and development dynamics in particular settings. I follow them and their stakeholders in this struggle, and in the process I analyze peace parks as contemporary manifestations of the neoliberal governance of conservation and development in southern Africa and the contradictions and struggles they unleash and conceal.

### **Reified Representations and Contradictory Realities**

The dynamics of environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and continued legacies of racial inequality make the translation from contradictory realities to jubilant discourses awkward. It frustrates many conservation and development professionals tremendously. One of my informants complained around mid-2005, “in conservation you feel you are playing catch-up all the time.” He and his colleagues constantly had to “tiptoe through the socioeconomic agendas.” It’s better if conservation changes its message, and presents it more forcefully, he believed: “more doom-and-gloom messages so that people will listen.” But neither he nor the intervention he worked for put this into practice. In a postcolonial neoliberal context, legitimacy in conservation and development is rarely obtained through the doom and gloom that always lurks around the corner. The orientation is “future positive” (see Edwards 1999; Mosse 2005), attuned to our “time zone of amazing promises” (Haraway 1997, 41).

An example from 9 March 2005 illustrates this. After having received a million euros from a Dutch lottery, the Peace Parks Foundation’s (PPF) chief executive and a program manager visited the Dutch embassy in Pretoria, South Africa, to present the foundation’s mission, goals, and operations. Through a contact at the embassy, I was able to attend the presenta-



tion. The program manager said, “Peace parks developed out of African history.” He explained that the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 divided Africa among colonial powers, completely disregarding ethnicities and animal migration routes. For a long time, even after independence, African borders could not be discussed, but the billionaire Anton Rupert dared to do so when he met with the Mozambican president Joaquim Chissano in 1990 to explore possibilities for a cross-border park between South Africa and Mozambique. These plans eventually led to the founding of the PPF in 1997, with the aim of stimulating and supporting the establishment of transfrontier conservation areas across southern Africa. But the chief executive said, “peace parks are not necessarily for the protection of biodiversity; they are mostly for development” because “tourism is the biggest supplier of jobs.” While admitting that biodiversity conservation is the main objective, the chief executive confided in us that “after a while you find out that people are more important than the environment.”

As the presentation continued, we were told that the PPF exists chiefly to make space for peace parks, help with facilitation, and train wildlife rangers. Facilitation means to “oil the government machinery” and “fix what is broke” by supplying governments with staff, technical aids, and advice. Visibly proud, the PPF representatives told us that most southern African presidents act as the foundation’s patrons, while Mandela is both a co-founder and an honorary patron. On the PPF’s request, Mandela even traveled to Asia to explore possibilities for a peace park between North and South Korea. Intrigued, I shared my experience some years earlier of traveling the border of the region’s flagship peace park: the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park between Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Along its borders live many different peoples, among them the Tsonga. Several Tsonga men told me that they knew the PPF and lamented that as members of a poor community, they do not “have access to Thabo Mbeki” (the then South African president) and cannot “send Nelson Mandela anywhere.” The PPF’s chief executive agreed that the five million people living next to the Great Limpopo in South Africa were not yet benefiting and that “this is a problem.” He then mentioned how proud he was of the community projects in the Mozambican Limpopo National Park: “In Limpopo, the community engagement process is easier. They can decide if they want to stay, and be fenced in, or move out.” He was aware that the resettlement process in Limpopo, backed by the World Bank, is highly controversial, and added that “there just aren’t many better ways of doing



it.” He quickly moved on to another topic. What is important according to him is that “politicians just love the peace parks concept: It has everything, conservation, development, it is green. They love signing the contracts.”

Supported by global business elites interested in nature conservation and driven by a deeply neoliberal outlook, the PPF wields enormous power over the regional peace parks agenda, including over the national ministries and conservation parastatals officially responsible for implementing and governing individual TFCAS (see Büscher and Dietz 2005; Draper, Spierenburg, and Wels 2004; Ramutsindela 2007; Schoon 2009; Wolmer 2003). The exposé also illustrates the politics at play when reified representations confront contradictory realities. In what I will refer to as the “peace parks discourse,” most conspicuously endorsed by the PPF, difficult questions on contradictory material realities are seen as disruptive and thus preferably avoided. I am interested in the politics involved in how proponents of peace parks like the PPF negotiate the tensions between reified representations and contradictory realities. Moreover, I ask why and how the dominant peace parks discourse is supported, reinterpreted, or resisted by other actors in transfrontier conservation.

This is crucial because the peace parks discourse is but one representation of the promises of transfrontier conservation. While regionally dominant and attractive for international donors, it relates only precariously to individual transfrontier conservation interventions. One of these is the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project (MDTP), the intervention of my ethnographic focus. Initiated to protect globally significant biodiversity and stimulate local development through ecotourism in the high mountains between Lesotho and South Africa, the Maloti-Drakensberg is somewhat of an outlier in the regional peace parks picture. It does not boast the so-called typically African wildlife experiences, focusing instead on landscapes and less spectacular taxa. In its implementation, the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project also differed. It was funded by the Global Environment Facility as a single, massive cross-border intervention (as opposed to the often multiple interventions involved in other TFCAS), the PPF was only marginally involved, and many implementers were not very charmed by the peace parks discourse. Yet, while the dominant discourse was regarded with suspicion, the contradictory dynamics and practices behind the peace parks discourse featured equally in the Maloti-Drakensberg. A brief empirical illustration from 2007 testifies.

Malefiloane is a small village in Lesotho’s Botha-Bothe district. One of



the community facilitators for the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project introduced me to the members of Balala lihloliloeng me o phele Malef-iloane, which translates to “conserving biodiversity to earn a living” or “we conserve to live out of what we conserved.” This local handicraft group established by the transfrontier project consisted of twenty-two people but this day there are only five. The community facilitator informed me that the group was going to discuss its constitution. The group needed a constitution, with the chief’s stamp of approval, to open a bank account to store the group’s earnings. The community facilitator introduced me and asked the group how the drafting of the constitution and the bylaws went. According to one member, they “made progress.” We were also informed that the group had asked the chief and the community council for a place to hold meetings, especially when it rained. It would be ideal for them to build a little shelter with wood from the area, which they could purchase from their savings. The group was also into saving and credit modalities: every time they sell something they should put 10 percent into the group’s account “to keep the group going,” according to the facilitator.

When the meeting finished, the community facilitator said that her job is very challenging. She has to do a lot more than just facilitating. Sometimes she comes to a meeting and finds some of the women crying because they have been beaten by their husbands (“then you have to drop your agenda”). Another time, conflict arose when everyone wanted to individually start selling handicrafts to Liphofung, the nearby cultural center. She managed to resolve it and keep the group together. The community facilitator had a vision about where she wanted to take the group, but “with the people’s level of education and the culture it is very difficult,” she told me. Just to explain financial percentages is a big thing, as is dealing with money in general. It is also difficult to deal with interpersonal relationships. Telling the truth when someone is not functioning can be hard, especially when people are related. All these things make the facilitator’s job very challenging. What added to her frustration was that members of the head office of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project in Maseru, Lesotho, did not understand the situation: “They think that training is enough. For them it means that part of the work plan or action plan has been fulfilled.” Moreover, she added, “They think that when you have trained people they are empowered, but in reality it is not like that. For real empowerment you must make sure you have local leadership, accountability, and independent action, and this takes a long time.” According to the facilitator, people



talk about capacity building so easily, as if it's something you can do in bits and pieces, but "this is a process." She further complained that many people in the head office don't want to attend the group's meetings because they have so many other meetings or because "the food at this meeting is not good enough."

In this and other occasions, the community facilitator tried to show me what happens when discourses on community-based transfrontier conservation confront the complexities and messiness of everyday local life. The ethnographic richness, intricacies, and contradictions of local life in the Maloti-Drakensberg form a stark contrast to the grand narratives and global solution of the peace parks discourse. Yet both are part of the frontiers of conservation. In investigating these dynamics, I am especially interested in the political practices they entail. Recent "aidnography" has been attentive to these practices through ethnographic research committed to close but critical engagement with conservation and development agents (see Lewis et al. 2003; Mosse 2004, 2005; Quarles van Ufford, Giri, and Mosse 2003). I have also sought to engage with proponents of transfrontier conservation and implementers; chapters 3 to 7 analyze the politics the implementers of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project employed to negotiate material realities and reified representations and how other actors responded with their own political strategies. However, adding up these political practices will not lead to an exposition of the infinite variety of interests and strategies that actors hold or deploy. Rather, I will show that these political practices—in all their variety—are deeply influenced by political-economic structures.<sup>8</sup> If neoliberal conservation is the frontier of conservation; this book dissects the politics involved in transforming the frontier.

### **Frontier Politics**

Frontiers, clearly, connote much more than parks across borders. They are peculiar spaces, separating the usual from the unusual and the possible from the impossible. A frontier is "an edge of space and time: a zone of not yet—not yet mapped, not yet regulated" (Tsing 2005, 29). Frontiers are the moments that new knowledge is created and that open minds to new possibilities, new ways of thought, and different practices. The frontier, therefore, cannot be just a border. It will always be a space on its own, riddled with contradictions and struggles, mired in ambiguities and uncertainties. It is this space that allows the negotiation of the inherent tensions between material realities and reified representations.



Conceptualizing frontiers in this way has major implications. It means that opening new frontiers is a profoundly political act, tied up with interests and shaped by power constellations. Indeed, I argue that the negotiation of frontiers occurs as a particular set of political practices. This sets the book apart from related interventions, particularly in anthropology and development studies. While many authors ultimately stress the partial, limited, and refractory nature of their ethnographic observations, I emphasize the structural features to which I believe my ethnography directed me. This is why I argue for ethnographic research that links different levels of abstraction, has a special eye for power relations, and combines agency with structure. Only in this way can the book account for neoliberalism's diversity of contextualized and place-particular hybridizations and say something about the remarkable congruencies in how neoliberalism embeds itself in the conduct of governing social-ecological change. This has nothing to do with trying to "identify hidden motives" behind observations (Li 2007, 9). Rather, I emphasize that ethnographic interventions are political and part of the frontier politics that they investigate. Yes, we must always acknowledge that "local articulations with capital are more creative and diverse than Marx anticipated" (West 2006, 266), but we cannot not hide behind this fact. It is in this vein that I will conclude the book by going back to the politics in political ecology in order to give fresh impetus to a positive politics that critically engages with neoliberal solutions and interventions while opening space to think about just and sustainable futures.

This is not straightforward, and the scale of the challenge should be appreciated. After all, frontiers have special significance in a neoliberal political economy. Neoliberalism needs frontiers. For all its idiosyncrasies and contradictions, neoliberalism, and in fact the wider capitalist system, has proven remarkably resilient and able to overcome resistance. This is not to say that neoliberal expansion is linear or without boundaries. Rather, neoliberal capitalism is able to deal with its own systemic boundaries, because both its excesses and its alternatives can be turned into new sites for commodity production (see Hartwick and Peet 2003; Harvey 2010; Kovel 2002). To put it stronger still: neoliberal capitalism thrives on frontiers. It thrives on the borders between the known and the unknown, the possible and the (yet) impossible; this is the source of its "crazy vitality" and dynamism and the reason why Marx paid homage to capitalism (Berman 1988, 92; Thrift 2005).

Fuse this dynamic with the "disorderly" and violent demands and con-



stitutions of African postcolonial societies and it becomes even clearer that opening up new frontiers is deeply political (see, e.g., Chabal and Daloz 1999; Mbembe 2001, 88). In a study of transfrontier conservation in southern Africa, this above all means dealing with dynamics of racial inequality and questions of sovereignty implied by the notion of the transfrontier. Conservation, David Hughes forcefully argues, “continues to produce the aesthetics, symbols, and fables of white privilege” (2010, 133; see also Kepe 2009). What started as violent, “racialized dispossession” of “African property and personhood” in the context of colonial rule and white occupation of large tracts of land continues to starkly influence affairs and relations to this day (D. S. Moore 2005, 12), particularly as many whites in southern Africa and abroad persist in favoring African nature over African people (Hughes 2010). In the case of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project between South Africa and Lesotho, this dark shadow appeared many an instance: from Sotho fear that South Africa was going to “steal” more land to racialized struggles between the white-dominated South African and black Lesotho project-implementation teams (see chapter 4).

In addition to being imbued with racialized histories, transfrontier conservation denotes new spatial ordering: the reorganization of the regulation and governance of nature and people in particular places. This implies sovereignty, not just the prerogative of states within political boundaries but—following Achille Mbembe (2001, 78–79)—the subjectivities and disciplinary tactics created to control and direct people. In this way, peace parks extend and modify earlier ideas and practices around community-based conservation (CBC). CBC emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to colonial top-down fortress-conservation models that excluded people from protected areas (see Hulme and Murphree 2001; Kusters et al. 2006; Ros-Tonen and Dietz 2005). This conservation discourse, built on ideals of respect for indigenous knowledge, awareness of historical injustices, and the compatibility of human development and conservation of nature, matured when neoliberalism was becoming increasingly hegemonic, making it likely, in James McCarthy’s words, that CBC discourses were “influenced by the larger policy environment in which they developed” (2005, 996). The result is a continuous amalgamation of mixed “institutional forms and political agendas” that favor particular constructions of governance of conservation and development around faith in markets to assign roles to communities, the state, and other stakeholders (998). Transfrontier conservation builds on and further transforms these institu-