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FEATURED REVIEWS

Intimate Archives and Anterooms

Joel Cabrita. *Written Out: The Silencing of Regina Gelana Twala*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2023. Pp. 344. $36.95, paperback (ISBN: 9780821425077); $36.99, ebook (ISBN: 9780821447895).

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Abstract
A review of Joel Cabrita's biography of Regina Gelana Twala.

Keywords: South Africa; biography; women; gender; arts; apartheid

The lives of Black women writers and artists in South Africa have, of late, been the subject of various repatriations. Against the racialized and masculinist genealogies that have come to mark the landscape of Black writers and their audiences, names such as Nontsizi Mgqqwetho, Mabel Cetu, Letitia Kakaza, and Noni Jabavu offer the reimagining of both the literary and aesthetic underpinnings of foundational discourses and their relevance in the present. These efforts are not confined to literary studies.[1] In the fine arts, for instance, Nontobeko Ntombela and Portia Malatje's exhibition "When Rain Clouds Gather: Black South African Women Artists, 1940 – 2000," which showed at the Norval Foundation between 9 February 2022 and 9 January 2023, reflected "upon the influential and often unacknowledged contributions of Black women to South African art history in the twentieth century."[2] "When Rain Clouds Gather" stages a Black feminist curatorial intervention in which "[t]his constellation of works begins to make visible the impact and the intellectual contributions that Black women have made in South Africa's art history in the past century." This description could as well serve to underscore Joel Cabrita's biography *Written Out: the Silencing of Regina Gelana Twala,* an important addition to this growing corpus of work.

Regina Twala was a remarkable woman. She was a social worker, an anthropologist, a creative writer, and a copious commentator on issues of the day in the Black press. Among an early cohort of

[1]Scholars such as Makhosazana Xaba and Athambile Masola have been doing work on author and journalist Noni Jabavu. Xaba and Masola coedited an anthology of Jabavu's journalism of the 1970s for the *Daily Dispatch* under the title *Noni Jabavu: A Stranger at Home* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2023). In Black visual culture there has recently been work by Marie Meyerding on photojournalist Mabel Cetu who, in the 1950s, a decade defined in the popular imagination by the "Drum boys," published images with *Zonk!* magazine: "A Picture's Worth" published in *Africa is a Country* (https://africasacountry.com/2023/02/remembering-a-pictures-worth). Siphokazi Magadla's *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers: Women and the Armed Struggle in South Africa* (London: Routledge, 2023), exploring women combatants in the anti-apartheid struggle of South Africa, reveals the often suppressed histories and experiences of women in armed struggles.

[2]Nontobeko Ntombela and Portia Malatje, "When Rain Clouds Gather: Black South African Women Artists, 1940 – 2000," Exhibition, Norval Foundation, https://www.norvalfoundation.org/when-rain-clouds-gather/.

Africans to attend Wits University during the years of the Second World War often referred to as "the open years," she graduated with a bachelor's degree in social studies in 1948. Along with physician Mary Malahlela, she was one of the first African women to graduate from Wits. Given the racialized milieu in which Africans were to access the partial promises of modernity and higher education, Twala's achievements were deeply intertwined with narratives of African progress and its doxology that "no race will rise above its women." For most readers, though, *Written Out* will likely be the first time they will have heard about Regina Twala. Why such an important figure has remained obscure for so long is a major theme of *Written Out*.

Written Out stages a major restoration to public view of Twala, an author whose trace seems to have all but disappeared. The title of Cabrita's book makes its own point: Twala's "disappearance" was by design at the hands of an ethnonationalist cohort of Zulu male literary elites, publishers, white anthropologists, and, later on in her life, agents of Swati royalism. Indeed, given Twala's decades long attempts to have her creative and academic work published—beginning in the late 1930s and running to the end of her life in 1968—it is remarkable that no monograph has appeared under her name to this day.[3] It is out of these paradoxes and silences that *Written Out* stages the conditions of its own possibility.

Twala's silencing is intertwined with complex, gendered archival practices. Cabrita found the voluminous correspondence between Regina Twala and her estranged husband Dan Twala in the study of eminent literary historian Tim Couzens. They had lain there, seemingly untouched, for decades. Cabrita's description of this archive is worth restating: "It is a unique epistolary archive unmatched in African history for its volume (there are nearly one thousand letters), its chronological longevity (the letters were written throughout at thirty-year period from 1938 to 1968), and for the distinctive voices of its interlocutors" (4). Cabrita argues that the Twalas' archive was not merely languishing but one that also entangled Regina Twala in at least two ways: that of her intimate exchanges with Dan Twala and Couzens's scholarly choices. Dan Twala gave the letters to Couzens during a series of interviews he (Couzens) conducted while researching African playwrights in the 1970s. The fruit of his work would be *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H. I. E. Dhlomo*, published by Ravan Press in 1985. Couzens also published a coedited volume of Dhlomo's collected works with Nick Visser that year. It can't be overstated that this period marked an important restoration of Black South African writers and their works to public view and to the canon of African literature.[4] Brian Willan's biography of Sol Plaatje was published in 1984 with a collection of his works to come. A restored edition of his only novel *Mhudi* was also published during this period while the anthropologist John Comaroff came across and subsequently published his Anglo-Boer War diary (more appropriately termed the South African War). Richard Rive and Tim Couzens also published a slim biographical volume on Pixley ka Isaka Seme in 1991. Bongani Ngqulunga's *The Man Who Founded the ANC* (2017) is a more extensive biography of Seme and benefits from access to a much broader range of documents than Rive and Couzens had when they wrote their slim volume. The eminent scholar and psychologist N. Chabani Mangayi was working then on what would become his important biographies of the painter Gerard Sekoto. Twala's fate was different. Her name and work has remained largely unknown until the publication of Cabrita's biography. That it took decades for a major work on Twala to be published

[3]Cabrita is working on publishing Twala's anthropological work.

[4]See Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H. I. E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985); Tim Couzens and Nick Visser, eds., *H. I. E. Dhlomo: Collected Works* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985); Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje, South African Nationalist, 1876-1932* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1984); Sol Plaatje, *Mhudi* (London: Penguin Books, 2007); Sol Plaatje, *The Mafeking Diary of Sol Plaatje* (London: James Currey, 1999); Richard Rive and Tim Couzens, *Seme: The Founder of the ANC* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1992); Bongani Ngqulunga, *The Man Who Founded the ANC: A Biography of Pixley ka Isaka Seme* (Cape Town: Penguin Books, 2017); N. Chabani Manganyi, *A Black Man Called Sekoto* (Johannesburg: Wits Press, 1996); and N. Chabani Mangayi, *Gerard Sekoto: I Am An African* (Johannesburg: Wits Press, 2004).

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speaks to how, at least in the genre of literary biography, women seem out of joint even with the revisionist work of this period.[5]

Written Out weaves Regina Twala's epistolary exchanges with Dan Twala in a manner that makes the archive a major source for the book. Dan Twala—himself a complex figure: all at once employed by the Bantu Men's Social Centre, a thespian with his own ambitions for the stage and film—was the meticulous preserver of his and Regina Twala's archive.[6] Intricately woven through this archive, *Written Out* recuperates as much their epistolary romance and its complex intertwined gendered dynamics as it does Regina Twala's thwarted artistic and academic ambitions. Indeed, as Cabrita puts it, "the couple created an epistolary archive to which they returned in times of sadness, loneliness, or simply to remind each other of the fundamentals of their relationship" (99). *Written Out* offers, however, another way to apprehend the clearly voluminous and meticulous archive of Regina and Dan Twala's correspondences. Regina Twala, Cabrita writes, "treated their correspondence simultaneously as intimate private letters and as a more public text aimed at a wider readership" (100). In other words, if Twala's ventures into public authorship were bedeviled by white and male anxieties about Black women as knowledge makers and desiring subjects, her letters addressed not only her romance with Dan Twala and its daily vicissitudes but also the unimagined reader the present had not yet made way for. *Written Out*'s own archival investments shape the historical implications of these private, intimate exchanges as history made in the (feminized) affective and erotic. The queer implications of this intimate archive await deeper examination but readers of *Written Out* will doubtless be intrigued to learn that Dan Twala's "sexual interests were not limited to women" (74). In the early stages of his courtship with Regina Twala he was involved with R. G. Carroll, a white geologist. This interracial homoerotic aspect of Dan Twala's life was treated "with humorous equanimity" by Regina Twala (75). This complex web of desire and queer male intimacy across the color line, read alongside Regina Twala's educational, academic, and literary ambitions, often reframed the intimate boundaries of the two as well as the organization of their domestic relationship. In spite of these queer arrangements Dan Twala ultimately favored the proclivities of a traditional life; a life in which his many infidelities and a child out of wedlock drove a wedge between Regina Twala and him as he seemingly reinstated his patriarchal desires. Twala's inevitable migration from Natal to Johannesburg marked her restless desire for modern womanhood and the complex matrices of desire and sociality unleashed by the city's gumbo. These desires, as *Written Out* shows, were also affronted by patriarchal anxieties both at home and in the public, intellectual domain.

The notion of the New African was central to Tim Couzens's characterization of H. I. E. Dhlomo's labors toward the intellectual and artistic restoration of Africa in the face of racial oppression. *Written Out* offers us a way of thinking about the gendered implications of this term. In "The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device," The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group argues that the figure of the "modern girl" emerged globally in the 1920s and 1930s as women broke out of the disciplinary molds of patriarchy, in particular by appropriating the technologies of consumption in order to wield new forms of feminine self-fashioning.[7] Twala left her teaching post at Adams for a Johannesburg ushered into her imagination by the pages of the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* and the city's promise of "new and exciting notions of female independence" (33). Johannesburg's major newspapers directed at a Black readership were forums in which African women honed their writing skills while rehearsing new notions of femininity. Twala contributed to *Umteteli wa Bantu* and the *Bantu World* under the *nom de plume* Mademoiselle. Interestingly, though in education Twala was among a small group of

[5]A notable exception is Gillian Stead Eilersen's biography of Bessie Head titled *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears* (London: James Currey,1995).

[6]Regina and Dan Twala make appearances in Donald Swanson's 1949 film *African Jim* (Cabrita, *Written Out*, 131–33).

[7]See Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger et al.,

"The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device: Collaboration, Connective Comparison, Multidirectional Citation," in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, eds. Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1–24.

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African elites, her literary and social tastes were tantalized by popular fiction and artforms that defied respectability and its taste-making protocols.[8] Once in Johannesburg, Twala's modest yet respectable former life as a teacher in Natal would in turn be transformed to wife, divorcee, domestic worker, journalist, student, writer, social worker, anthropologist, and political activist; experiences that were alive to her when she moved to eSwatini in the latter years of her life. One cannot, then, ignore the material precarities that often stymied the lofty artistic ambitions of the African literati during the interwar period and, where women such as Twala were concerned, the threat of domesticity and racialized domestic work to swallow their ambitions into oblivion. As Bhekizizwe Peterson put it, following the work of Phil Bonner and Ernesto Laclau, "the petty bourgeoisie, because of its intermediary location between capital and labor, can be swayed by the political pressures of either of the principal classes."[9] *Written Out* maps out for contemporary readers in the academy and beyond the stakes of women such as Regina Twala taking up of vocations such as creative writer, critic, anthropologist, and politician.

One of the tensions in *Written Out* lies in Cabrita's meticulous demonstration that Twala's efforts to become a published author were deliberately thwarted over successive decades. None of Twala's monographs were ever published and her novella, *Kufa* seems to have been lost. Anthropologist Hilda Kuper refused to publish Twala's manuscript after her death in spite of their acquaintanceship during their years at Wits University (266). Bengt Sundkler seems to have outright lifted passages from Twala's work without giving her any credit (220–24). In the broader terrain of the production of knowledge about African experience, disciplines such as anthropology are haunted not only by their complicated claims to representing the African but of excluding African producers, even when their coexistence with them in the field was essential to their own work. And yet *Written Out*'s intricate knitting of Twala's biography reveals the indispensability of Black newspapers in the construction of her intellectual biography. Aside from *Umteteli wa Bantu*, the *Bantu World*, and the Wits University journal *African Studies*, Twala was a contributor to the male-dominated *Drum* magazine and, as if returning to her younger days, wrote frequently in the eSwatini newspapers the *Times of Swaziland* and *Izwi lama Swazi* under the name "Intombazana." Poring over the numerous citations of Black newspapers in *Written Out,* it seems that Twala was both absent and present, perhaps in itself an indication of how traditional archives wield only a partial force over the shape of Black life. Black newspapers carried their own archival force that challenge what meaningful knowledge looks like and where it resides, fragmented and short lived as they often were. The dialogic forum of the newspaper perhaps gives a richer picture of the gendered politics that were at play on the page as the idea of the New African was being articulated and expressed.

Intriguingly—and somewhat puzzlingly—in the middle of *Written Out*, Cabrita shifts from referring to Twala as "Regina" to using "Gelana." A Zulu-ization of "Girl," Gelana had accompanied Twala almost all of her life and, in 1952, she formally adopted it. Cabrita suggests that this shift marked irrevocable transitions in Twala's life but then *Written Out* also reads as if designating multiple identities to Twala—Regina and Gelana—without working out upfront the implications of marking this shift in the middle of the biography. In other words, if Regina Mazibuko/Twala becomes Gelana Twala why was this not foreshadowed and given some attention at the beginning of the book? Instead *Written Out* only engages with this transition at the moment in Twala's biography where her archive makes it legible. It's an intriguing and complicated turn in the book and is worth a quote:

[8]In addition to *The Modern Girl*, see Tsitsi Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Lynn M. Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa," *The Journal of African History* 47, no. 3 (2006): 461–90.

[9]Bhekizizwe Peterson, *Monarchs, Missionaries and African Intellectuals: African Theatre and the Unmaking of Colonial Marginality* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2000), 16.

> This would be much more than a mere change of name. Regina's preference for an isiZulu name symbolized her political and personal transformations of the 1950s. These were years during which she lost faith in South Africa's powerful white liberal elite. She would now view their well-meaning efforts at Black uplift as thinly veiled racism. Mind the early years of apartheid, these were also years when Regina would embrace the newly radicalized ANC, seeing direct political opposition as the only viable course of action when confronted by a racist state (175).

This explains the use of both Regina and Gelana in the subtitle of the biography. But if Twala ultimately chose Gelana then why does Regina appear first in her naming and why, perhaps, not abandon Regina altogether? The politics and paradoxes of naming are not new in Black South African literature and beyond. Poet, scholar, and fellow Wits University graduate B. W. Vilakazi was named Bambatha Wallet after the Bambatha Rebellion which took place in Natal the year he was born. When he embraced Catholicism at Marrianhill he took the name Benedict. In his literary and academic career he signed as B. W. Vilakazi. His initials and, indeed, seemingly strategic choice of name invoked rather than resolved his positionality in the battle zones of colonial modernity.[10] Es'kia Mphahlele, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, and other major writers went through similar transitions during their careers. The list of African statesmen who went through these shifts, from Kwame Nkrumah to Jomo Kenyatta, is equally voluminous.[11] In the Afro-American context on the other side of the Atlantic, these issues unfolded with the poignancy of the losses incurred in the Middle Passage. Twala was, then, in familiar company, and when coupled with the gendered dynamics of intellectual formation it would have been interesting to see Cabrita work out a critique of naming in tandem with the themes of visibility and erasure that *Written Out* is concerned with.

Written Out will be of interest to scholars beyond South Africa and across disciplines. Through Twala's multiple (dis)locations, *Written Out* maps out for us the vicissitudes of the boundary crossings of a multidisciplinary, transnational figure consigned to the margins of the racial and gendered projects in which she was quite clearly fundamental in shaping. Twala's last years in eSwatini were as intellectually and politically significant as those of her life in South Africa, a fact which points to regional and transnational possibilities for literary, gender, and historical studies in South Africa at a time where Black internationalism has come to the fore of the politics and possibility of worldmaking. In its border crossing maneuvers *Written Out* invites more work that transgresses national boundaries in the search for home(s).[12]

[10]For a discussion of this aspect of B. W. Vilakazi's identity, see Peterson, *Monarchs,* 87–88.

[11]Kwame Nkrumah was born Francis Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta was born Kamau but was also known as Johnstone Kenyatta prior to becoming Kenya's first statesman.

[12]My reference to worldmaking is from Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). Annette Joseph-Gabriel's *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019) is an exemplary recent work on the transnational politics of decolonial feminism.

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