

Staging Wild Africa: Safari and/as Performance

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Goals & Objectives

As part of my larger concern with the manners in which Africa is portrayed—and perceived—my next research project is a book-length study of safari-as-performance. Based on work in several research sites—Florida in the US and the Botswana/ Mozambique/South Africa triangle in southern Africa—the study is titled *Staging Wild Africa: Safari and/as Performance*.

The book consists of three parts:

Part I: Safari and History

Part I consists of a history of 19th and early 20th century safari practice, read through the lens of performance. Richard Francis Burton is said to have introduced the Swahili word for journey or adventure – *safari* – into the English language in the 19th century. My analysis in this first section of the study focuses on several historical scenarios, including Richard Francis Burton’s use of brownface costuming in order to visit the Haj; the historic encounter between Henry M. Stanley and David Livingstone that is often framed dramatically as if it were a theatrical scenario, and Roosevelt’s 1909 specimen collection spree for the Smithsonian, which traded in discourses on colonialism, patriarchy, Western consumption of African resources, and performed American narratives of nation building. I support my writing of the history of the safari as a cultural practice with analyses of safari within popular culture across the 20th century, including films like *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939), *King Solomon’s Mines* (1950), *The Naked Prey* (1966), and *Out of Africa* (1985) and the concomitant discourses on primitivism, social hierarchies, and racist ideology that accompany them. My central questions here include: What were safaris designed to perform? How does the safari as a practice – and a fantasy – play a part in writing the narrative of Africa for the rest of the world outside the continent? How is safari imbricated in colonial imaginaries and performances? How were the bodies of “white hunters” and “natives” disciplined to behave or act? And what types of scenarios did the safari (or journey) imagine and make possible, and what did it ignore or erase?

Part II: Safari As African Fantasy

Part II concerns the staging of Africa and the safari-as-tourist-attraction in American amusement or theme parks such as Busch Gardens or Disney’s Animal Kingdom. The latter is explicitly framed around a piece of theatre—Julie Taymor’s *The Lion King* (based on the Disney film, which itself borrows from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*). In this section of the study, I will explore the manners in which ideas about “Africa” circulate in a tourist economy designed as a destination. In the space of the amusement park, tourists are encouraged not to actually travel to Africa, but to experience a virtual version of Africa (read a safer/more sanitized, commercialized, and fantasy version of the continent). In what Scott Magelssen calls an “experience-based engagement,” visitors can “travel without getting dirty” through a generic Africa loaded with “authenticity” trappings. The questions I seek to explore here include: What version of Africa do American amusement parks like Animal Kingdom enact? How (and what) are tourist bodies asked to act or perform within such spaces? How do hired

performers (actors) in the theme park's scenarios play into fantasies about Africa and where might they resist the performance? And what negotiations become possible (or impossible) within the overlapping discourses of commerce, colonial and bestial fantasy, and performance?

Part III: Safari as Performance

Part III is a performance ethnography of contemporary safari practice, in the Southern African triangle between Botswana, Mozambique, and South Africa, an area that draws and thrives on an enormous tourist trade. I examine how Africa is staged and performed for Western (mainly American) tourists in a range of contemporary safari experiences in this region. These include exclusive, five-star safaris that frames tourist experiences through romantic fantasies of the colonial African past, and more everyday, affordable safaris in Mozambique, and eco-safaris in Botswana, that give tourists the opportunity to "give back" to communities by involving them in various social justice projects. My questions here include: What are the responsibilities of a tourist on safari? How and what are we asked to perform or act? Are we to act the gracious guest (a very African concept of hospitality) or the consuming outsider? The ethical contributor or the distanced observer? Or something in between? How (and what) are support staff (guides, trackers, Professional Hunters (PHs), serving staff, indigenous bodies) asked to perform? And to what ends? What is performed for tourists on safari? How is the idea of "Africa" enacted and what narratives are involved in this type of storytelling? I'm interested as much in mythic stories about Africa as I am in counter-mythic narratives that question or confront the colonial past.

Significance of the research in my career

This project expands upon my previous research in Southern Africa – which has yielded two books: *Making Space: Three Decades of Magnet Theatre* (Intellect/Unisa 2016) and *Performing Whiteness in the Postcolony* (Univ of Iowa Press 2016) – and it broadens the scope of my work to include performance sites in Mozambique and Botswana as well as the US. While still related geographically to my area of research (South Africa) and within my field (Theatre and Performance Studies), this project represents a brand new line of exciting research for me.

In this project, I explore how, though competing narratives and legacies of power that overlap in the space of safari, it becomes a site through which to examine economies (financial, political, figurative and performative) of our increasingly globalized world that Achille Mbembe describes as the postcolony, an ever-negotiating space, haunted by the colonial past, and constantly reinventing itself.

This is the first study to tackle safari and/as performance. Much of the published work on safaris includes biographies of great white hunters (see Brian Herne's *White Hunters: The Golden Age of African Safaris* (2001) for example), commercial safari guides marked by Fodors, National Geographic, Banana Republic, Bradt Travel etc, or coffee table books like David Anderson's *On Safari* (2005). There are several scholarly studies on the historic depiction of Africa as a continent that inform my work, including Anandi Ramamurthy's *Imperial persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British advertising* (2003), Julia

Gallagher's *Images of Africa: Creation, negotiation and subversion* (2016) and Curtis Keim's *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind* (2013). However, no study addresses safari through the lens of performance; nor is there any extensive work on how Africa is staged or enacted in the Western imaginary. There is some literature on Disney but none that address how Africa is imagined and depicted through performance.

Methods & Approach

In keeping with standard practices in Theatre and Performance Studies, my methodologies for this project will involve a combination of archival research, interviews with people involved in the safari business and tourists who participate in safari tourism, first-person performance ethnographies of several actual safari/tourism sites, both in the US (Disney, Busch Gardens) and southern Africa, and critical scholarly analysis of historical documents.

Status of the Work

Site research was completed in 2017 and 2018, interviews in 2019, and I plan on drafting the manuscript and shopping it to presses in 2020.