

A "Nasrani" Woman Goes Native:
Englishness in Rosita Forbes's
"The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara"

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IN 1883, Cambridge Professor Sir John Seeley claimed, "to us England will be wherever English people are found, and we shall look for its history in whatever places witness the occurrences most important to Englishmen" (141). Seeley's conceptualization of Englishness as geographically mobile characterized the British Empire's movement of national identity beyond domestic borders during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also defined Englishness as a specific race, language, and moral authority rather than as a metropolitan centre situated on the island of Britain. Travel discourse during this time helped to accomplish and maintain Britain's empire because it gave voice to the actual geographical movement of British citizens through colonized territory. Although women did travel and document their experiences in the nineteenth century, during which the travelogue peaked in popularity, they travelled mostly as colonial wives, missionaries, and, sometimes, anthropologists, rather than as imperial administrators.¹ With women travelling to the colonies in mostly *supportive* roles, the true adventure of travel remained a masculine domain.

Early twentieth-century shifts, however, in both colonization opportunities and gender identities changed the context of travel writing from that of the earlier period. While nineteenth-century travellers had endless opportunities for exploring new territory, and thus for successfully establishing pockets of Englishness in large parts of Africa, India, and the West Indies, twentieth-century travellers increasingly faced the tourist's beaten track. Ali Behdad has termed those travelling beyond the heyday of late nineteenth-century European imperialism

“belated travelers.” He notes that these travellers ventured out at a time “when the European colonial power structure and the rise of tourism had transformed the exotic referent into the familiar sign of Western hegemony” (13). As such, contends Behdad, they could not help but experience a “sense of displacement in time and space, an experience that produced either a sense of disorientation and loss or an obsessive urge to discover an ‘authentic’ Other” (13). British travellers, especially, manifest a “peculiarly valiant desire to discover new places at a time when British colonialism had already expanded its power to all corners of the globe, leaving few places to discover and conquer” (Behdad 93). The desire to find an “elsewhere” where a traveller could become “a pioneer, a heroic adventurer, and have an ‘authentic’ experience of otherness,” drove travellers in the early twentieth century to “unsettled” territories such as the Arabian and African Sahara deserts (Behdad 93).

With respect to gender, women travellers in the twentieth century played an increasingly active role in expanding the reign of Englishness into these regions. Recent studies by Sara Mills and Alison Blunt point out that nineteenth-century women’s travel accounts, because of women’s marginal position within colonial administration, often convey anti-imperial attitudes and an ambivalent positioning of the self. Sara Mills accounts for this in terms of the conflicting discursive positions open to these women where “the discourses of colonialism demand action and intrepid, fearless behaviour from the narrator, and yet the discourses of femininity demand passivity from the narrator and a concern with relationships” (22). At the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of the “New Woman,” British women found themselves less bound by Victorian constraints on femininity and freer to engage themselves with imperial goals. The “New Woman” gained her identity from an often intentional display of rebellious and shocking behaviour in the public sphere. Although still constrained by a feminine code of conduct, twentieth-century women’s travel narratives are, nevertheless, characterized by narrators less aware of transgressing propriety than of fiercely insisting on their own independence and ability within the masculine, public space of empire. For

example, Margery Perham as a scholar of and consultant to the colonial administration, Karen Blixen as a landowner, and Beryl Markham as a pilot, all embody this independence. All played their own direct role in the colonization of Africa. What is especially interesting is that in much male twentieth-century travel writing, as imperial confidence failed in the inter-war years, tales of travel became less gallant, and much more ironic. English writers such as E. M. Forster, Graham Greene, and George Orwell expressed a certain revulsion against empire as political hostilities against the British Empire began to mount. Such revulsion, however, is not evident in women's writing of the same period. As Margaret Strobel points out, "for most women, the empire presented opportunities not found in Europe" (xi). One can certainly assume that given their new-found freedom, women were not nearly as ready as men were to denounce colonial territories as open playgrounds of adventure. This altered the relationship between masculine and feminine voices in travel writing: as women played a more active role in global travel, so they helped more than ever to keep alive the imperial enterprise of spreading national identity.

Joan Rosita Torr Forbes's position as an English woman within the borders of the colonized African nation of Libya serves to foreground the role that gender played in moving Englishness around the globe during the later stages of the British Empire. Europe's Scramble for Africa continued into the twentieth century, with the First World War aggravating the determination of European powers to gain control of those territories not yet colonized. Although Italy acquired Libya in 1912, Forbes represents the pervasive British presence in Africa at that time, and demonstrates Britain's determination to control, in various ways, land that it did not directly occupy.² Despite this politically charged context, Forbes's texts take a relatively neutral stance on imperial questions. This seeming neutrality undermines any anticipated "feminine," anti-imperial voice and makes it difficult to pin down the place of the gendered subject amidst the multiple ideologies of gender and imperialism. Forbes's *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara* contains a strong commitment to English national identity and its imperial goals, despite

the author's "going native" for the entirety of her excursion. The vacillation between the author's attempt at an "authentic" experience of another culture and at maintaining her own imperial identity reveals the slippage of English national identity as it moves beyond the domestic borders of England and passes through peripheral territories under British rule. Forbes is able to don and doff her Englishness for practical purposes—she adopts an intriguing disguise as a Beduin woman to expedite her journey by tricking the Saharan Arabs, and as a means of identification with the "Other." But she fails to control her Englishness at all times—despite her proximity to the Beduins enabled by her disguise, Forbes engenders an imperialistic relationship between herself and the Libyan people with whom she travels as well as between herself and the Beduin women whom she encounters. Thus this paper contends that in the process of manipulating and being manipulated by national ideologies, both Forbes's self and ethnic identities shift to reveal their fluidity as constructed concepts and ultimately to corroborate early twentieth-century imperialistic discourses.

Forbes travelled to Africa after obtaining a divorce from her husband, Colonel Robert Forbes, a colonial administrator in India. In North Africa, Forbes's interest in the Arab culture and language took her on a dramatic adventure to the "forbidden city" of Kufara in the heart of the Sahara Desert in 1920. Forbes needed to circumvent both the local Italian authorities, who were uneasy about the British surveying their territory, and the Arab authorities, who objected to the entry of a Christian—or "Nasrani"—woman into the Senussi-governed province of Cyrenaica. To avoid the resistance of both groups, Forbes disguised herself as a Muslim woman and took the name of Khadija. She and her Egyptian co-explorer, Ahmed Bey Hassanein, made their secret escape from the town of Jedabia one night and spent two arduous months travelling through the desert. In successfully completing her journey, Forbes became the first white woman and the second European to explore this area. Forbes also taught herself the rudiments of surveying and from Kufara she travelled on to chart a "new" route to Egypt. Her account, *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara*, became the first full-length account of

travel in the region. The only other European traveller to the region—Friedrich Gerhard Rohlfs—died shortly after his explorations of the area, leaving only limited documentation of his experiences.

Forbes's other full-length account of an African journey, *From Red Sea to Blue Nile*, documents her trip through Ethiopia in 1922. Accompanied by photographer Harold Jones and a large number of Ethiopians, Forbes travelled from Assab, the Red Sea port, to Harar, the ancient Muslim city where Richard Burton was held captive in the mid-nineteenth century. In Addis Ababa, she met Queen Zaiditu and later the Regent, Ras Tafari, who became Haile Selassie I. Forbes accumulated a vast amount of information on Ethiopian customs and her impressionistic account of this region was the first of its kind to be made available to the West. Jane Robinson notes that while Forbes's first-hand accounts of her travels earned her professional recognition in the form of a Fellowship of the Royal Geographical Society, along with other awards, she also became a "glamorous figurehead of daring modern womanhood" (91).³

In many ways, Forbes plays the role of the masculine traveller, following in the tradition of the nineteenth-century archetypal English imperialist. That is, she is manipulated by existing imperialist ideologies. For one, Forbes wrote clearly in the genre of the adventure tale. Martin Green, in *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*, argues that

the adventure tales that formed the light reading of Englishmen for two hundred years and more after *Robinson Crusoe* were, in fact, the energizing myth of English imperialism. They were, collectively, the story England told itself as it went to sleep at night; and, in the form of its dreams, they charged England's will with the energy to go out into the world and explore, conquer, and rule. (3)

These adventure tales peaked in popularity in the nineteenth century, the era of the great English explorers. Tales of wandering heroes returning home having conquered the mysteries and dangers of exotic lands, had a huge impact on British culture and the British imagination because, as Patrick Brantlinger observes in *Rule of Darkness*,

The great explorers' writings are nonfictional quest romances in which the hero-authors struggle through enchanted, bedeviled lands

towards an ostensible goal: the discovery of the Nile's sources, the conversion of the cannibals. But the goal is also sheer survival and return home to the regions of light. (180)

In aligning herself with the masculinist tradition of associating colonial encounter with adventure, Forbes defies gender constraints that simply did not allow women to act as courageously as their male counterparts. Yet, for all her rebelliousness of spirit, Forbes propagates several imperial myths.

First, she propagates the myth of colonized territories as the mysterious and the unknown. In *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara*, the oasis of Kufara is constructed as a mystical destination, as the "sacred place," the "far-off oasis" (14), the "unknown, mysterious country untrod by foot of stranger" (16). For Forbes, the "secrets which Rohlfs had so nearly solved remained wrapped in the mirage of the great deserts and Kufara was still a legend more than a fact" (18). In this text, the Sahara is not a place containing a history, a culture, or a nation. Rather, in the imaginary projection of the narrator's mind, it is a spiritual place holding secrets for the European traveller to unlock. Presumably, the desert has the potential to become "fact," but clearly not until Forbes's travels have enabled it to become so. Only Forbes, the embodiment of England in this colonial encounter, can bear the meaning that will transform the legend into some form of tangible reality. But Forbes's reading of this space dwells on shaky ground, for she has to construct the land as mysterious in order to be able to demystify it, revealing the imperial knowledge that shapes her account as ideologically produced.

Second, Forbes perpetuates the myth of the colonized territories as dangerous and hostile to outsiders. The danger of getting to Kufara is evident on two accounts. The nature of the geographical terrain, she asserts, is so treacherous that "none but the strongest caravans can attempt it" (15). The cruelty of the desert—"either a blazing sun which burns through the thin cotton barracan . . . or a bitter wind which pierces every bone in one's body" (168)—is enhanced by dramatic episodes such as the discovery of the "three human skeletons [which] lay in a huddled group, half-covered with sand" (169). But her trip is also dangerous because of the human inhabitants of the des-

ert. She mentions the village of Ribiana, near to which she must pass, as "a lawless spot from which come the marauding bands which make the neighbourhood of Buseima exceedingly dangerous" (15). She tells of the "maniacal hatred with which strangers are regarded" (16), and she notes the "robber band that laid in wait for us near Bir Rassam" (163). In these extracts, Forbes fabricates both landscape and people as hostile forces that provide her with something that she must overcome in order to render herself a national hero. These two ways in which Forbes frames her trip perpetuate the myth that travel means primarily adventure. The sense of adventure is heightened by the isolated position of the lone English citizen amidst the strangeness and dangers of Africa which, in turn, justifies the plight of the English subject as the focal point of the narrative. Furthermore, the idealistic spirit of Forbes's heroic adventure is enhanced by her being a woman where any danger becomes doubly threatening, and by her sheer determination to travel whatever the cost may be. These factors compound the imaginative construction of the colonial conquest, typical of travel narratives throughout the life of the British empire.

Another way in which Forbes is manipulated by the ideology of her national position, is in her belief in the absolute freedom of European travellers like herself to enter colonized countries, observe their people, and document their experiences. Crucial here is the feeling of freedom that travel provided. For example, early on in *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara*, Forbes informs the reader about her feelings of "freedom" and consequent "excitement" (47) at having embarked, finally, on her journey. No doubt this sense of freedom stems from her escape, literally, from those authorities restricting her travel — both Italian and Arab — as well as from European culture; she notes how free she feels to be leaving Europe behind her. But, curiously, the moment of freedom from one set of constraints is not met with another. The narrator perceives no boundary beyond European authority; beyond the boundaries of Europe lies only an "uncharted land" (12) of nothingness. Such a constitution of a territory as uninhabited allows her the mastery she seeks and legitimates her uninvited entry into Libya.

It is now a commonplace observation that the imperial goal of placing unknown territory on the map constitutes part of the colonizing project of imperial nations such as England. But let me explain how this freedom was specifically enabled by the English national identity of an early twentieth-century traveller like Rosita Forbes. Historian Robert Colls has suggested that British imperialism resulted from the culmination of a long history of English Liberalism since 1688. Colls, focusing on political tides at the turn of the century, asserts that “nineteenth-century Liberalism represented English freedom as an ideal force, deep within the national character, and capable of universal dissemination as England’s special gift to the world” (30). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although this Liberalism was modified to cope with growing domestic and imperial responsibilities, it remained a powerful part of England’s cultural, political, and national identity backed by philosophies of “free subjects, free speech, free ideas, free religion, free contracts, free enterprise, free markets, and free trade” (Colls 31). England’s empire numbering around 345 million people and occupying 11.5 million square miles, comprised the most extensive territorial claim in the world (Colls 43). The problem of containing this massive expanse worried even Liberals who, despite their concerns about the exploitative interests of imperialism that transgressed their country’s Liberal traditions, feared the loss of the empire England had gained. This neurosis, according to Colls, prompted a more “visceral idea of the central State” that demanded greater “corporate national efficiency” (30) and heightened English national identity. Definitions of Englishness, such as that of Sir John Seeley’s quoted earlier, were adapted accordingly to shore up the diffuseness of empire and to defend England’s hold on distant lands. Despite this modification of Liberalism, Colls claims that it remained a prevalent political ideology into the twentieth century while bringing with it a more astute sense of national identity (44-45).

Clearly, an ideology of Liberalism, motivated by imperialism’s economic bases of trade and land expropriation, provided the license for English imperialism, and a renewed sense of national identity encouraged colonialism well into the twentieth century.

At this historical moment, English national identity depended largely on the spatial control of distant lands. In *The Secret of the Sahara*, this type of control becomes the very rationale for Forbes's travel, revealed most clearly through her intent to survey her route through the desert. Early in the narrative, Forbes recounts how she and Hassanein, "while lunching in the oriental splendour of Claridge's" (76), had arranged to do some surveying en route through the "uncharted land" (12) of the Sahara. On the trip, therefore, Forbes and Hassanein carry with them numerous instruments for this purpose, including compass, passometer, barometer, and camera. They also keep diaries for recording information and throughout the trip they show concern for covering significant extents of distance. Forbes's mapping comprises a mode of spatial representation that reads and records an allegedly uninscribed landscape in an endeavor to shape, interpret, make visible and accessible the world that lies beyond England. The more mapped and hence knowable land was to England, the more open it was to exploitation and control.

The English Liberalism motivating this survey, even as it works to advance itself on various fronts, fails to hold its ground. Forbes's attempts to chart Senussi territory meet with local resistance from her Arab companions that functions to provide discontinuities in Forbes's imperial narrative and expose English ideologies as far from unified. Upon Forbes's request for one of her servants to fetch her a camel, the servant turns to another and exclaims, "Are we to be ordered about by a cursed Christian woman? One bullet and we will send her back to her Christian country!" (76-77). The Arabs also resent the idea of their land being surveyed. Yusuf, a Senussi member of the caravan, asks Forbes when she brings out the compass, "Why do you need a compass?" insisting "We know the road as we know our own hearts. . . . We carry the road in our heads" (77). Forbes laments that "anything that suggested map-making was abhorrent to our guides" (77). There is resistance when Forbes and Hassanein bring out their journals, there is opposition to the long distances travelled, and there are arguments over which routes to follow. The Arabs respond further by withholding geographical information, which frustrates Forbes no end.

In this text, when England's imperial goals of entering, charting, and claiming the space of other nations are threatened, national identity turns outward from itself and national neuroses are transferred onto other cultures. This encourages an obfuscation of the imperial role of the colonizing traveller (by blaming the source of hostilities on the colonized attendants) and an invisibility of interdetermined spheres of culture where conflict is actually a function of specific colonial dynamics although it is not represented as such. Thus, Forbes does not read the resistance to the surveillance inherent in her surveying in terms of the politics of global domination where colonized and colonizer meet in an arena of oppressive politics. Rather, she reads it in terms of an essentialized racial difference. Her descriptions attribute to colonized subjects a certain Manichean rigidity,⁴ which, in turn, is reinforced by racially marked bodies. She translates the resistance to her control as a certain "fanaticism" where the Arabs resisting are read as "the fierce fanatics of Libya" (31). "We had not counted on the fanaticism of the Senussi" (76), says Forbes, and adds, "how difficult it is to draw information from Libyan Arabs" (171). This fanaticism is linked to and reinforced by several stereotypes. To Forbes, "the Arab is greedy by nature, while the Sudanese is positively voracious" (51). Her companions display the "usual Arab passion for sugar" (55); they are "greedy for food" (62), appear "fiendish" (86), and embody "the improvidence of the race" (61). Her remark that "gold to [Arabs] is Alpha and Omega and a great deal else in between" (166) cleverly elides the greed of Europe while projecting this quality on to the Arabs. She also links the notion of fanaticism to the "childlike" simplicity of the Arabs—"the whole life of a Beduin is reduced to the simplest possible effect" (84) while they have "the faith of children" (66). Finally, she perceives the resistance of the caravan as laziness—at one time they "dawdled hopelessly" (166)—and contrasts it with her own and Hassanein's dedication to the expedition—"it was obvious that they were tired, but it is doubtful if they were as exhausted as we were" (52).

These racist judgments are fixed by the physiological characteristics assigned in accordance with racial attributes that rein-

force a preoccupation with reading meaning from body surfaces. At one point, Forbes describes the Sudanese slaves as a "gyrating circle of blacks, who flung themselves into extravagant postures" (40) with "barbaric vigour" (42); one has a "square, bestial face with a few broken yellow teeth . . . was a grumbler and infinitely lazy. . . . The other was big, brutal and stupid with something of the nature of a kindly bulldog" (81-82). This essentialization of racial difference, by way of isolated visual signifiers that detach the slaves from their context, sets up the slaves as "ethnographic fragments." Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains this term, in her essay "Objects of Ethnography," as informed by a "poetics of detachment" that refers "not only to the physical act of producing fragments, but also to the detached attitude that makes that fragmentation and its appreciation possible" (388). The detachment and accompanying attitude here results in a racial hierarchy that reinforces England's morally superior position and allows Forbes to feel secure. These less-than-human visualizations diffuse the significant political nature of the resistance to English Liberalism by the native people and reaffirm the narrator's absolute freedom to enter Libya. While this position is sanctioned by race, no doubt the gender position of the traveling British "New Woman," for whom Africa had become a playground of adventure, gives Forbes license too.

Forbes's perceptions of racial difference also reinforce the determination of the English nation to maintain its imaginary exclusive identity amidst the dynamics of racial and national identity. This is demonstrated most poignantly in Yusuf's remark to Hassanein and Forbes's internal response:

"Fadh! Do not live always alone," said Yusuf. "Mix with us a little. We shall not forget who is master." From this I knew that Hassanein had won another of his personal victories. He had a wonderful way of gaining the confidence and sympathy of Arabs, from the Sayeds down to the fanatical Beduin. (59)

Given that the masculinist position of "master" is what seems to give Hassanein his "personal victories" and bring about reconciliation with the Arabs after conflict, Forbes's own gender may account, in part, for the hostilities they experience. Moreover, given that Hassanein is a native Egyptian, race is more

probably a factor in his and not her ability to resolve conflict. Yet Forbes never acknowledges that this may be true. While she takes solace in the nurturing of Arab support that Hassanein is able to achieve on her behalf, it is Yusuf's concession to England's hierarchy of power that is most comforting to her. David Spurr has pointed out that the ultimate aim of colonial discourse is not to establish a "radical opposition between colonizer and colonized" but to dominate by "inclusion and domestication rather than by a confrontation which recognizes the independent identity of the Other" (32). Forbes is most relieved when the acquiescence of Libyans as subjects of colonial rule—shown here by their dependent yet consensual "confidence" and "sympathy"—is achieved.

The idea of English Liberalism as unchallengeable is necessarily backed by an imperial subjectivity. At times of resistance, the inordinate self-determination of the narrator, which I mentioned earlier as so characteristic of Forbes's texts, comes into play. Forbes brushes aside any awkward hostility demonstrated by her Arab companions and replaces it with a focus on the self, often rendered in terms of her material well-being. She frequently overwrites episodes of racial disparities with mundane information about weather, food, and distance travelled—issues that all relate in some way to her own sense of self comfort. Thus, the surface observations so characteristic of travel accounts that are aimed at providing ethnographic neutrality function here as a reaction to the difficulty of racial conflict that the narrator can neither tolerate nor document. The inability of the self to enter into racial dialogue immobilizes the self within itself and undermines the alleged global power of both the self and the nation. Such a strategy of focusing on the local and immediate hides any crisis in imperial authority. The self must appear cohesive and in control of its local environment, even if its global empire is not. As such the English self is neither an impartial, observing body, nor is it an all-encompassing imperial one. Rather it is an entity highly regulated by imperial ideologies that reacts and behaves accordingly.

Interestingly, while Forbes attributes the immutability of racial characteristics to Libyan people, she allows herself a cer-

tain flexibility of self. While she is, at times, so unconscious of her English identity and the way in which it informs the imperialist aspects of her narrative that I have outlined above, she is, at other times, aware of and able to manipulate that very same identity. Warned in Jedabia by Arabs who are determined to prevent her journey because they do not welcome a "Nasrani" in the desert, Forbes, spurred on by her adamant refusal not to turn back, embarks on a plan to trick the Arabs. She essentially "goes native" when she abandons her own clothes, behaviour and language, to adopt the dress and behavior of a Muslim woman and the language of the local Arabs. In the book's preface, Forbes tells of the letter she attains from two Arab leaders, the Emir Mohammed Idris es Senussi and his brother, Sayed Rida, authorizing "Sitt Khadija, a Moslem working for the good of Islam and the Senussi, and A. M. Bey Hassanein to visit the country" (xxiv). By re-defining her outer body with the help of these Libyan authorities, Forbes is able to shed and reinvent her national identity. While the notion of "going native" features prominently in women's travel accounts for practical purposes, it has also been something to be feared because of the susceptibility to losing one's "civilized" nature. Patrick Brantlinger notes that nineteenth-century missionaries frequently expressed fears of "regressing," of "being converted to heathenism instead of converting the heathen" (194). "Going native" heightens the contact between European and native Other in what Mary Louise Pratt has called the "contact zone," those "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4). Forbes's act of "going native" allows for her provocative movement into the space of another culture, disrupting previously static self, national, and imperial identities.

In *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara*, although coerced into it for matters of practicality, Forbes adopts a willing attitude to "going native" or, to use Homi Bhabha's differently nuanced term, to "mimicry." As the caravan finally make its way out of Jedabia, Forbes easily abandons her Englishness:

It was the first step on a long journey. Everything was uncertain. There were so many difficulties to be surmounted, but we felt that

now, at least, the last trace of Europe lay behind us. We breathed more freely. We both loved the desert and the dwellers therein, and we felt that they must understand and respond to our sympathy.

(10)

Forbes undergoes a process of mimesis that critics like Behdad and Bhabha have claimed leads to inevitably “split” (Behdad 14) or “forked” (Bhabha 126) discursive practices. By enveloping herself in the garments of the Other, and by entering the desert, Forbes implies a desire to occupy another cultural position. Her eagerness to shun her own Englishness and her desire for a reciprocal relationship between herself and her Arab companions suggests a flexibility of national identity unseen in earlier travel narratives, especially in earlier masculine ones. In achieving a level of transcultural identity with the Arabs (by learning their language, eating their food, and adopting their dress), Forbes transgresses rigid national and racial ideologies of difference by means of her disguise. She fractures her own identity at the same time as she fractures her nation’s by displacing the English culture she represents. Specifically, her disguise allows her to go against the grain of racial difference as visible sign and to disavow English racial authority in so far as it comes to rely on its own visual authority.

While this moment of reciprocity is short-lived, it produces a “split” or “forked” discourse because of both its accompanying intentions and its effects on the production of colonial authority. Bhabha, in his essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” writes that mimicry is

the sign of double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is . . . a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both “normalized” knowledges and disciplinary power. (126)

Unlike many instances of “going native,” which enabled European ethnographers and anthropologists to get closer to their subjects, here the process has little effect on establishing a real cultural connection between Forbes and the Beduins. Her donning of the clothing of the Beduin woman is accompanied by a

host of other affected behaviors designed to trick the Arabs into believing that she is one of them:

Thereafter we began a laborious, systematic campaign to correct the impression of a rich Christian woman. I discarded my hat for the Sayed's beautiful kufiya. Early and late I could be heard reciting verses of the Koran. I already knew the obligatory prayers, and took care to perform them minutely. . . . At first we were regarded with the utmost suspicion, which gradually relaxed as we gave them Moslem salutations and told them how happy we were to be living an Arab life among Arabs. . . . After a few days I was greeted enthusiastically and introduced to the solemn-faced babies adorned with silver amulets and taught how to bake flat, heavy bread in mud ovens. (25)

Forbes's success at her trickery pleases her because it allows her the freedom of movement she is so determined to win. This is the freedom that will enable her to carry out her survey/surveillance of the land that will become mapped British territory. "Going native" is not used for conciliatory, humanistic purposes. Rather, it enables Forbes, through her mobility within and mapping of Libyan territory, to regulate the "contact zone" on her own terms, and thus to achieve self-aggrandizement and consolidate the power of the nation. Because the manipulation of national identity enables the English subject to act as agent in achieving her own imperial position, it is this kind of "narcissistic self-acknowledgment," Behdad argues, that "disavows the native's subjectivity" (14), and reaffirms essential differences between colonized and colonizer.

Nor does Forbes's proximity to the Beduins help to diffuse simple binaries between European and Arab, for her "going native" is informed by its own set of imperial ideologies evident in the following extracts:

I feel as if I had left behind me the last shred of civilization. The simplicity of life is beginning to impregnate me. I believe that old Beduin's blessing has bewitched me. When we leave the desert I shall be a Moslem. (10)

I fell asleep wondering at the desert spell which had changed the Oxford "Blue" into a typical Beduin, devout as the fanatic whose prayers rose five times a day to Allah. (60)

The European code of morals disappears altogether. One becomes a simple savage being who may commit crimes with impunity. (89)

It is important to concede the willing tone used to express the abandoning of national identity. Here, in fact, Forbes has relinquished control over the self which allows itself to fall under the "spell" of another people, another land. But the binary that this sentiment highlights—that between the English as an educated "civilization" and the desert as either devoid of meaning and hence mere "simplicity," or uncontrollably "fanatical"—demarkates a hierarchical relationship between England and Africa that insists on the moral difference between the two regions. Moreover, it speaks to a discursive position of colonialist desire for mastery over colonized subjects.

Such an assessment of Forbes's position does not credit her with producing the anti-imperialist rhetoric that many critics have attributed to various nineteenth-century European women travellers. Susan Blake, for example, notes of Mary Hall's story that it constitutes the "successful encounter between traveller and Africans" (352). Blake claims that Hall relates to the Sultan of a German East African village as "subject to subject" (352), engaging in a "reciprocal relationship" (353) because her position is "split—superior in race and class, inferior in gender" (353). Alison Blunt argues that Mary Kingsley slides between masculine and feminine positions, implying both that there is a definable feminine (and masculine) position in relation to other cultures, and that the feminine position is always the anti-imperialist one. Forbes is problematic for current definitions of women's travel positions because she does not fit into such a position of reciprocity. While the reader catches glimpses of attempts at reciprocity, these remain short-lived, surface-level interactions. The voice in Forbes's narratives remains a predominantly imperial one that controls the caravan and the servants, and maintains an undue focus on the self. Despite "going native," Forbes never succeeds in achieving a "subject to subject" encounter. Interestingly, this narrative is not bound by the traditional proprieties of English femininity and in fact displays a lack of attention to the gender and sexuality of both Forbes and the Beduin women. As such, Forbes's account characterizes the shift in twentieth-century relations between gender and imperialism.

The absence, in *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara*, of what critics have called the "feminine" voice complicates essentialist critical

categories of “feminine” and “masculine” modes of travel documentation. Here, the narrative gap regarding the global relations between Forbes and African women is significant because it creates differential gender roles for both Forbes as an English woman and for the Beduin women as Libyan women to whom her text ascribes meaning. In “going native” Forbes occludes her own position as an intrusive outsider, thereby eliding the dynamic between colonizing and colonized women. Her presence as an unwelcome Christian woman is easily overridden by her usurping of the identity of a Beduin woman—“Mrs Forbes had disappeared into space and in her place was a Mohammedan woman called Khadija” (54), we are told. After seeing her image in a hand-held mirror, Forbes notes that she was “thankful” to put it down, for she “hardly recognized the begrimed and haggard visage, yellow, sunburnt and lined, that peered out under the heavy black handkerchief between the folds of our barracan” (53).

Quite literally, her own body becomes overlaid with the attributes of a Beduin woman—the “begrimed and haggard visage,” and the “yellow” of the face dressed by the Beduin garment—suggesting some kind of identification through mimetic representation. Yet the relationship between Forbes and the Beduin women is problematic. For while she adopts their identity, Forbes’s identification slips in two interesting ways. She can barely “recognize” herself in this scene; that is, she has almost lost sight of the English woman she is. Hence the negation of Englishness is never quite complete. But she is also unable to recognize the yellow, sunburnt physiological features of the Beduin woman, and thus unable to see them as an exclusive identity. Curiously, even while Forbes attempts to adopt the identity of the Beduin women, they remain the population of least concern to her in her text. This lack of interest in the indigenous women of Libya is evident in her scant observations of them that never move beyond those of a superficial, aesthetic nature. Thus her disguise reinforces her inability to truly “recognize” them. On various occasions she describes these women in terms of their visual appeal only, as “muffled in folds of long indigo tobhs which were delightful in the brilliant sunshine” (94), for ex-

ample. Providing an effective contrast to the “white sands are the indigo and royal blue tobhs with which the black slave-women mingle the orange and reds of their more barbaric taste” (112). While bargaining with a “strong-minded female” for a sheep, Forbes turns her focus to the woman’s “attractive Buseima dress—white tobh with scarlet girdle, a black cloth wound closely round the face . . . and the barracan of rose and saffron” (152). A group of women at the oasis of Hawari are “unveiled and wore straight, dark red tobhs, unbelted, so they made an attractive group under a large thorn-tree between high sand walls” (178-79). The English woman is spectator; the Beduin women fragmented, fetishized objects in a panoptic moment of viewing—Forbes puts the Beduin women on display without ever being seen herself. Such surveillance rendered by the English woman’s gaze serves to detach these Beduin women from their full cultural context and attribute to them a limited context of garments only, thereby aligning them with the “empty” and “uncharted” landscape upon which Forbes also gazes.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in discussing the role of the museum exhibition in constructing ethnographic knowledge, argues for travel as a “model of exhibitions about other places” (404). The travel writer acts as a travel guide, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, by discursively removing artifacts and people from their cultural contexts and by displaying them as ethnographic fragments in their own texts. Forbes’s travelogue misplaces Beduin women as subjects of their culture and of their subjective positions as women by representing them as metonymic fragments of a whole. This becomes highly significant because it clears the way for the substantiation of Forbes’s own subjectivity. In the slippage between garment and racial meaning, the colonization of the Beduin women’s body with her own body, and of the Beduin women’s geographical space with her own meaning, instantiates a substitution of their subjectivity with hers. While this colonization is essential to the goals of the narrative because it aids Forbes, literally, in crossing the Sahara, it also enhances her own self-identity as it empties the Beduin women of theirs and essentially colonizes geographical, cultural, and gendered space. Forbes’s own transformation thus consti-

tutes the very motivation for her narrative and her own visibility emerges at the expense of the Beduin women. The differential positioning of women by English women has an immediate effect on the reconfiguration of the English gendered subject. The self is mapped as constructed against a series of textual and global absences unable to be accounted for.

The implicit contradiction—whereby Forbes simultaneously invokes and avoids the identity of Beduin women—embodies imperial ideology. Although she recognizes herself becoming a Beduin woman, she cannot see the Beduin women as a significant social group. Thus the racial and class differences amongst women that together make up the global dynamics of empire are elided by the discursive construction of woman as white and English. Furthermore, this elision of Beduin women serves to produce the Arab culture and Libyan nation as male. In this text where woman is English and nation is male, indigenous women of Africa are stripped of any political position and power, and iniquitous global distributions are perpetuated. Forbes ultimately aligns herself with the power of English and male culture, removing the awareness of her own feminine identity. Thus the movement of Englishness around the globe in the interests of the English nation takes place by way of a transformed, muted femininity, enabling British imperial power to be assumed not only by men, but by women too. Because the female is an imperial subject, and because she is ideologically porous and able to absorb ideologies, she is able to regulate other subjectivities as she regulates the colonized spaces of empire.

Finally, I do not mean to overlook completely Forbes's anti-imperialist voice. It is, however, a decidedly weak voice because it is constantly overwritten by a more powerful imperialistic one. Here is a typical example of the fate of one of Forbes's few attempts at an anti-imperialist stand:

We had no claim on their hospitality. We had no right to enter the most closely guarded country in the world. Beggar or prince, Beduin or sheikh, must prove good reason ere he is made free of the south-bound tracks to the sacred city. Our only passport was our love of the Arab race, our sympathy with their customs and their Faith. (101)

This kind of "sympathetic" mode of relating to the people of Africa, so characteristic of the paternalism of colonizing subjects,

appears not only in *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara* but also in *From Red Sea to Blue Nile* where Forbes meets with various Ethiopian political leaders such as Queen Zaiditu and the Regent, Ras Tafari. In later travels to Iraq, Persia, Afghanistan, and South America, she covered extensive distances to interview numerous political leaders, often offering herself as a mediator between them. Jane Robinson claims in her brief autobiographical sketch of Forbes in *Wayward Women*, that "her political altruism never quite rings true, however, and it is Rosita Forbes the books are really about" (92). My exploratory critical account of Forbes certainly builds on this notion yet tries also to show how *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara* confirms ideologies of English Liberalism and myths of Africa as blank space into which English woman moved to take up the slack of empire. Not only does Forbes's text expose how the British Empire worked its imperial strategies even in territories it did not directly occupy, but it also confirms the role that British women travel writers played in writing their nation's histories.

NOTES

- ¹ Strobel's *European Women and the Second British Empire* gives a detailed account of the supportive roles of European women who went to the colonies primarily as homemakers, memsahibs, missionaries, and anthropologists.
- ² For this and additional information on the dynamics of colonial conquest in North Africa in the first half of the twentieth century, see the introduction to Roberts's *The Colonial Moment in Africa*.
- ³ This biographical information is drawn largely from the sketch introducing Forbes in Romero's collection, *Women's Voices on Africa*, and Robinson's anthology, *Wayward Women*. There is virtually no criticism written on Forbes; Romero and Robinson provide the only two brief commentaries.
- ⁴ See JanMohamed for a more detailed analysis of this term.

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