

Note

‘FIRST PEOPLES’: LAURENS VAN DER POST’S USAGE OF THE TERM ANTEDATING THE OED ENTRY

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘First People(s)’ (also written uncapitalized) is a chiefly Canadian term: ‘(Usually in plural) Indigenous peoples in Canada, considered collectively; First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples; (also more generally) the Indigenous peoples of any country or region’. The OED further dates the earliest known use of the noun to the title of a 1973 book, *The first peoples in Quebec; a reference work on the history, environment, economic and legal position of the Indians and Inuit of Quebec*, by Toby Ornstein.¹ I have found no scholarly accounts which adduce an earlier usage. However, some fifteen years earlier than Ornstein’s book, Laurens van der Post can be seen using the term in what—as I will demonstrate—is an identical sense. This absence of a reference to Van der Post is particularly puzzling considering his two key texts which I discuss are frequently cited in other entries.²

Van der Post was an Afrikaner South African who established himself as a leading public intellectual and prolific author in the UK during the second half of the 20th century. His public and more learned-literary career converged on the topic of the Bushman,³ the collective name for a number

of hunter-gatherer societies in southern Africa who traditionally spoke Khoesan languages.⁴ In 1956, a six-part BBC documentary series, titled *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, chronicled Van der Post’s journey into southern Africa’s Kalahari desert in search of the Bushmen. This series received a tie-in book, similarly titled and published in 1958, which opens with the following sentence: ‘This is the story of a journey in a great wasteland and a search for some pure remnant of the unique and almost vanished First People of my native land, the Bushmen of Africa’.⁵ Although he does not use the term again in the book, it was uttered in a similar way in the documentary series at least once⁶ and echoed numerous times throughout his oeuvre.⁷

Since the argument might be made that Van der Post’s later, post-1973 writings could have been influenced by Ornstein and others working in the Canadian context, I want to focus on two dimensions of Van der Post’s use of the term as expressed in his pre-1973 writings. This serves to refute any suggestion that Van der Post merely echoed Ornstein. First, although his capitalization of ‘First People’ is inconsistent throughout his oeuvre, he does capitalize it in this first (printed) articulation of the term. This suggests some form of intentionality. Secondly, although some variation of ‘First People of Africa’ is the most common phraseological context within which Van der Post invokes the term—and which could, therefore, be seen as delineating the meaning

¹ T. E. Ornstein, *The First Peoples in Quebec; A Reference Work on the History, Environment, Economic and Legal Position of the Indians and Inuit of Quebec* (Montreal, 1973).

² *The Lost World of the Kalahari* is quoted 34 times and *The Heart of the Hunter* 29 times—which together comprise the bulk of the 80 quotations from his oeuvre currently included across various OED entries.

³ Aware of the contentious nature of the term ‘Bushman’, I use it in as neutral a manner as possible. This primarily follows those who self-identify as such in the contemporary moment; see J. Grant, Language and education: Photovoice workshops and the !Xun and Khwe Bushmen, *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 33 (2019), 157–73; J. Grant, The Origins Centre: Enlivening the Bushmen, *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 35 (2021), 5–21. For further discussions of the dynamics around naming southern Africa’s First Peoples, see J. Wright, ‘Sonqua, Bosjesmans, Bushmen, abaThwa: Comments and Queries on Pre-Modern Identifications’, *South African Historical Journal* 35 (1996), 16–29; A. Barnard, *Anthropology and the Bushman* (New York, 2007); W. F. Ellis, ‘*Ons is Boesmans*: Commentary on the Naming of Bushmen in

the Southern Kalahari’, *Anthropology Southern Africa* 38 (2015), 120–33; W. F. Ellis, Simulacral, Genealogical, Auratic and Representational Failure: Bushman authenticity as Methodological Collapse’, *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 28 (2014), 493–520.

⁴ For a discussion of these languages, see M du Plessis, ‘The Khoisan languages of Southern Africa: Facts, Theories and Confusions’, *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 33 (2019), 33–54; K. Jones, ‘Contemporary Khoesan Languages of South Africa’, *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 33 (2019), 55–73.

⁵ L. Van der Post, *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (London, 1958), 9.

⁶ See an untitled episode from the series: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMqtcdg4pg&t=56s>.

⁷ See L. Van der Post, *Jung and the Story of our Time* (New York, 1975), 43; L. Van der Post, *A Far-off Place* (London, 1976), 10; L. Van der Post and J. Taylor, *Testament to the Bushmen* (Middlesex, 1984), 128; L. Van der Post, *Yet Being Someone Other* (London, 1984), 155; L. Van der Post, *A Walk with a White Bushman* (London, 1986), 72; L. Van der Post, *The Admiral’s Baby* (New York, 1996), 8.

purely to the Bushmen—he does use it in a more general sense.

Three years after the publication of *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, Van der Post's *The Heart of the Hunter* appeared—a book which is described as 'a continuation of the story begun in *The Lost World of the Kalahari*'.⁸ It opens with the same description of his search for the 'almost vanished First People of [his] native land, the Bushmen of Africa', but later in the book he reflects in more general terms on the relationship between Europeans and peoples of colonized territories: 'The more I saw of him and the more I thought of the history of the encounter between Europeans and the first peoples of the world, the better I understood and respected his reticence'.⁹ As part of this reflection, he offers a searing critique of colonization and its effects on the cultures of the colonized:

We Europeans in Africa, America, Australasia, and the South Pacific have been great stealers of the stories of first peoples. We have killed off whole races by taking their story of creation from them. Worse, the men whose speciality the first spirit of life is supposed to have been, such as the Protestant and Jesuit missionaries who preceded trader and soldier, rivalled one another in laughing at the most sacred stories of the first peoples and dismissing what they found in them as mere superstition and abominable idolatry.¹⁰

Read against this backdrop, Van der Post's use of the term 'First Peoples' within his two central books on the Kalahari and the Bushmen, published in 1958 and 1961, respectively, encompasses what the OED has defined as the more general meaning of 'First Peoples' as referring to 'Indigenous peoples' of any region, whilst also often being linked to the Bushmen in particular through using it with reference to Africa.

⁸ L. Van der Post, *The Heart of the Hunter* (New York, 1961), xi.

⁹ L. Van der Post, *The Heart of the Hunter* (New York, 1961), 170.

¹⁰ L. Van der Post, *The Heart of the Hunter* (New York, 1961), 171.

At the same time as noting the similarity between his use and the received definition as described in the OED, I would conclude by highlighting the relationship between the term 'First People' and another that Van der Post articulates in his very first sentence in *The Lost World of the Kalahari*: 'First People of my native land'. In the received understanding of 'First People' it is synonymous with, but often treated as more sensitive than, the word 'native' (with its connotations of a colonial discourse). Through linking 'First People' with 'native' – not as synonyms, but as part of the relationship between both the originally colonized and the 'nativised' or 'naturalised' (supposed) colonizer, I would posit Van der Post's writing suggests a slightly different framing of the term, at least as it pertains to its relationship to 'nativeness' or 'indigeneity'. Whilst Van der Post's oeuvre has mostly been disregarded by scholars over the past four decades due primarily to accusations of racism and mythologization,¹¹ both the temporality of his articulation of the term 'First People' and the implications of his particular use thereof ought to be reason enough to revisit his writing.¹²

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¹¹ See A. Barnard, 'The Lost World of Laurens van der Post?', *Current Anthropology* 30 (1989), 104–14; E. N. Wilmsen, 'Primitive Politics in Sanctified Landscapes: The Ethnographic Fictions of Laurens Van Der Post', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21 (1995), 201–23; A. Barnard, 'Laurens Van Der Post and the Kalahari Debate', in P. Skotnes (ed.), *Miscast: Negotiating the presence of the Bushmen* (Cape Town, 1996); J. D. F. Jones, *Storyteller: The Many Lives of Laurens van der Post* (London, 2001); E. N. Wilmsen, *Primal Anxiety, Sanctified Landscapes: The Imagery of Primitiveness in the Ethnographic Fictions of Laurens van der Post*, *Visual Anthropology* 15 (2002), 143–201; L. van Vuuren, 'The Many Myths of Laurens van der Post: Van der Post and Bushmen in the Television Series *Lost World of Kalahari* (1958)', *South African Historical Journal* 48 (2003), 47–60. Exceptions to this critical tradition include N. Masilela, 'The White South African Writer in our National Situation', *Matatu: Journal of African Culture and Society* 2 (1988), 48–64; R. Thomas, 'Magic in His Build': Exoticising the lost Bushman in Laurens van der Post's literary drawings, *ResearchGate*, 2019; K. Tomaselli, 'Diasporic Identity, Intellectual Nomadism and its African Theorists', *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, 38 (2024), 44–61.

¹² This article is an adaptation of a section from my ongoing doctoral research, provisionally titled 'Between Archive and Afterlife: Translationality, Desire, and [X]am Orature in South African letters', undertaken at the University of Oxford. My research is supervised by Prof Elleke Boehmer and supported by the Clarendon Fund, Open-Oxford-Cambridge Arts and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Training Partnership, Lincoln College Kingsgate Fund, and the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust.

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