

*NATURE CAN TEACH
The Animal Gaze
South African Wildlife
Photoatlas*

*Romola V. Thumbadoo
November 2021 – March 2022*



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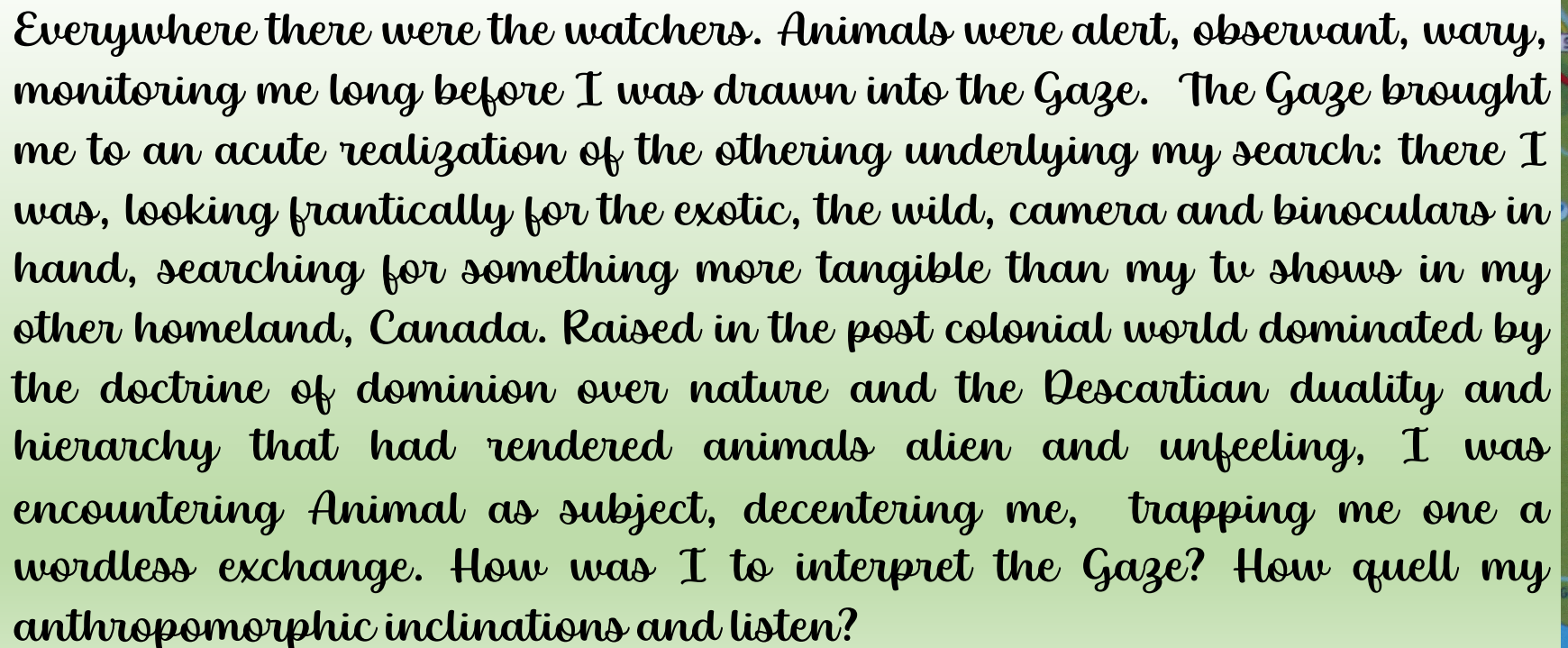
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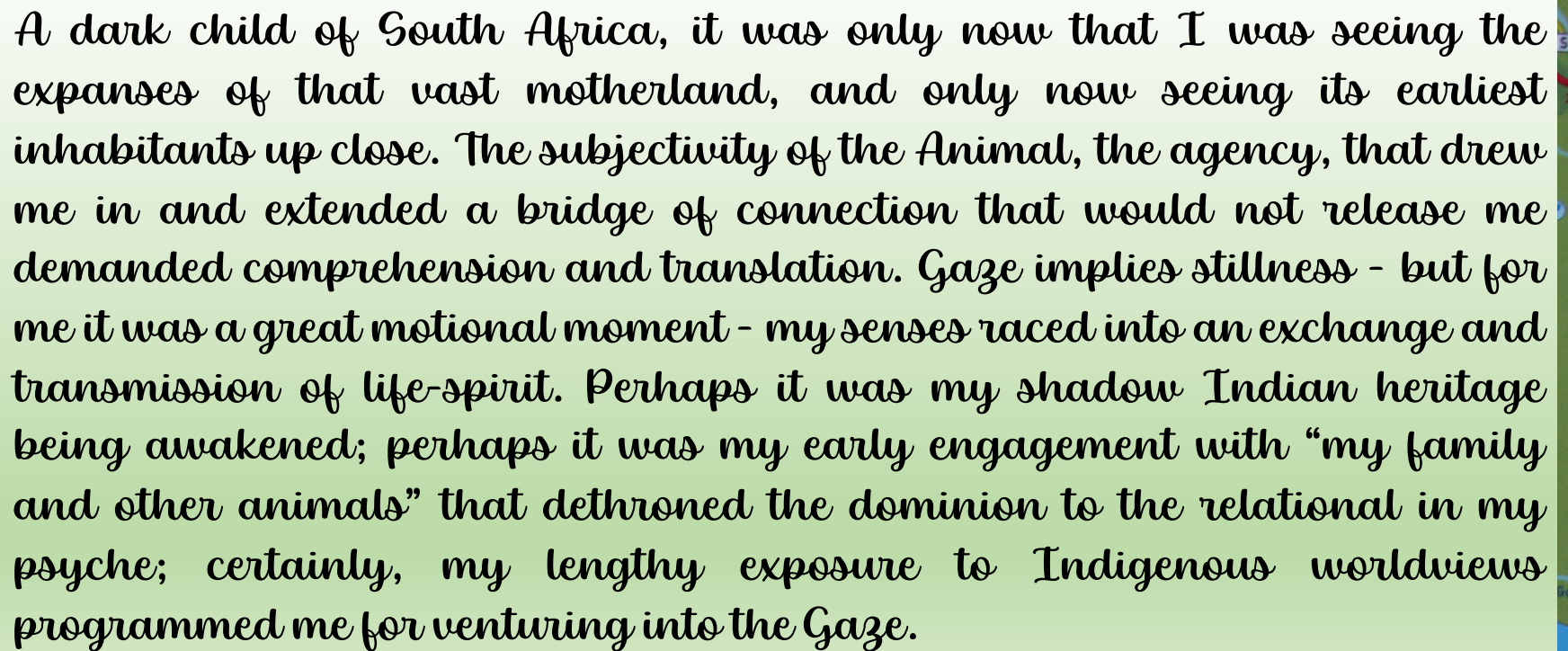
The Animal Gaze

This Photoatlas presents a snapshot of the iconic animals of South Africa that I met between November 2021 to March 2022. I was incredibly fortunate to make five trips across the country, some through national, provincial and private game reserves, at this critical transitional moment in time - time of undeniable global climate change, extreme weather, environmental stress, eco and biodiversity crisis, and unprecedented extinction of species. In this Age of the Anthropocene, I was acutely aware of the gaze of the wild at every turn.

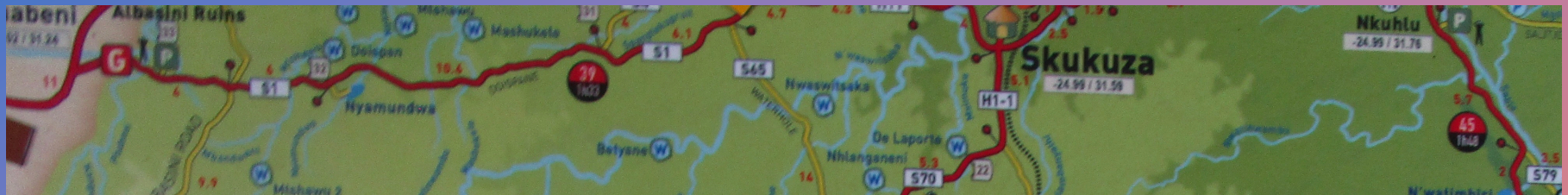
I was especially shaken by the Animal Gaze.



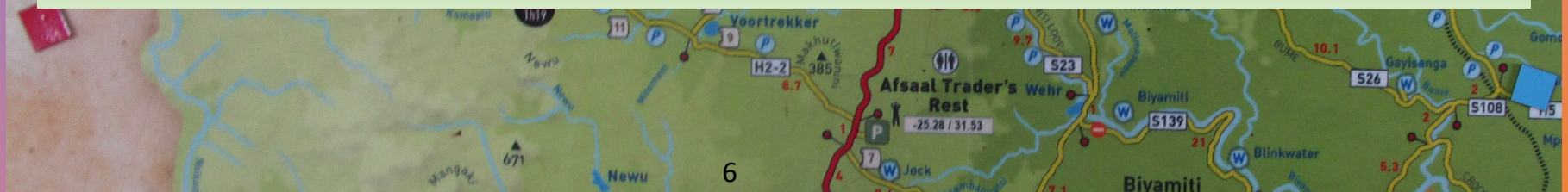
Everywhere there were the watchers. Animals were alert, observant, wary, monitoring me long before I was drawn into the Gaze. The Gaze brought me to an acute realization of the othering underlying my search: there I was, looking frantically for the exotic, the wild, camera and binoculars in hand, searching for something more tangible than my tv shows in my other homeland, Canada. Raised in the post colonial world dominated by the doctrine of dominion over nature and the Cartesian duality and hierarchy that had rendered animals alien and unfeeling, I was encountering Animal as subject, decentering me, trapping me one a wordless exchange. How was I to interpret the Gaze? How quell my anthropomorphic inclinations and listen?




A dark child of South Africa, it was only now that I was seeing the expanses of that vast motherland, and only now seeing its earliest inhabitants up close. The subjectivity of the Animal, the agency, that drew me in and extended a bridge of connection that would not release me demanded comprehension and translation. Gaze implies stillness - but for me it was a great motional moment - my senses raced into an exchange and transmission of life-spirit. Perhaps it was my shadow Indian heritage being awakened; perhaps it was my early engagement with “my family and other animals” that dethroned the dominion to the relational in my psyche; certainly, my lengthy exposure to Indigenous worldviews programmed me for venturing into the Gaze.




Considering themselves children of the penultimate mother, Mother Earth, Indigenous people like my friend and teacher William Commanda affirmed relationship with Animal. Those were the ones with an ancient capacity to survive, live and thrive consistent with the evolution of Earth herself. As such, they were respected and honoured as the original teachers, and the spirit of relationality, Ginawaydaganuc, opened the doors to the communion. Indeed, the earliest cave paintings of humans affirmed such a reciprocal life bond with Animal.

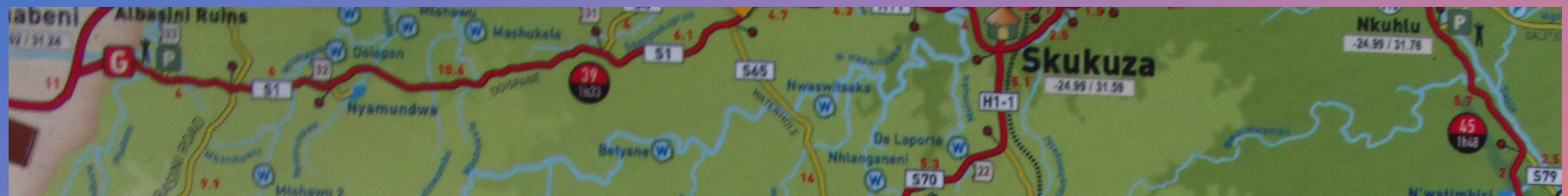




But today, animals too occupy a colonized historicized world that is being buffeted by accelerated evolutionary transition in an unprecedentedly anthropocened world and the anthropogenic impact became visible to me over the course of my whirlwind road trips across the birthplace of humanity.

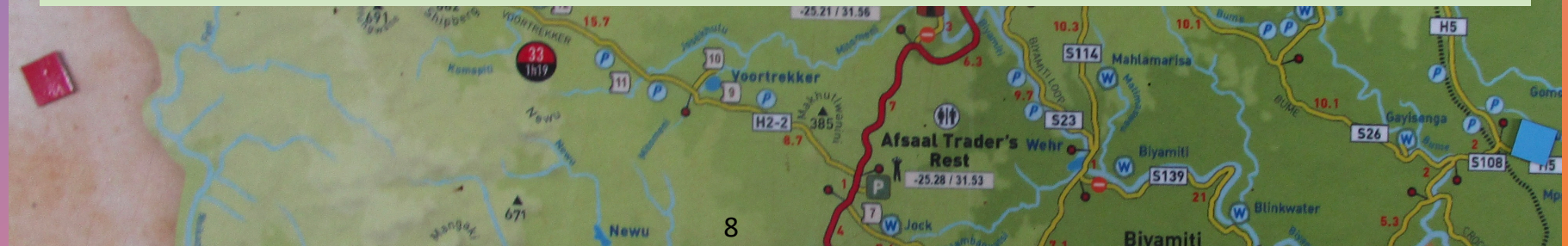
I reflect now on the colonial and evolutionary forces engaged in a seeming death grip, and I can see all over South Africa the spaces for the wild have shrunk incredibly. And then, in even the remaining tiny game reserve sanctuaries, tourists like me race through, demanding the Big Five. How we further stress the besieged.





In 2012 a guide told me her parents had worked in Hluhluwe Game Reserve for 24 years without seeing a leopard. This year, I saw two of these elusive private creatures on trees. Past the prize capture photo moment, I was left with chalk choking my breath.

Iconic Africa continues to compel with tremendous urgency, but it seems to me also that its Gaze has already shifted.





Chase's Hummingbird of Love and Joy ... Romola





















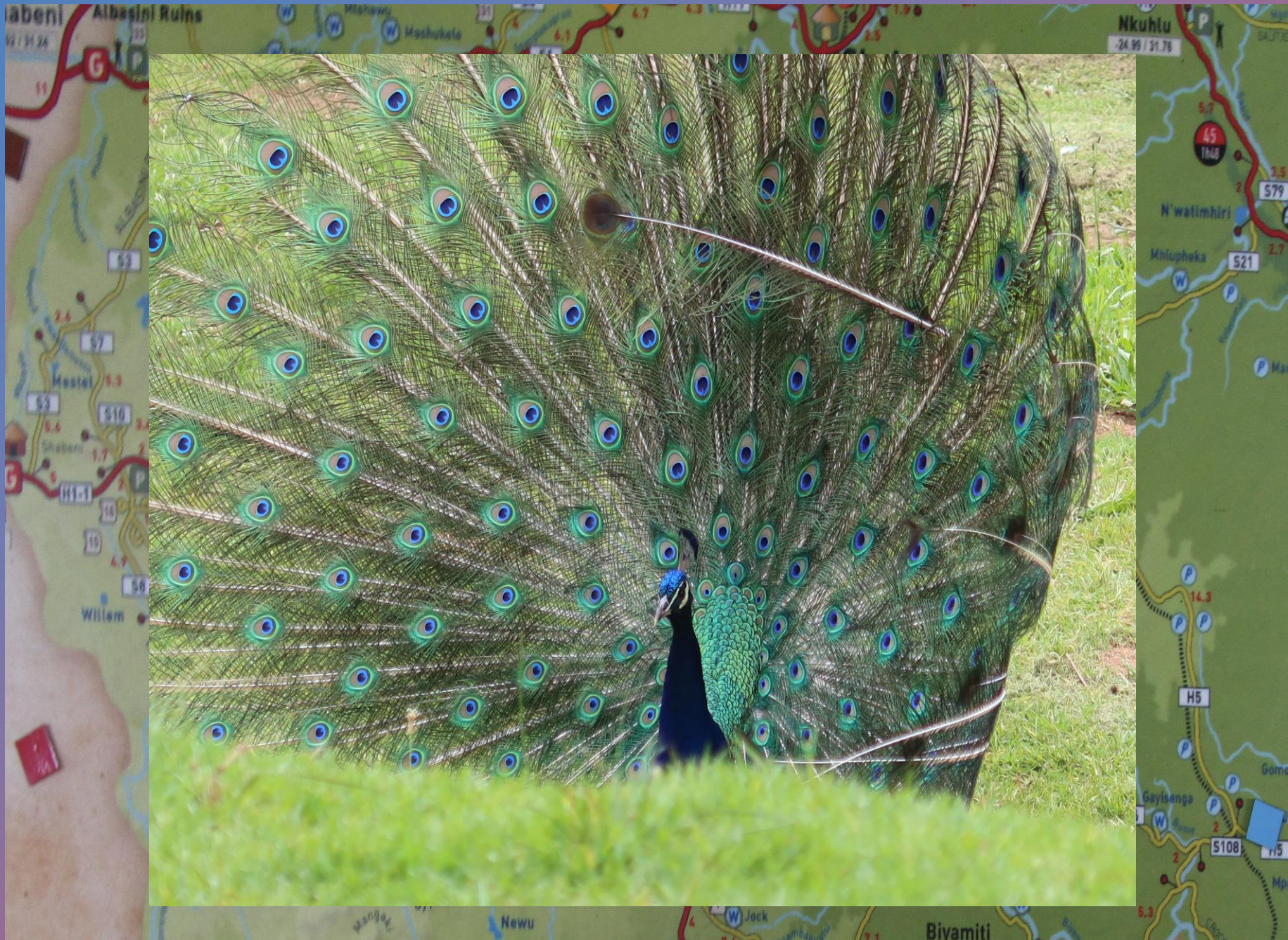


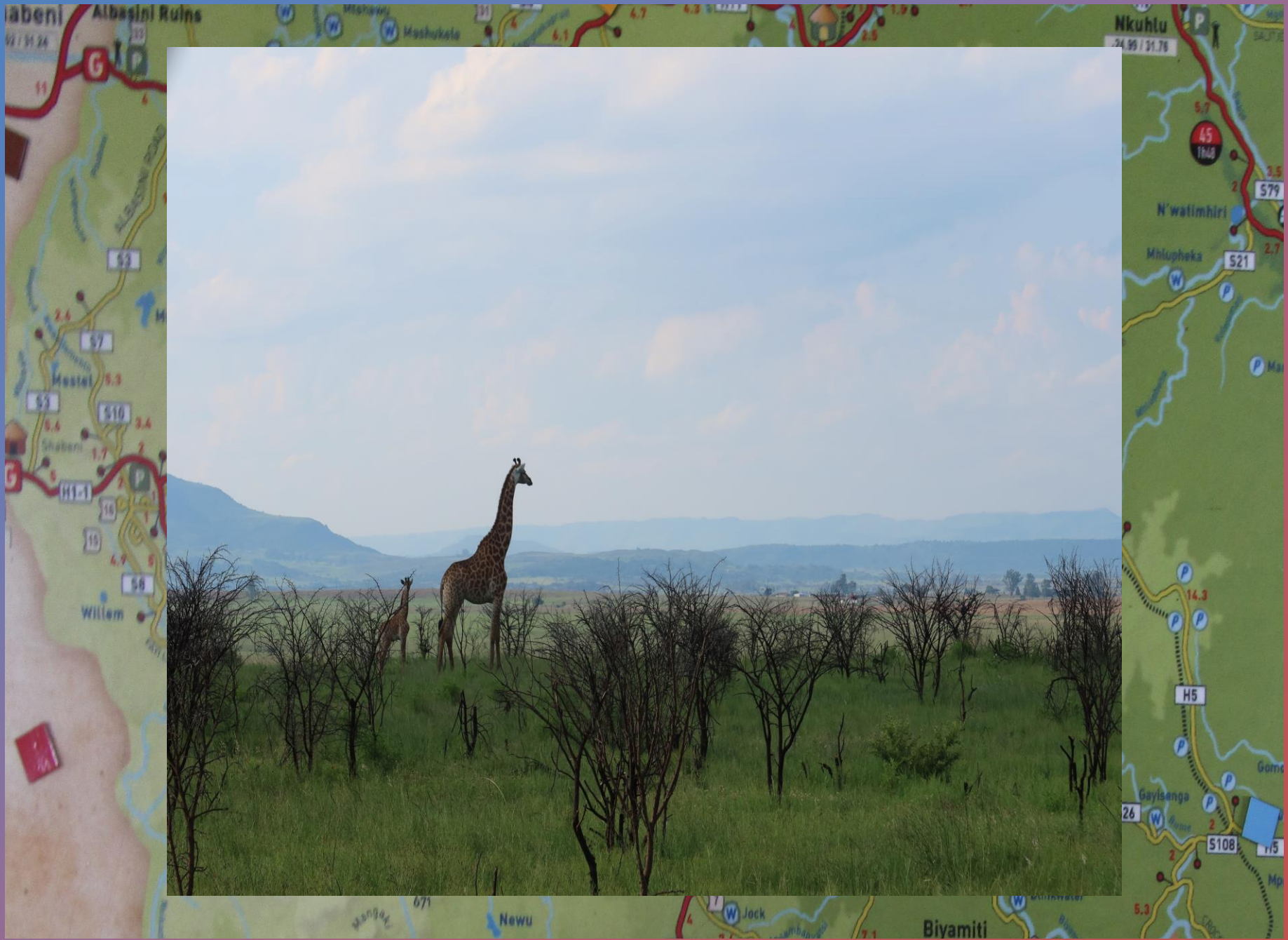








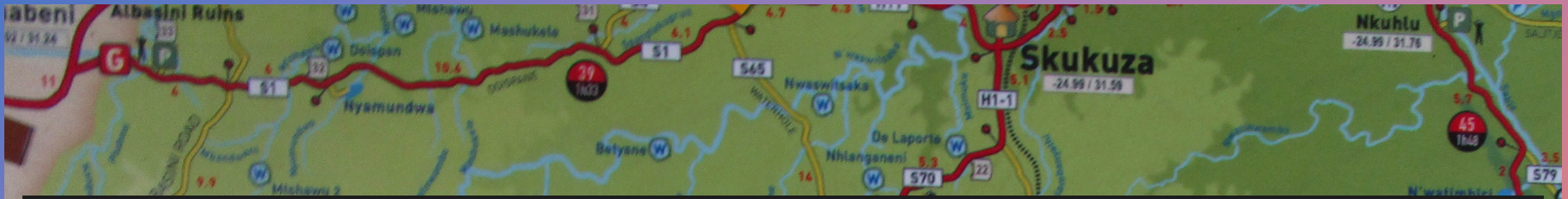


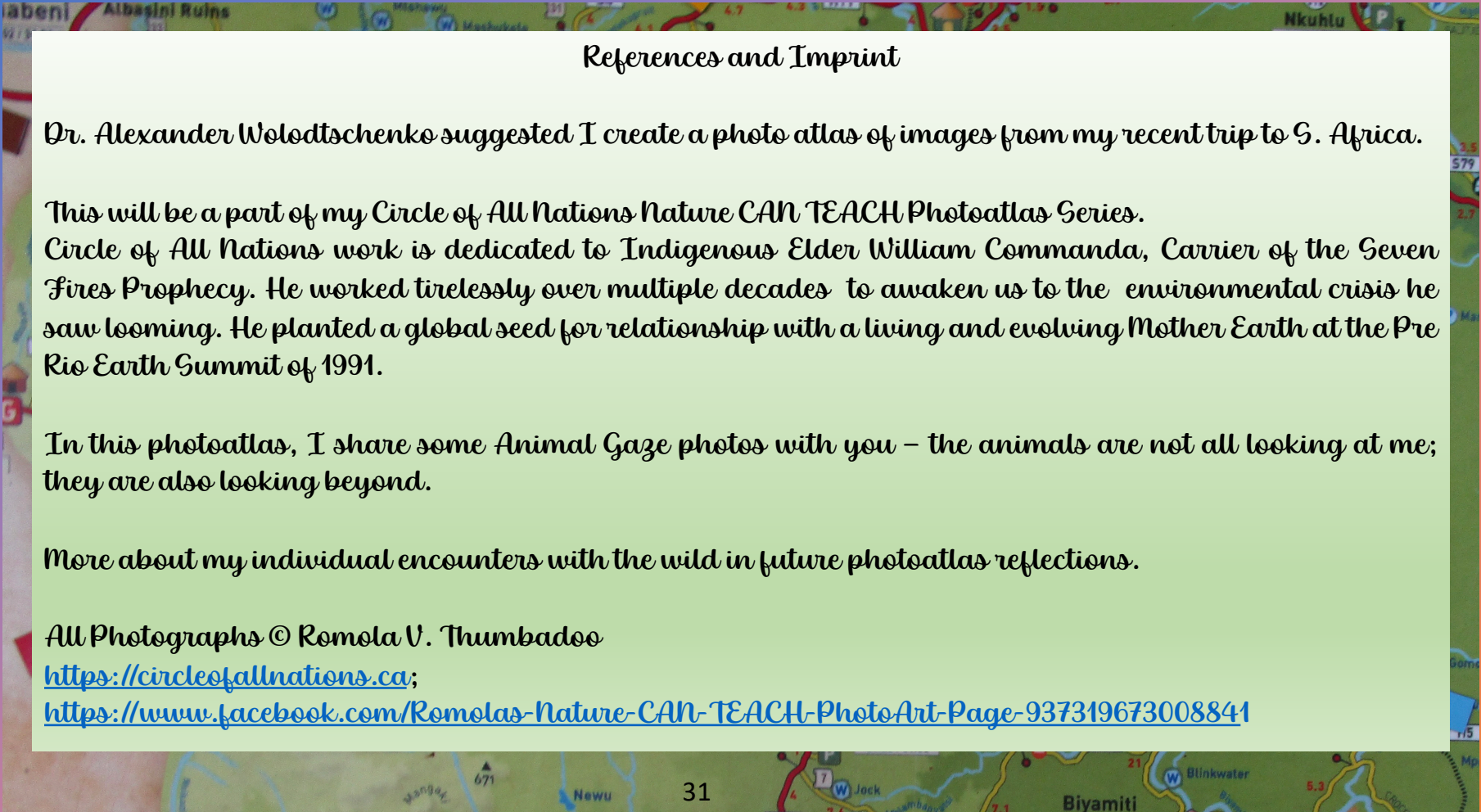












References and Imprint

Dr. Alexander Wolodtschenko suggested I create a photo atlas of images from my recent trip to S. Africa.

This will be a part of my Circle of All Nations Nature CAN TEACH Photoatlas Series.

Circle of All Nations work is dedicated to Indigenous Elder William Commanda, Carrier of the Seven Fires Prophecy. He worked tirelessly over multiple decades to awaken us to the environmental crisis he saw looming. He planted a global seed for relationship with a living and evolving Mother Earth at the Pre Rio Earth Summit of 1991.

In this photoatlas, I share some Animal Gaze photos with you – the animals are not all looking at me; they are also looking beyond.

More about my individual encounters with the wild in future photoatlas reflections.

All Photographs © Romola V. Thumbadoo

[*https://circleofallnations.ca;*](https://circleofallnations.ca;)

[*https://www.facebook.com/Romolas-Nature-CAN-TEACH-PhotoArt-Page-937319673008841*](https://www.facebook.com/Romolas-Nature-CAN-TEACH-PhotoArt-Page-937319673008841)

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