

Reflections on Experiences Abroad

Volume 1

Article 3

2022

On the Trans-Kalahari Highway: Caught in the Middle of Two Spaces

Myra Ann Houser

Ouachita Baptist University, houserma@obu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/experiences_abroad



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Publishing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Houser, Myra Ann (2022) "On the Trans-Kalahari Highway: Caught in the Middle of Two Spaces," *Reflections on Experiences Abroad*: Vol. 1, Article 3.

Available at: https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/experiences_abroad/vol1/iss1/3

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reflections on Experiences Abroad by an authorized editor of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

1

On the Trans-Kalahari Highway: Caught in the Middle of Two Spaces

Myra Houser

The biggest meltdown may have come when my parents told us we were going. We'd just finished lunch, and one parent—my mother?—said, “Girls, we’re moving to Namibia.” I ran outside, threw sticks against a pepper tree, and cried about leaving Francistown, the only home that I really remembered. I could not imagine any space more beautiful than the tiny town in which I had grown up, any place where the stars could be bigger and brighter, or any space where people would be warmer and more loving. In all of my long, nine years I had never wished for another home, and certainly did not want one now.

I grew up with parents who served as missionaries, beginning when I was three months old (technically, appointed before I was born). Living in Francistown, Botswana, my dad was a church planter, while my mom served as treasurer for the International Missions Board, or IMB, in Botswana. When we moved to Windhoek, Namibia, they switched jobs. Dad served as mission administrator, and Mom worked to help establish and maintain various children’s ministries. The move precipitated re-asking of a familiar and much-hated question for third-culture kids: “But which place do you like better?” I also hate(d) the “But do you feel more American or more ____?” version. But I really, really hated the “Did you like Botswana or Namibia better” version. That is why I have decided to cheat whilst writing this essay.

I was meant to write on a special element of a country in which I have lived. But if I know one thing from studying African history, it is of the artificial and historically recent nature of nation-state-boundary lines. There are places in which people recognize

these. In many ways, Botswana and Namibia could not be more different culturally, demographically, historically. But they also share a large border and much common history, and in places there is little discernment between the two. One of those places is in traveling along the Trans-Kalahari Highway that connects the two. It is a unique space, and it cannot be understood as part of just one country, so I might as well cheat and write about two.

For many Americans, the TKH is a study in barren boringness. For many more, it is deadly. A combination of rented cars, over confident automatic car enthusiasts trying their hand at manual cars, driving on the left side of the road, and wild animals has led to one of the highest road fatality rates in the world. That has abated a little now, as the road is mostly paved and even has luxury passenger trains and more stopovers running through it. But my memories of it are far from barren and far from boring. Much of this may be due to associating it with the angst of driving back and forth across two places that I love, lost in my own thoughts and anticipation.

But it is also much, much more than that. It is a point of connection between two of the world's least densely populated countries. As such, it is a place where it is easy to feel alone, to become lost in your thoughts, to see the stars (at night they are bigger and brighter than those in Texas, which makes sense because both countries are, gasp, bigger than Texas). The remoteness that makes the space so dangerous is the same quality that makes it so magical. Those 1,300 miles and miles of dirt (and now mostly paved) road make it possible to not see a car or another soul for many hours. As long as you are not looking for a quick ambulance ride, that can be a great thing. On a practical level, those miles connect several land-locked spaces to a major shipping port—Walvis Bay—with plans to expand to another—Maputo.

While the highway does feature a lot of the quaint towns, small rest areas, and accommodations that self-describe as 'rustic' and cater to folks on such a route, the spaces where people reside are pretty disparate. The places where animals reside, though, are many. Many of southern Africa's larger game animals live along the route, so it is not unusual to see a giraffe grazing on the side of the road, an elephant crossing it, or a troop of obstructionist baboons sitting in the midst of it. The ability to go from 120km to 0 comes in very handy in these circumstances. So does the ability to suspend or not worry about time. Of course, many folks trucking goods across the southern part of the continent do not have the luxury of lengthy baboon-imposed stops, but many people traveling at slower paces—as my family did on holiday—have the ability to

enjoy one of the world's most empty roads. In those instances, running on the timeline of a baboon troop or pulling over to watch a herd or individual something makes for a great break. There is something very unexpected and thrilling about working on a wild timeframe and not knowing what will result.

By far one of the best features of this particular road is the ability to be so off schedule, so lost in a sense. Despite the many differences between Botswana and Namibia, the landscape in this part of the countries is pretty similar. You could be in one space. You could be in the other. You could forget. There is a melding of these disparate parts of life that the highway makes really comforting. In reality, of course, it is funded through the cooperative effort of four nation-states, and so it is kind of a liminal, space-less space. This does not erase those boundaries or the very different lived experiences of people within them, but it does let them meld together in your mind. It lets you be in one long, continuous space rather than having to think about where you are and answer the dreaded question of which space you like best. Maybe, in retrospect, "Girls, we're moving to Namibia" was not such a scary phrase so much as an opportunity to connect with more.

About the Author

Dr. Myra Houser is a faculty member in the Sutton School of Social Sciences at Ouachita Baptist University. She is chair of the school's Department of History.