Introduction

> No one is ever entirely the author of her life.
>
> —Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*

This was the sixth phone call I'd made. My question was always the same. Have you heard of someone called R. D. Twala, who ran as a candidate in the 1963 legislative elections in Eswatini, a country in Southern Africa?[1] Twala had lived in the small town of Kwaluseni, on the outskirts of Eswatini's second-largest city, Manzini. Whoever this person was, Twala was also an accomplished anthropologist whose work was published in the prestigious journal *African Studies* (in which no biographical detail accompanied its articles). I had also come across R. D. Twala in the Uppsala University archives of the Swedish historian Bengt Sundkler. Twala had worked as a researcher for Sundkler in the late 1950s, sending the Swedish scholar meticulously crafted reports on religion in Eswatini. Whoever they were, woman or man, R. D. Twala was intelligent, erudite, politically active, and highly opinionated. My curiosity was piqued. I wanted to learn more about them.

But the answer to my question was also always the same. The historians whom I asked (both professional and lay), the journalists, the political activists, and the Kwaluseni residents all

hesitated, thought for a few seconds, and then—I could sense it on phone calls—shook their heads and gave me a no. R. D. Twala was someone about whom they knew nothing at all. The name didn't even elicit a stirring of vague recognition. A complete blank. I was surprised. I had expected that a candidate in Eswatini's first semi-democratic elections—a momentous occasion for the country, just five years before it gained independence from Britain in 1968—and an individual who was a rare published Black African anthropologist of the 1950s would have left some imprint in public memory. Eswatini, moreover, was not a large country—only seven thousand square miles, slightly smaller than the state of New Jersey. My experience of growing up in Eswatini in the 1980s and 1990s was that this was a country where it was hard to remain anonymous.

My sixth phone call broke my streak of bad luck. I was contacting Professor Bongile Putsoa, an academic in her eighties who had taught at the country's university for many years (the university was in the small town of Kwaluseni, adjacent to busy Manzini). I had been directed toward Putsoa by an old school friend of mine, Thato Sukati, who had been married to Bongile's son for some years. As Thato listened to me bemoaning my difficulties in finding more about R. D. Twala, she suddenly thought of her former mother-in-law. Putsoa had not only had grown up in Kwaluseni (Twala's hometown; I at least knew this small fragment from the election bid) but was also deeply knowledgeable about local history. If anyone knew about R. D. Twala, Thato assured me, it would be Bongile Putsoa.

I rang Putsoa and gave my usual explanation. But before I had finished, Putsoa laughed and cut me off: "Oh, you must mean Regina!" For the next fifteen minutes, Putsoa spoke about a woman called Regina Twala who had lived in Kwaluseni in the 1950s and 1960s and who had died in 1968. (I later found out that Regina was born in 1908, placing her at an early sixty when she died.)[2] Putsoa had been a young woman in the 1960s, and her memories of Regina energetically striding around Kwaluseni were still vivid. In Putsoa's recollection, Regina was a social worker engaged in

uplift of the community, although she did also hazily recall that Regina was active in politics. One thing in particular stood out in Putsoa's memory. Regina had founded a small library, certainly the only one in Kwaluseni and one of only a very few in the entire country in the 1960s. The tiny building still stood today, Putsoa told me, although now a broken shell with a tree fallen through its roof. She would take me to see it.

I met with Putsoa a few days later, and she did indeed take me to see the old library founded by Regina Twala. It was now a sad ruin under the Kwaluseni sun. A fading name in peeling paint read "Prince Mfanyana Memorial Library." Regina had named the library after Abner Mfanyana Dlamini, the first liSwati man to gain a university degree. Inside I could still see ancient, overturned bookshelves. I would later learn that Regina's founding of this library spoke to her lifelong dedication to the emancipation of the emaSwati people from British colonial rule and to her conviction that education was integral to this goal.[3]

Of even greater value were the introductions Putsoa made for me to Regina's family. There was Anne Twala, Regina's daughter-in-law, who around 1966 had married Regina's only child, her son Vusumuzi (known by family as Vusi). It turned out that Putsoa and Anne Twala were members of the same Methodist church. Anne still lived in the Kwaluseni house Regina had built when she moved to Eswatini in the 1950s. I then met Anne and Vusi's daughter, Gelane Pinokie Twala, who was named after her grandmother. (In later life, Regina used the name Gelana.) Regina never met Pinokie (as she prefers to be called), who was born about a decade after her death. Yet Pinokie was nonetheless Regina's heir. Vusi—Regina's only child—had died in a car crash several years after Regina's death, and Pinokie was his only offspring. Later on, it would become intensely important for my research that in name, as well as in the eyes of the law, Pinokie was Regina's sole heir and her grandmother's legal, intellectual, and spiritual representative.

Meeting her family helped me further unlock the mystery of R. D. Twala. I was subsequently able to also track down the

existence of very many letters exchanged between Regina Twala and her second husband, Dan Twala. It is hard to overstate the significance of this collection. 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 a thirty-year period from 1938 to 1968), and for the distinctive voices of its interlocuters. Regina and Dan were both leading figures of twentieth-century Southern Africa, connected to key social and political transformations and figures of their tumultuous era. Regina, for example, was a friend of both Nelson Mandela and his wife, Winnie. It is a collection of letters entirely without peer; I know of no similar correspondence between two figures of twentieth-century Africa. Yet echoing the theme that I was fast coming to see defined Regina's existence—both during her life and posthumously—the letters are completely neglected. Nearly every historian of Southern Africa whom I spoke to about these letters simply had no idea of their existence.

What explains historians and the public's wholesale ignorance of this remarkable collection? For more than fifty years, the letters have been kept in the Johannesburg home of the South African historian Tim Couzens. Couzens had twice interviewed Dan Twala in the late 1970s (about ten years after Regina's death) and had planned—with Dan's blessing—to publish his and Regina's correspondence. Couzens was at the time doing research on Black male playwrights, and Dan was a leading figure in Johannesburg's theater scene, being a founder member of the city's Bantu Dramatic Society in the 1930s. But for some reason, after his interviews of the 1970s, Couzens never returned to the topic of Regina Twala.[4] Instead, Couzens spent much of the 1980s researching his biography of Trader Horn, an early twentieth-century European ivory trader based in Central Africa. Regina and Dan's letters languished in Couzens's study for many decades, and Dan would die in a car crash in Eswatini in the mid-1980s, seemingly putting the final nail in the project's coffin. Couzens himself died in 2016, and ever since, Diana Wall, Couzens's widow, kept the letters in

large cardboard boxes in her husband's study. The storage of these letters for fifty years or so in a private Johannesburg home was a double-edged sword. It undoubtedly preserved an important historical collection for posterity. But with the letters locked away and inaccessible, it also contributed to the ongoing public amnesia about Regina Twala. In time, as work on my book progressed, I would also come to appreciate the painful resonance of Regina's legacy—that of a Black female intellectual—being in the ambiguous safekeeping of a white South African academic.

Obscurity and marginalization (frequently at the hands of white scholars) are themes that shape Regina Twala's life and legacy. While a prominent historian like Couzens had at least deemed Regina worthy of passing interest, this was not a widespread sentiment. My initial experience of realizing few people had ever heard of Regina Twala would be repeated very many times as I worked on this book. I became used to politely blank faces as I described the woman I was writing about. I was a biographer whose subject was invisible (or, more accurately, had been made invisible, a process that this book will document). Outside of a minuscule circle of family members, no one in either Eswatini or South Africa (where Regina was born and spent the first forty years of her life) had ever heard of her. Bongile Putsoa would remain a rare exception as someone who had either known her personally or who still remembered her work and her legacy. Kwaluseni's residents knew about the ruined one-room library built by Regina, standing off their main thoroughfare, but all daily passed it by, uncurious and unknowing.

Bringing marginalized people into focus is not a unique predicament for a biographer. There is an entire genre of biography that tells the little-known stories of ordinary women and men, deliberately eschewing attention to the elite, the famed, and the celebrated. Many of these biographies focus on quotidian figures as a way of illuminating a particular period or region. Biographers select "ordinary" people not for their extraordinary features but rather for their everyman qualities.[5] But Regina Twala does not fit this pattern

of an obscure woman being clawed from the blank forgetfulness of the past by a dedicated historian. As I was fast finding out, she was far from an ordinary woman. Regina was part of a tiny group of middle-class professional Black women of twentieth-century Southern Africa. In her company were the first female nurses, doctors, teachers, politicians, and social workers, pioneering figures who pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable feminine behavior. Yet even among this illustrious company, Regina stands out as exceptional. A cursory examination of her life shows a truly unique figure in the history of twentieth-century Africa.

Born and raised in a Zulu family in the small village of eNdaleni in the Midlands of South Africa, Regina Twala would be only the second Black woman to graduate from the prestigious University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, emerging with a degree in social studies (a mixture of sociology and anthropology). Throughout Regina's life, she wrote prolifically, producing perhaps as many as six book manuscripts (only two survived, one only partially) and over one hundred journalistic and academic articles. Alongside her academic interests, Regina was also an active political figure, protesting for many decades against the racism of the South African apartheid state and against the British colonial state in neighboring Eswatini. Regina also emerged as an outspoken critic of the traditional Swati monarch, Sobhuza II, who seized absolute power after the departure of the British. Regina's personal life was just as extraordinary. Those who knew Regina remember her as stubborn, opinionated, passionate, determined, and difficult. She could be kind to those in need and bitingly dismissive of those in power. Briefly married and subsequently divorced in the mid-1930s, Regina braved societal censure against women who left their husbands. She chose the prospect of a better life against the known reliability of an unhappy marriage. Regina's second marriage to the prominent Dan Twala—a thirty-year-long relationship—was a rich and multilayered intellectual, emotional, and physical union, marking the pair out as one of the power couples of midcentury Southern Africa.

Yet *this* was the woman whom history seemed to have forgotten. What was I to make of this puzzle? How was it that a woman as talented, unusual, memorable, and prolific as Regina Twala had been so thoroughly erased? She was a political leader in an era where few women occupied leadership roles, an intellectual luminary, an author of multiple works, an outspoken journalist, a university-trained anthropologist, and an unconventional defier of norms for women. Regina was certainly not an "ordinary" woman, not by the standards of the 1950s and not even by criteria of the 2020s. Regina, rather, was a blazing star, someone who pioneered numerous firsts for Black women in two different countries in Southern Africa. That a woman did nothing "exceptional" of course does not make her life any less worthy of remembering. But taking into account Regina's many accomplishments does make her invisibility to contemporary audiences all the more puzzling.

Yet the erasure of Regina Twala is a predicament shared by very many African women of the twentieth century. Generations of accomplished female professionals—writers, artists, doctors, and politicians—are virtually unknown outside of their immediate families. One way to measure what writer Zukiswa Wanner calls Black women's "constant flirtation with erasure" is these women's difficulty in gaining the attention of biographers.[6] While biographical coverage of African men is regionally uneven (South Africa predominates, while other parts of the continent are relatively unrepresented; the last biography of a liSwati individual was published in 1981), biographies of African women from anywhere in the continent are still a vanishingly rare species.[7] Of the 225 biographies published of South African figures since 1990, I count only ten that have focused on women.[8] Prominent women like Charlotte Maxeke—a US-educated teacher, social worker, and activist and probably the most famous Black woman in early twentieth-century South Africa—only received a full-length biographical treatment in 2016. Currently, it is not even distributed outside of South Africa.[9] In the rare cases where women are biographers' focus, these are largely women linked to prominent

political men—what one historian dubbed the "lives and wives" approach.[10] There are more biographies of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, for example, than of any other South African woman.[11]

One might argue that African women's biographies remain unwritten because there is simply not enough material with which to construct their lives; sexist societies have undoubtedly marginalized women from written official records. But the biographers of a nineteenth-century South African Khoikhoi woman, Sara Baartman, still managed to write her story despite a nearly complete lack of written documents for a biographical subject who had died two hundred years ago.[12] And historian Athambile Masola reminds us that the chroniclers of African women should search for their stories in locations that are far from obvious. Often women's lives appear in the footnotes of written records more concerned with documenting the deeds of men.[13] Scarcity of materials, moreover, was clearly not an issue for Regina Twala. I have already mentioned her hundreds of letters, her unpublished manuscripts, and her published journalism. This is not a woman whose written output has disappeared or that did not exist in the first place. Moreover, Regina's prominence in social and political life—her university education, her high-profile political activity, her social work—all meant that her activities were frequently covered in newspapers in both South Africa and Eswatini. Indeed, it is rare to write about a Black South African woman who has left behind quite so much trace of her life, both archival and published. How, then, are we to explain the silence about her, given there is simply so much material for a curious biographer to get on with?

Making the fact of Regina Twala's obscurity my focus rather than merely an odd sidenote (and recognizing this is a predicament shared by many other Black women of the twentieth century), this biography answers the questions of *why, how, when,* and *by whom* she has been so thoroughly forgotten, both within her own lifetime and after her death. Far from being a puzzling oddity, Regina's erasure came to me to signal the primary dynamic of her entire life. What follows is both a standard biography that

relates the life of its subject, situating her in her context and time period. But it is also a broader meditation on remembrance and forgetting and on the gatekeeping mechanisms that ensure some individuals are celebrated long after their death and others are entirely erased. The anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot memorably writes that "presences and absences . . . are neither neutral or natural. They are created. . . . One 'silences' a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun."[14] Telling Regina's story also means telling the story of how she has actively been written out of history, including identifying those responsible for this.

By adopting an agnotological approach (one that foregrounds inquiry into the production of ignorance), I will show how Regina's posthumous obscurity has neither been the product of chance nor the supposedly natural outcome of a little-known figure. Regina was the opposite of little-known: she was a prominent woman. But she was also one who has been deliberately written out of history, of memory, and of public consciousness, a process that began even while she was still alive. Ignorance of Regina Twala has been purposefully constructed. The public, scholars, and political powerbrokers have all engaged in a "sanctioned forgetting" of her legacy, both during her lifetime and afterward.[15]

Yet we usually think of caliber as more important in determining whose legacy endures and whose fades. One of the regular questions I was asked when writing this book and when I mentioned Regina Twala's difficulty in finding publishers, was the variation of "but was her writing any good?" The politics of merit are particularly fraught in a racist and sexist society like twentieth-century Southern Africa. Far more important in determining the success or failure of an individual's legacy than their merit were the facts of white rule over a Black majority population. Since the seventeenth century, Black South Africans had been subject to the imperialistic designs of both Afrikaners—the white settlers that had populated Southern Africa for several centuries—and Britons. In South Africa, this culminated in the election of the Afrikaner National Party on its platform of apartheid, or separate

"development" of the races, in 1948, which brought into being one of the most viciously systematic systems of racist segregation the world has ever seen.

In neighboring Eswatini, the Swati monarch Sobhuza II always held nominal powers, meaning—on paper at least—that Black oppression in Eswatini was not on the same scale as in neighboring South Africa. Moreover, under the dubious patronage of the United Kingdom (Eswatini was one of Britain's colonial protectorates until 1968), the country managed to retain some measure of autonomy from South Africa, which had long desired to absorb its tiny neighbor into its own borders. Yet despite the much-vaunted progressiveness of Eswatini on matters of race (an attitude that still persists today), ordinary life in twentieth-century Eswatini was—for a Black person—little different from what lay across the border. Racist segregation laws existed in the country until 1963. EmaSwati had no voting rights until that same year. Violent killings of Blacks by whites—usually punished, if at all, by a minimal sentence or fine—were widespread until independence in 1968. Black women, in particular, were bereft of legal protection and at the whims of their male guardians and traditional chiefs.

Regina Twala's life thus underscores that Black women experienced the horrors of apartheid and colonial rule very differently from Black men. Racism was not gender blind. Being a Black woman under white rule in Southern Africa of the twentieth century meant having even fewer legal rights than a Black man, possessing the legal status of a child, and being unable to inherit or own property in her own right. Regina, however, was part of a tiny minority of women who were granted the status of "exempted" individuals by the British colonial state—a distinction reserved for Western-educated women—and thus she could enjoy the right to own property. But legal status gave Regina scant protection throughout her lifetime. Black women of Southern Africa still had to contend with the misogynoir of the white colonial and apartheid regimes and their anxiety over Black female sexuality and the

independent activities of autonomous women.[16] Women like Regina also had to contend with a lack of solidarity from Black men, who were often intent upon compartmentalizing Black women into confining boxes of housekeeper, mother, and sexual object.

In short, a joint whammy of racism and sexism—what feminist scholar Frances M. Beal referred to as "double jeopardy"—made it punishingly difficult for Black women like Regina Twala to establish themselves in all kinds of professional spheres until well into the last decades of the twentieth century.[17] This was certainly true of authorship and academia, two of Regina's chosen spheres. Literary scholar Barbara Boswell documents the astonishing fact that by the 1980s only six books had ever been published by Black women writers in South Africa.[18] Writers like Regina and a handful of others had to contend with sexual harassment, patronizing attitudes, censorious moralizing, and jealous territorialism on the part of male publishing gatekeepers, both white and Black.

The literary gatekeepers of the racist and sexist society of twentieth-century Southern Africa clamped down by quite literally writing her out of the region's record. Regina is not unique among Southern African women writers in never finding a book publisher and being one whose work was consequently buried and near lost. (Even the rare writer who was published—the first English-language book by a Black woman appeared only in 1975—soon found herself out of print.)[19] The literary activist Goretti Kyomuhendo, who worked with women writers in Uganda in the 1980s and 1990s, told me of countless unpublished manuscripts of women writers that had simply never seen the light of day.[20]

Politically as well as intellectually, Regina's career was marked by many defeats. Her experience echoes that of the very many women throughout the continent who found themselves excluded by men from their own national liberation movements in the twentieth century.[21] Regina eventually withdrew from politics in Eswatini, defeated and bruised by the relentless hostility of the men she worked with. Regina's failed efforts at reputation creation during her own lifetime—her doomed work at cementing herself

as a Black intellectual and political activist—would be echoed after her death. Regina's last breaths were quite literally taken up with her efforts to ensure her last book manuscript would be published. This work—an important ethnographic opus that would surely have established Regina's reputation as a foremost scholar of Eswatini—was posthumously forwarded to a white anthropologist of Eswatini, the eminent Hilda Kuper at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), for publication. But instead of publishing Regina's work, Kuper buried the manuscript in her UCLA study for many decades. Regina had comparable experiences with other white academics, gatekeeping individuals unwilling to cede ground to Regina as an intellectual and researcher in her own right. Many of Regina's so-called allies—"progressive" white academics who repudiated apartheid and colonial rule—could in fact be her worst enemies, motivated by jealousy and intellectual territorialism.

Given Regina Twala's bitter experience with white scholars, my own role as biographer is an uncomfortable one to occupy. If Regina is a woman written out of history—both in her own lifetime and afterward—what does it mean that her reintroduction to history is being mediated through myself, a white academic? I am a professional historian residing in North America and employed by a prestigious university. I am, moreover, of white Southern African ancestry: my parents—one an Afrikaner, the other a joint national of Portugal and Mozambique—moved to Eswatini in 1982 when I was two. I lived there until 1998 and on and off since then. My bringing Regina's work to light is thus shot through with inherited issues of race and privilege. My family's and my story are part of the history of white supremacy in Southern Africa.

So, however important it is that Regina's story is finally coming to light, that it takes the mediation of a white academic from the Northern Hemisphere to do its telling would surely have rankled Regina. For all her desires to publish her corpus, manage the narrative of her life, and consolidate her legacy, the task of telling her story and of bringing her work to public attention has been taken up by another—and, what's more, by an academic employed by the

kind of well-funded institution at which Regina was never able to find work. These are dynamics intensely familiar to African studies as a whole, a field of study historically dominated by white scholars (many in the northern hemisphere) telling the stories of Black African individual and communities. When viewed in this light, it is hard to view my biography of Regina in a straightforwardly rehabilitative sense, to laud it as a worthwhile restoration to memory of an important lost figure. Instead, my biography begs difficult questions about continued white privilege in telling the stories of Black historical subjects and of the entrenched institutional power of the universities and presses that have supported my career while spurning individuals like Regina Twala.

Even while I have wrestled with the implications of my telling Regina's story to the world, it has been clear to me that there is also one other party intensely interested in her public reputation. This is, of course, Regina's family—most of all her granddaughter, Pinokie Gelane Twala, and her two stepchildren (Dan Twala's biological daughter and niece, respectively), Zanele and Mary Twala. (Mary died during the writing of the book.)[22] Living in both Eswatini and South Africa, Regina's family are intensely proud of their mother and grandmother, recognizing her extraordinary talents and eager for the world to know more about her. The family has granted me access to family papers and interviews, in large part because they view the book as a means to bring Regina Twala to a wider audience. Pinokie Twala is a trained *sangoma*—a diviner and healer—whose guiding spirit is her deceased grandmother. Pinokie tells me that Regina in fact has selected me as her biographer. In the family's eyes, I am Regina's chosen instrument for at last ensuring her work is known to the world.

At the same time, Regina Twala's family also recognize the ways in which they run the risk of disempowerment in the managing of her posthumous reputation. Undoubtedly, they are cognizant of Regina's own maltreatment at the hands of the literary-academic establishment, an experience shared by very many Black women of the twentieth century, in South Africa and elsewhere.[23] The fact

that the family has long been unaware of the letters kept in Tim Couzens's study is a sore point for them. And for my part, I am both a platform for Regina's legacy as well as a potential exploiter of their beloved relative's story.

Echoing these tensions, the pages that follow do not provide readers with a celebratory narrative of an indomitable woman who triumphed against the odds. Regina Twala was a powerful woman who was silenced by even more powerful forces. She was a prominent woman whose legacy has been obscured by those who sought—and still seek—to promote other agendas. The traces of her that survive are so hard to find, so locked away from the world that she is all but lost, save to those like myself equipped with privileged networks that gain them access to deceased white historians' studies and the ability to travel to international archives.

Some might find controversial my choice to frame both Regina's life, as well as my telling of it, as a tragedy. Critics might feel my approach places too much emphasis on the victimhood of Black women rather than their strength. Even the title of my book, *Written Out,* in the passive voice, suggests defeat rather than agency. The small number of biographies of Black African women—and more broadly scholarship of African women—prefer to tell far more celebratory narratives. Scholars offer stories of resilience, perseverance, and triumph against the odds, success despite challenges, rising up despite defeat.

As valuable as these stories are, it is important not to immediately fold vulnerability into triumph. The stories of silenced women deserve to be told without too quickly burnishing them into stories of resistance. In large part this is a question of ethical accountability. The forces that silenced Regina in her lifetime are still active today. Eswatini is today as much in the grip of the traditionalist monarchy as it ever was. As I write this introduction in mid-2021, the kingdom is undergoing a turbulent uprising as emaSwati citizens protest the absolute monarch, Mswati III, son of Sobhuza II. More than sixty emaSwati are reported to have been murdered by the country's army. The country is seeking

proponents for democratic reform—such as Regina would surely be—but still grappling with the repressive silence the state imposes upon any discussion of these figures. Few in official circles in Eswatini today would be comfortable with celebrating a dissenting figure like Regina Twala. Regina was out of step with the politics of the 1960s; tragically, she is still out of time in contemporary Eswatini. Across the border, postapartheid South Africa has never gone through a true accountability process. The question of reparations has never been seriously discussed, and many of the economic and social inequalities of the twentieth century persist today. African studies—in the United States, at least—is still dominated by white academics. To simply celebrate Regina's triumphs draws our gaze away from those culpable for her silencing.

Telling the story of a written-out woman thus leads us straight to the crucial question of agency. Since the 1980s, as part of the broader shift toward "history from below," scholars have celebrated historical actors' possession of agency and the fact that even the most oppressed individuals are able to assert autonomy and self-determination.[24] Yet, as the literary scholar Naminate Diabate powerfully claims, "There is no agency outside of restrictions."[25] We might also think of the words of anthropologist Talal Asad cited at this introduction's outset: "No one is ever entirely the author of her life." I do not intend the title of this book to suggest a passive lack of agency. But I do mean it to convey that however creative and resourceful Regina Twala was, it was nonetheless impossible for a single Black woman to transcend the racist and sexist constraints of her time—and, indeed, of our time too. And even posthumously, the fact of Regina's mediation through me, a white academic, suggests the continued persistence of those structures of power. Following Diabate's construction, agency and restriction always unhappily coexist. This, then, is the story of an invisible woman, an erased woman, a silenced woman, a woman whose fate was for the telling of her story to be always in the hands of others. This is the story of a woman written out of history, and this is the story of how she was written out. This is Regina Gelana Twala's story.