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Black Travel and Presence in the Building of South Africa

ROBIN L. TURNER

In *Safari Nation*, Jacob S. T. Dlamini rewrites the history of Kruger National Park in South Africa by placing black people's actions at the center of the narrative. Writing against the widespread understanding that forced removal, exclusion, and labor exploitation fully define black people's historical relationship with this iconic park long known as a top safari tourism destination, Dlamini contends that this overly simplistic narrative mistakenly accepts "segregation and apartheid at face value."

Safari Nation shows that black southern Africans have long had varied and complex relationships with the park, with conservation, and with leisure travel and tourism.

This ambitious book aims not only to transform our understanding of South Africa's premier national park, but also to show that black people's mobility and leisure shaped the South African nation. Dlamini, an assistant professor of history at Princeton University, makes a significant contribution by attending to the perspectives of both black elites and neighboring black communities on Kruger National Park, as well as by connecting conservation and tourism history to black politics and intellectual history. This book shows how black people—so-called Africans, Indians, and Coloureds—co-created the nation through their sustained presence, mobility, and pursuit of freedom. Dlamini's close attention to black people's agency, their diversity, and their complex engagements with apartheid echoes themes in his previous books, *Native Nostalgia* and *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle*.

Safari Nation weaves together three stories through its ten chapters. The first details how

black southern Africans lived in, moved through, and worked within the region at the confluence of South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe that eventually became Kruger National Park between the late nineteenth century and the early twenty-first century. Dlamini affirms that thousands of

black "African" people were forcibly removed from the lands that were designated for the park and suffered enduring harms from this displacement, from mistreatment by park officials, and from wildlife attacks,

as other scholars have recounted. But he foregrounds Africans' persistent presence in the park and in the region.

The second story Dlamini tells is far less well-known. He describes how black political leaders, journalists, and other professionals viewed and engaged in travel. Black elites, such as South African Native National Congress leader Richard Victor Selope Thema, wrote about leisure travel, nature, and conservation in black newspapers such as *Koranta ea Becoana*, *African Who's Who*, and *Bantu World*. Dlamini's analysis of how these self-consciously modern people saw the relationship between mobility and freedom—and how they traveled to Kruger Park, across South Africa, and beyond its borders—demonstrates that they saw such journeys as political acts.

These first two narrative threads place the third—which concerns the well-documented decades-long effort to build a white South African nation, white national park system, and white international tourism destination—in a strikingly different light. Although Dlamini devotes some attention to the substantial harms inflicted by white supremacist conservation, tourism, and labor policies on black people and communities, his account places greater emphasis on how black people affected these white supremacist projects. White decision-makers could not and did not act unilaterally, but instead had to react to the persistent

**Safari Nation: A Social History
of the Kruger National Park**
by Jacob S. T. Dlamini
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presence of black southern Africans in the Kruger Park region, to black elite tourist travel to the park, and to the sustained rights claims of black South Africans. “The sheer presence of black South Africans altered the history of the KNP,” Dlamini argues. Through this interpretation of park history, he makes larger points about the inherent incoherence and incompleteness of the white supremacist state projects of segregation and apartheid.

Dlamini criticizes previous studies for uncritically accepting claims that parks officials evicted all black residents from what became first the Sabi Game Reserve in 1898 and the Singwitsi Game Reserve in 1903, and then Kruger National Park in 1926, and that black people were barred from visiting the park. Archival records reveal that more than 1,000 black people lived within the park boundaries between the 1900s and the 1930s, and that hundreds remained in the 1950s despite the forced removal of many communities. In fact, the last “resident native” did not depart until 2000. Dlamini emphasizes that these black residents were not hidden or unknown. National Parks Board and Native Affairs officials corresponded with one another about park residents, collected taxes and rents from them, culled their livestock, employed many as park workers, and sometimes viewed them as useful tourist attractions.

Dlamini’s criticism of archaeologists, geographers, and social scientists for failing to delve into the archives lends an unpleasant note to this otherwise compelling discussion. It seems less than generous to expect non-historians to question the “laborers or poachers” paradigm that dominates earlier well-regarded histories. Jane Carruthers’s 1995 book, *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History*, details how white southern Africans accepted black people as subordinate workers but criminalized their hunting and use of arms to protect their families and livestock. That work makes brief reference to facilities for black tourists and to black park residents, but devotes much more attention to black Africans on “the other side of the fence.”

Large numbers of black people also traversed the park to visit friends and relatives elsewhere in the region, to poach wildlife, and to travel to mines, towns, and cities. State officials sought to restrict independent movement through the park

and worked with the Chamber of Mines to channel migrancy through labor recruitment agencies, delegating much of the responsibility for enforcing their policies to African park rangers and the “native runners” who brought Mozambican migrant workers across the park. Yet as Dlamini emphasizes, the Kruger National Park region has remained a “zone of movement” for people and wildlife despite ongoing efforts to fix park and national boundaries.

Tens of thousands of black domestic workers accompanied their white employers on their Kruger Park visits, even though the park provided African guides and attendants for white tourists. “Employing a domestic servant was not just a question of having someone perform household chores; it was also about maintaining one’s standing as a white person,” Dlamini writes. The presence of visiting domestic workers thus buttressed the racist social order, but it also worried park officials who feared that they “might raise discontent” among their underpaid counterparts employed by the park.

NEW AFRICANS

Dlamini takes great pains to underscore the complexity and diversity of black people’s relationships with Kruger National Park. Black people lived in, were removed from, and worked at the park, “but blacks also took holidays,” as Dlamini writes. He contends that looking closely at these black travelers, at black tourism traditions, and at the black elite more generally is essential to understanding the history of the park and of South Africa’s development into a safari nation. Kruger National Park has accepted, if not welcomed, black visitors since tourism began there in 1923. Thousands of black travelers arrived between the 1940s and the 1970s. Black tourists drove themselves to the park, viewed wildlife, and spent time with one another in segregated facilities, to which they were restricted until 1981, when park tourism was desegregated (though park labor was not).

A large share of these “black” tourists were Indian South Africans. Indian families that lived nearby spread the word about the park in their social networks, built the first basic park accommodations for Indian visitors in 1932, and hosted people in transit.

Dlamini places black tourism in Kruger National Park in the context of twentieth-century

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black elite travel traditions and discourse. Focusing principally on “New Africans,” *Safari Nation* details how these self-consciously modern African elites connected leisure travel to freedom, mobility, and improvement. Black elites challenged white supremacist discourses that depicted African people as inherently premodern and close to nature. They sought recognition as civilized modern people who were different from other Africans. These beliefs led New Africans to develop independent travel traditions; to lobby for equitable transport, political rights, and land rights; and to oppose zoo-like touristic displays of African people in Kruger Park and along tourist routes.

Black elites play a crucial role in the argument Dlamini advances in *Safari Nation* because their perspectives and experiences differed so significantly from those of most black people in the Kruger Park region, where the creation of the park brought “a new social and political order.” So-called African, Indian, and Coloured elites chose to travel and spend some of their limited funds on leisure pursuits despite the racist hindrances they encountered. Travel was a means to improve themselves, to connect with “our kind of people,” and to familiarize themselves with nature and with the country they claimed as their own.

The latter chapters of *Safari Nation* track the interaction among black and white southern Africa through the homelands era and the transition to democracy. Dlamini contends that conferring self-governance and then nominal independence on the four homelands that neighbor Kruger National Park hastened the fall of apartheid by heighten-

ing its internal contradictions. (Homelands were former Native Reserves decreed by the apartheid government to be ethnationally homes of African people.)

Homeland leaders espoused conservation philosophies that integrated ecological, economic, and human well-being. They sought to collaborate with Kruger National Park, while the South African National Parks Board worked to build relationships with these leaders without ceding control over the park. Black homeland citizens were exempt from racial restrictions as visiting tourists but continued to suffer from park-linked wildlife depredation, antipoaching violence, and terrible working conditions, just as they had prior to homeland self-governance.

The end of apartheid and the reintegration of the homelands into South Africa did not resolve these challenges. Instead, South Africa’s political transformation created more public space for varied black perspectives on nature conservation, leisure, and tourism. Dlamini highlights the continuing diversity among black South Africans, contrasting the ways in which nearby communities mobilized to hold the park and the government accountable for past and ongoing harms, then-President Nelson Mandela articulated a more democratic and inclusive conservation vision, and urban black people tried to connect with nature. South Africa can and should belong to all who live in it, as the 1955 Freedom Charter declared. This nuanced, multi-vocal history of Kruger National Park provides a solid foundation for building a more cosmopolitan South African safari nation. ■