

Poster Children: Laurens van der Post's Imperial Propaganda in *A Far Off Place*

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The use of children to both promote and deconstruct the institution of Empire is not new. Rudyard Kipling's troubled hero in *Kim* upholds the basic tenets of Empire while also critiquing their efficacy. Kim's eventual breakdown at the end of the novel demonstrates the consequences of hybridized identities within Empire common in literature of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century.¹ Much has been written about Kim's struggle to find his own identity and his fragmented sense of self.² Yet what happens when the novel's hero and heroine are European children who spend much of the narrative appropriating the identity of indigenous peoples and then revert back to their European positions without experiencing an identity crisis? Such is the case in Laurens van der Post's novels *A Story Like the Wind* (1973) and *A Far Off Place* (1974). The novels follow the journey of two children of European descent: young François Joubert, who has been raised in the bush by his parents at Hunter's Drift, a co-op plantation, and his companion, Luciana "Nonnie" Monckton, a British-Portuguese girl whose father, a colonel in the British army, has purchased the land next to Hunter's Drift. *A Story Like the Wind* concludes with François and Nonnie about to depart on an early morning exploratory trip into the bush with François' faithful dog, Hintza. The children are intercepted by François' secret Bushman friend, Xhabbo, and Xhabbo's wife, Nuin-Tara, who have come to save the boy from African rebels led by a Chinese "chairman," who is continually and unflatteringly likened to Chairman Mao and has slaughtered the inhabitants of both farms. *A Far Off Place* follows the children's subsequent journey across the Kalahari Desert to safety under the care of their Bushmen protectors. Although the young protagonists are caught between the British Empire and the very people supplanted by Empire, their adoption of Bushmen culture and ultimate return to a distinctly

European way of life seem to be in service of van der Post's efforts to preserve the Bushmen's rights. Francois does not appear to undergo any form of an identity crisis; nor does he seem to experience difficulty slipping between European and Bushman roles. Although Nonnie's identity becomes muddled towards the end of the novel as she takes on the appearance of a Bushman woman, she, too, slides between Bushman and European behaviors rather easily. Reducing the novels to imperial propaganda ignores the complicated critique of imperial pursuits contained within the novel. Rather, through its seemingly simplistic answers to postcolonial southern African politics, *A Far Off Place* illustrates the vastly problematic landscape of identity politics and post-imperial responsibility in an increasingly global society. Born in Philippolis, South Africa, van der Post traveled the world and, after serving in World War II, was knighted in 1981 for his international political advice. Although he spent the later years of his life in England, van der Post referred to himself a "white Bushman" and even titled an autobiographical collection of interviews he conducted *A Walk with a White Bushman*. Van der Post's fictional and non-fictional writing is often marked by his defense of the rights of the indigenous Bushmen of Africa against both the British and southern African tribes. *Venture to the Interior*, for example, offers an ambivalent examination of van der Post's own emotional ties to Africa and a critique of the duties required of members of the British Empire. At times unflinchingly supportive of British pursuits in Africa, the text explores the chasm between the African continent and the British Isles and the rift's effects on the identities of those living between the two, as he, himself, did (xiii). Christopher Booker notes that the significance of van der Post's depiction of the Bushmen "was not that every detail of what he said was factually true. It was that he opened up a spiritual dimension to life in our spiritless modern world like no one else" (n.p.). The Bushman figure that pervades van der Post's writing in *A Far Off Place*, *A Story Like the Wind*, *Heart of the Hunter*, and other works becomes the texts' moral centre, a connection to the deep workings of the universe. Despite the "Disney-ification" of the later novels—*A Far Off Place* and *A Story Like the Wind* were turned into the 1994 film adaptation *A Far Off Place* that barely resembles the plot line of either

novel³—the English knight's chronicles of François and Nonnie's journey in southern Africa remain poignant portraits of indigenous peoples often neglected by callous colonial pursuits and tribal warfare.

While his efforts to give the Bushmen a voice are lauded by anthropologists such as Wilhelm Bleek, van der Post employs deeply problematic tropes and narrative strategies; often, the Bushmen in his texts are indebted to the structure of Empire for their mere survival.⁴ Van der Post continually refers to Africa as “primitive,” and his depiction of the continent can hardly be called sympathetic; his writing indicates that time spent in Africa often results in negative consequences for Europeans. Yet his inspection of the European in Africa suggests a fissure within the European's identity that occurs the moment he or she questions the relationship between the colony and metropolis. In his critique of J. D. F. Jones' unsympathetic biography of van der Post, David Atwell writes, “Van der Post's Ur-language of primitivism, stoicism, a cross-cultural discovery of essences, and self-reliance, authenticated by his South Africanness, in the years before South Africans became pariahs, was completely congenial to this generation [of the early to mid twentieth century]” (309). The splintered identity that Atwell calls “South Africanness” is depicted in *Venture to the Interior, A Story Like the Wind*, and *A Far Off Place*, through van der Post's characterization of Africa as “mother” (*Venture* 17). Although by using the trope of the noble savage as a vehicle for characterizing the Bushmen he so passionately cares for, van der Post attempts to portray them with dignity and heroism so that those in power will be moved to protect them, doing so is problematic. In his efforts to protect the Bushmen, van der Post takes on a parental role himself. This double articulation of the Bushmen as both parents and children signifies a complex web of agency, sublimation, and paternalistic tendencies that threatens to obscure not only van der Post's but also others' actions to protect and preserve the indigenous of the Bush.

The Bushmen of the Kalahari, also called Khoisan or Boesjemans, are considered to be among the oldest peoples of southern Africa.⁵ Their nomadic lifestyle carried them throughout areas in the south that are now parts of Botswana, South Africa, and Namibia. Anthropologist Elizabeth Marshall Thomas provides an iconic description of the

Bushmen in her 1989 text, *The Harmless People*. She writes, “Bushmen are a naked, hungry people, slight of build and yellow-skinned” who “are shy of any stranger” (6, 7). In her assessment of the Bushmen, Thomas, like van der Post, seeks to protect them, and she also employs paternal lexical choices. Yet the Bushmen do actually seem to be in need of assistance. According to Gregory McNamee’s introduction to *The Girl Who Made Stars and Other Bushman Stories*, “thousands of Bushmen were murdered or driven away from their lands. It is thought that perhaps only forty individuals are now alive who preserve intact traditional ways of life and knowledge; still not free to move at will across the countryside, these forty reside within South Africa’s Kagga Kamma Game Reserve, where they live astride two worlds: that of the ancient past, and the ever more closely approaching global monoculture that has erased so many cultures in the space of a few decades” (15). In an effort to preserve the Bushmen’s way of life, van der Post, Thomas, Bleek and Lucy Lloyd offer compelling pieces of ethnographic study about the Bushmen, yet their respective works rest on the use of a trope often observed in literary celebrations of Native Americans in literature from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries—that of the noble savage. Even the title of Thomas’ book casts the Bushmen as innocent and in need of protection.

Thomas’ portrayal aligns with van der Post’s continual longing for an idyllic Africa that would grant freedom and protection to the Bushmen. He laments that Europeans “[came] to Africa on the assumption that by moving to a new world they would leave their problems behind” but instead “had gradually begun to create a greater form of tyranny” (*A Far Off Place* 301). Van der Post’s complaint echoes chapter eight of *Venture to the Interior*, in which he discusses the propensity of the English in Africa to landscape their estates so as to emulate gardens in England. At once the image of English gardens offers a reminder of home while simultaneously underscoring just how out of place the English are in Africa, particularly in Blantyre, a settlement on the Nyika Plateau in Malawi where van der Post sets the opening of *Venture to the Interior*. The neatness of English gardens, incompatible with the region, indicates the inability of the English to fit into the socio-political fabric of their

African surroundings: “The town and its gardens, the confused blend of Goanese and British suburbia seemed to shrink to some vain and rather provocative gesture; to be no more than some very pink-and-white mouse rearing its head against the lowering, curved but as yet sheathed paws of an African cat” (*Venture* 92–93). Rather than simply relaying a physical description of the area, van der Post presents a haunting critique of colonialism, suggesting that the colonized are merely waiting to pounce upon the unsuspecting colonizers. Moreover, by disrupting the region, the English are inviting retaliation—a retaliation explored in *A Far Off Place*. Despite his veiled warning and his work on behalf of the British Empire, however, van der Post’s sense of exile allows him to locate a type of kinship with the colonized. Throughout *Venture to the Interior*, van der Post provides stark commentary on the British imperial project. He complains, “Some of those races [in Southern Africa] have since vanished for good, and those places that once knew them so well are now only occupied, as though by ghosts, by people of our own colour” (21). While his critique is qualified by his constant references to African “primitiveness,” he sets his own national and racial identity as something transient and phantasmal. Europeans lack the richness and depth of the indigenous people of South Africa—people they have displaced—a sentiment that is consistent with van der Post’s use of the noble savage in his work on the Bushmen. Perhaps this displacement illuminates what van der Post sees as the similarity between the European and death. The presence of Europeans, and specifically the British, in South Africa signaled the death of not only the indigenous population and their way of life but also what van der Post paints as a harmonious relationship between the Boer and indigenous communities. Although his depiction may contain an element of fantasy, van der Post does critique the Europeans’ involvement in Africa as one of unchecked plundering.

This lament culminates in his portrayal of the indigenous Bushmen couple in *A Far Off Place* who help the children flee the rebels who killed their parents. As surrogate parents to François and Nonnie, Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara teach them to survive their trek across the Kalahari Desert by following traditional Bushman customs. While the African

rebels and their leaders are portrayed as blood-thirsty, uninformed, and needlessly brutal, the Bushmen are seen as the oft-forgotten victims of empire, suggesting that the novel could be, and at times should be, read through an anti-imperial lens. Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara become what Edwin Wilmsen describes as “the final human icon of authenticity for which van der Post had long sought” (163). Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara are more than mere iconography, however. As they are the ones who protect the children, they are also uncompromising in teaching the children proper behavior for living in the bush. In order to protect the children, they require that François and Nonnie follow the behavioral codes of the Bushmen people; the more closely the children are able to adapt to Bushmen culture, the better their journey seems to go. John McCracken’s assertion that van der Post’s illustration of Africa (in this case, specifically the Nyika Plateau described in *Venture to the Interior*) “is of one to be incorporated culturally within a European aesthetic tradition” ignores van der Post’s nuanced treatment of the Bushmen (McCracken 813). Nonnie and François must eschew their European behaviors while crossing the Kalahari if they are to survive, and van der Post repeatedly reminds readers that doing so is not easy for the children. Until the problematic final chapter of the novel, the children are chastised for relying on European codes of conduct. Nuin-Tara, in particular, bears the responsibility of keeping the children in check by reminding them of their duties, at times even forcefully so. Shortly after the massacre, Nuin-Tara demonstrates frustration with Nonnie’s inability to adapt to adverse situations when the girl unsuccessfully tries to accompany François on a reconnaissance mission to the farm. As Nonnie cannot yet understand Bushman, Nuin-Tara can express her frustration only to François: “She had of course no means of telling that Nonnie had never been confronted as she herself had so often been, with so terrible a situation. Terrible as it was to Nonnie, for Nuin-Tara, tragedy and disaster were great constantly recurring realities of Bushman life” (van der Post, *A Far Off Place* 22). Nuin-Tara notes that she, herself, would never have burdened Xhabbo with such nonsense. Although François realizes that Nuin-Tara is “disapproving” of Nonnie, he chooses to speak sharply and “authoritatively” to Nonnie, ordering her to stay behind and

look after Hintza (22). Nuin-Tara and François check Nonnie for not behaving as the Bushmen would, first by communicating in a language that she cannot access and, second, by recognizing Nonnie's ignorance, pointing out that as personally devastating as the massacre was to the girl, it paled in comparison to the continual persecution faced by the Bushmen. Furthermore, while the recognition of the Bushmen's struggle for survival paints them in a sympathetic light, van der Post's treatment of Nuin-Tara as largely unsympathetic to Nonnie offers a more complicated portrait of the Bushman woman. She is seen as both noble for enduring the continual struggle for survival against persecution and intolerant of Nonnie's behavior, so much so that François wishes he could "explain and excuse" Nonnie (22). Yet, he does not, choosing, instead, to believe that "all would sort itself out in time and Nuin-Tara would soon know for herself the person of spirit he himself knew Nonnie to be" (22). While this moment reminds readers that Nonnie and François are still children, forced into adult roles in order to survive, it also offers a contradictory depiction of Nuin-Tara. She is simultaneously courageous and unforgiving, and her lack of understanding seems to undermine van der Post's portrait of the Bushmen, as Nuin-Tara refuses to permit Nonnie to act as the child that she is.

Nonnie and François are, in fact, adolescents, a point underscored when François plans to leave while Nonnie sleeps but is waylaid by Nuin-Tara, who requires that he, too, follow proper codes of conduct. Intending to slip away without her knowledge, the boy had given Nonnie sleeping pills and left her a detailed note providing instructions to be followed in the event of his death (35). The contingency plan he outlines calls for Nonnie to follow Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara to safety, despite the fact that she has never camped out in the Bush and does not understand a word of the Khoisan language. When Nonnie lies down to sleep, François prepares to leave, but Nuin-Tara stops him "in that uninhibited Bushman way of hers" and orders him to lie down next to Nonnie as Xhabbo lies next to her (35). Although Jones argues that "during twelve months in the bush and desert there is never a hint of a sexual current between these two epitomes of innocence, clearly though they are destined for each other" (306), the scene suggests that François

experiences an understated sexual awakening that is necessarily overshadowed by their need for survival. Moreover, D. W. Lloyd argues that Nuin-Tara's insistence that François and Nonnie behave as a couple is part of the children's "process of individuation," in which both the male and female anima must be accepted (329). François' emotional crisis as he lies next to Nonnie is not only a sexual awakening, then, but also part of his journey towards a Jungian actualization of self. Van der Post asserts, "He was confronted with a difficulty completely outside of his experience. As far as he could recollect, he had never shared a bed, even so bare a bed of sand, with anyone else" and "he had no natural immunity to protect him against being overwhelmed by the many feelings released in him by so simple and natural an event" (*A Far Off Place* 37).

François' struggle with his adult connection to Nonnie is explicated for nearly two full pages of text; he is able "to overcome this untried new emotion" only by relying on "that Calvinist upbringing of his" (38). The Bushmen couple's anticipation and encouragement of this natural relationship between François and Nonnie makes the scene a particularly poignant catalyst for François' coming of age. Nuin-Tara, after all, tells François to sleep next to Nonnie. The behavioral codes Nuin-Tara insists upon suggest a deeper understanding of human emotional behavior and the human need for proximity than either European character demonstrates at this point in the novel. Although the reader understands that François must leave the cave in order to scout out the remains of his home, he or she cannot help but recognize this early moment of his sexual maturation. He is able to delay this maturation only by forcing himself to behave as a "Calvanist" temporarily separating himself from Nonnie's Catholicism.⁶ Eventually, François steals away to Hunter's Drift, where the worst of his fears are confirmed: rebels, joined by three leaders—one Chinese, one Scottish, and one French—have set up a makeshift headquarters to aid in the rebels' efforts to remove Europeans from southern Africa by slaughtering them and their sympathizers (53–55).

François' return to Nonnie and the group's eventual realization that they will need to cross the Kalahari under the protection of Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara lead him through several harrowing near misadventures.

Prior to their journey, however, François engages in several direct and violent encounters with the rebels—something that is mostly absent from his experiences with the rest of the group. He blows up his home so that the rebels cannot use it as a base: “First he could set his home on fire” (59). He attempts to warn his adopted uncle Mopani of the rebels’ plan to destroy Mopani’s home, as well, but the Matabele rangers he speaks with cannot help as one of them is killed and the reader never learns of the other’s fate (93). He shoots down a helicopter used by the enemy before it can take off, and he and Hintza witness the blind, murderous rage of the rebels, who needlessly kill the great elephant, Hannibal, along with other members of the herd shortly after Hintza is stabbed in the leg by a bayonet. These moments underscore the problems of Empire in Africa for François, particularly when he realizes that his father had been the first victim he knew to fight against further imperial rule of Africa: “His father, Ouwa, was the first. He had been the first, as far as François knew, to take up this cause and the first to die, killed by the common enemy of all three them. Yes, he had to admit it, Ouwa, the Scot and the Frenchman had the same enemy and were on the same side. That was the irony of it” (109). Despite this realization and François’ successful victories over rebel soldiers early in the novel, this seemingly capable boy must place his life in the hands of Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara in order to survive; he cannot take care of himself. It is at this point that François and Nonnie’s education in Bushman culture accelerates since van der Post seems to suggest that only by following and trusting the Bushmen can François and Nonnie survive.

Throughout their maturation, François and Nonnie do not engage in sexual intercourse and are seemingly noble; indeed, Jones refers to them as “these two epitomes of innocence” (306). As imperial subjects, neither François nor Nonnie are terribly threatening to anyone except the heartless rebels who pursue them across the Kalahari. They continually strive to please Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara and unflinchingly trust that the Bushman couple will lead them to salvation. Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara, in turn, allow the children access into their private world. For example, Nonnie is finally taught the language denied to her at the start of the novel. While at Lamb-snatcher’s Hill, Nuin-Tara “began to do her utmost to

teach Nonnie a new language as well as a new role in life” (*A Far Off Place* 153). She requires that Nonnie repeat Bushman words until she not only understands them but can also reproduce them properly. She also “train[s] her in the elementary duties of Bushman housekeeping on the march” (153). Although Nonnie struggles with her new lifestyle, Nuin-Tara checks her behavior in the loving way a mother would. As they press on their path faster and more relentlessly than Nonnie thinks herself capable, “she [finds] herself gripped by Nuin-Tara, firmly held up, being shaken and she thought in danger of being slapped, unfairly, for hysteria” (191), but when she looks up at Nuin-Tara, “she [sees] a face inclined towards her full of understanding” (191). Nuin-Tara schools Nonnie so effectively that the young girl is eventually rewarded with a dress made out of a duiker hide and a headdress of ostrich eggs. The dress signifies what becomes the most explicit identity shift within the novel. When Nonnie dons her dress, her character is transformed: “The day she discarded her European suit for this dress, Bushman in inspiration and European in design and execution, it was as if she had stepped out of an outworn shell of herself and become a new person” (231). Importantly, though, Nonnie’s acceptance of her improved identity is treated as a natural occurrence for her and becomes a symbol of her full acceptance by the entire group. After this moment, Nonnie falls seamlessly into a routine with Nuin-Tara, preparing melons for dinner alongside her and openly discussing the horror of the massacres at Hunter’s Drift and Silvertown Farm (231, 234–35). Nonnie so loves her dress and is so committed to following her training by Nuin-Tara that François has to persuade her to return to wearing her European bush suit when they encounter the swamp: “She looked as if she were about to refuse and François hastened to explain how the rough country ahead and, particularly, the mosquitoes by night, flies and other insects by day made it necessary that she should have . . . much of her body covered” (250). When she obeys him, Nonnie exclaims that she feels as though she has been on a vacation and that now she “really ought to grow up” (250). When Nonnie is wearing her European clothes, she lapses into the behaviors she exhibited early in the novel by insisting on having her way and not listening to the others in the group as they

encounter a Portuguese woman at the Singing Tree. Realizing that the woman is being held against her will, Nonnie calls to the woman and encourages her to run across the road to join their group. The woman is shot by rebels as she runs towards Nonnie. At this point, Nonnie struggles “fiercely with Nuin-Tara on the ground” because she wants to see if the woman is truly dead (259). François reminds her of her new role as an adult within the group and is “more rough with her than he had ever been” (260). That Nonnie commits such a transgression while wearing her bush outfit is significant: the incident serves as a condemnation of the European practice of forcing Africa to adopt their ways—a point underscored by the fact that Nonnie’s bush outfit fails to protect her from a tsetse fly attack that leaves both her and Xhabbo with African Sleeping Sickness. When, at the end of the novel, she insists on wearing her duiker hide dress to greet the Admiral who saves them, Nonnie asserts a complicated identity. Van der Post remarks, “As a result, when the Admiral in his dazzling white uniform . . . appeared in their midst, he had difficulty just for a moment in telling Nonnie and Nuin-Tara apart” (293). In greeting the Admiral, she chooses to display her commitment and acclimation to the Bushmen: she appears to be one of them.

While François’ identity is never really in question, he, too, becomes an altered person under the tutelage of the Bushmen. He is able to secure food by hunting and tracking in the Bushman way and eventually assumes leadership of their group when both Xhabbo and Nonnie develop Sleeping Sickness. Yet, at precisely the moment of Nonnie and Xhabbo’s illness, the focus of the narrative shifts from an account of the Bushmen’s capability to an account of the power of survival held by the European children. François “would remember the physical nearness of Nonnie and the look of trust with which Xhabbo had given him the day he rescued him from the lion-trap. . . . He remembered Mopani telling him about this very look that one sees, as he put it, ‘only in the virgin eyes of the children of nature. It is a look one must never betray, little cousin’” (271). The role reversal offers a troubling commentary on the relationship between the children and their Bushmen protectors. The narrative slips into moments of pro-imperial rhetoric, lauding the majesty of the Bushmen ways while simultaneously assert-

ing European dominance. This slippage is most apparent in the final and most troubling chapter, in which Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara are given medals of protection that bear “the seal of Her Britannic Majesty” (297), and François and Nonnie plan to return to southern Africa after they are university-educated in Germany. Even François’ beloved dog Hintza “lift[s] his leg and spray[s]” a living lion guarding a palace in “the oldest kingdom of Africa” (309, 308). Despite several assertions to the contrary, the children serve as agents of empire, promoting cultural control over the region as they seek to rebuild their home and “bring it back into harmony with the voice of their original calling” (304). The children illustrate the paradoxical nature of anti-imperial propaganda that originates within the imperial seat itself rather than on the margins. The consequences of using children to both promote and critique empire result in a muddled message in which van der Post argues that the only way to preserve the traditions of the past is to accept a profound and not necessarily positive change in the future.

François and Nonnie spend more than a year in the care of the Bushmen couple, trusting in and following their customs as they cross the desert to find sanctuary. Keep in mind that sanctuary consists of returning to their own people—Europeans living in Africa—not the Bushman tribe. Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara sacrifice their own community to guide the children across the desert. When Xhabbo is able-bodied, he and Nuin-Tara are able to lead François and Nonnie through the dangers of the Kalahari; however, once Xhabbo is too ill to lead just as the group nears the sea, François not only steps in as leader but also steps in as a decidedly *European* leader and a paternalistic figure at that. Xhabbo becomes the helpless child who must trust the very boy whom he has guided across the desert. Although Nuin-Tara does not contract Sleeping Sickness, she, too, must rely on François for their salvation because, as they near the sea, she tells François that as he “too was a child of the people who come out of the sea, the place would be good to him and he would find the help he wanted” (273). François thus travels alone to meet the British Fleet that eventually saves the group.

Importantly, Nonnie’s own British heritage goes significantly further in saving the group than does François’ bravery. When François intro-

duces himself to the Admiral and explains that he has been traveling with the daughter of the late Sir James Archibald Sinclair Monckton, the Admiral is moved to trust and help the boy: “[It] was the mention of Nonnie’s father that really produced the break-through from incredulity into belief” (281). The naval doctor is taken to Nonnie and Xhabbo where he confirms that “Miss Monckton and the chap with the unpronounceable name had sleeping sickness” (284), which he then treats through the use of modern Western medicine. The only deferment to Bushmen customs occurs when François explains that transporting Xhabbo to a hospital for treatment would be an affront to the man (285). As translator for both the Bushmen and the British, François dominates the conclusion of the novel, and his presence is cast as particularly Western. He becomes the group’s spokesman, relating their story to the Admiral and then to British, American, and European radio and television programs (285). Although François is “full of praise for his friends’” in all his accounts of their journey, only he and Nonnie profit from their adventures, as Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara return to their home (289).

Throughout the novel, though, the Bushman couple become idyllic saviors to the children while they cross the desert, and even at the end of the novel, “the great and dazzling hero for [François] was Xhabbo; the real courage and unselfish endeavor, his and Nuin-Tara’s” (286–87). François and Nonnie are so indebted to Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara that they “could only respond in kind and thank [Xhabbo] again and again, and say that if it had not been for them they would not have any life to live at all, and that Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara were not only brother and sister to them but father and mother of what they might become” (296). Yet in order to preserve and protect their protectors, the children become parental figures themselves. For example, when François relates his story at a press conference, he chooses to “leave out for the moment the facts that his guides and companions across the desert were Bushmen. He did this because he feared the additional sort of reprisals that might be carried out against defenceless Bushmen in the desert, should this fact become known by their enemies and friends of their enemies” (289–90). François’ self-censoring illuminates his transforma-

tion back into a European. He sees himself as a protector and although he feels guilt over not publicly praising the couple, protects not only Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara but also other Bushmen throughout southern Africa.

The urge to protect their protectors is made even more explicit as Nonnie and François say their good-byes to the couple. As Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara prepare to leave the children and make their way back to their people, the children use a portion of the money they are paid for their story to purchase medallions for the couple:

For suddenly there had been nothing in that great civilization of theirs that seemed to them of the slightest use to Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara, nothing that would not just clutter up their lives and make them more difficult. . . . The presents then were two large, round gold medallions on which the names of Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara were inscribed. Underneath each name, minutely and deeply engraved, was the injunction, "You are commanded by Her Britannic Majesty to aid and protect these two persons wherever you shall find them and to admit and allow no impediment, let or hindrance, into their lives. In case of doubt, sickness or trouble, you are to contact Her Majesty's nearest representative." Below the injunction was the seal of Her Britannic Majesty and the motto, "I shall maintain." (296–97)

The gesture, meant to demonstrate the depth of the children's gratitude, is complex. First, the sparse nature of Bushman ornamentation is noted throughout the novel, and such medallions become a visual marker of Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara's separateness from the rest of their tribe. They are marked by their association with the children, which illustrates their compassion and honorable nature but also signifies a departure from the distance their culture maintains from so-called civilization. Secondly, for the medallions to be of any real use or protection to Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara, any potential harm-doer would need to be close enough to read them—a circumstance that seems fairly implausible given the cultural distrust that pervades the novel, since the enmity between the

African rebels and the Europeans led to the very massacre that caused the journey across the Kalahari in the first place.

Finally, the medallions are paradoxical in that they protect the protectors. Such encoding, juxtaposed with François' assertion that "the first thing [he and Nonnie will] do when [they] finish with [their] new schooling is to come back to find Xhabbo and Nuin-Tara and save them and their people from extinction" (308), reinforces the very system that much of the novel critiques. Even on the last page of the novel, the King "of the oldest dynasty in Africa" begs their forgiveness for what has been done to them (310). Nonnie and François tell the King that "there [is] no need to forgive" (310). By placing the power to protect and forgive in the hands of children, van der Post is able to condemn European imperialism for its treatment of Africa while also maintaining its very structure as a vehicle for preservation. Despite their upbringing in the Bushmen culture on their journey, the children shed their nomadic ways and re-enter European culture without so much as a stumble. They are, were, and remain European, indicating that even the malleable minds of children are somehow fixed, particularly in regard to imperial structures. Unlike Kipling's *Kim*, they do not suffer a crisis of self that calls into question their loyalties. Indeed, they are more resolute in their desire to help preserve and protect the Bushmen. While Lloyd asserts that the children are "liberated from the ideologies of colonialism, racial dominance and Marxism" (329), Nonnie and François' unwavering belief in the power of a European education to overcome decades of oppression indicates not a rejection of imperial structures but a revision of their aims. Nonnie and François do not envision Westernizing or modernizing the Bushmen but entering the complex world of global politics. *A Far Off Place*, then, belies recognition of a hybridized global society in which one must work both within and outside of the system in order to protect the rights of the disenfranchised. Van der Post's tale upholds deeply flawed and problematic tropes of imperial constructs, for the children take up the age-old propaganda that civilization will lead to salvation. The difference, however, lies in their use of civilization. Rather than entreating the Bushmen to adopt European codes of conduct, the children resolve to use those codes to protect and preserve the social

structure of Bushman culture, thereby striving to embody van der Post's own goal.

Notes

- 1 Conrad's infamous Kurtz demonstrates the dangers of "going native," as do the boys in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.
- 2 Mohanram examines Kim's identity in terms of skin in order "to read the ambivalence of whiteness written on the specificity of the Irish body" (251), which, she argues, is a way to read *Kim* as a novel about globalization. Wollen, on the other hand, unpacks the historical significance of the Great Game in *Kim*, and its effects on identity. Additionally, Taylor's article presents Kim's breakdown as symptomatic of an aesthetic crisis (49).
- 3 Although panned critically, both *A Story Like the Wind* and *A Far Off Place* were publicly popular. Jones suggests that this popularity arose because van der Post "wrote of a foreign landscape of which most readers knew nothing, and were therefore willing to accept" (312). Despite Jones' unflattering portrait of van der Post, he credits the novelist with the ability to captivate audiences through his storytelling.
- 4 Klopper, noting similar problematic tropes in van der Post's *The Lost World of Kalahari*, states that van der Post attempts "to rescue the Bushman from earlier colonial denigration by presenting the primitive world of the Bushman as having integrity and value" (40). Klopper argues that van der Post posits a "prelapsarian language" that negates difference (50). Similarly, Brown examines van der Post's use of the trope of the Noble Savage as a way to examine the complicated web of racial stereotypes amidst fiction about colonial revolt. For Brown, the character of Xhabbo is set in contrast to the brutality of the rebels who destroy the children's homes (71–76).
- 5 Thomas explains that both the Bushmen and the Hottentots [Khoikhoi], who are from "the same racial and language groups, are the earliest human inhabitants still living in southern Africa," although no one is certain of their origins (8, 12).
- 6 D.W. Lloyd asserts that van der Post casts Nonnie as a Catholic because "Catholicism retained a sense of the feminine and intuitive understanding" that François, a product of a Protestant upbringing, requires in order to achieve a sense of individuation (329).

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