

The Story of *Seretse and Ruth*: A Southern African Foundational Fiction

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Summary

This article is centred on Wilf Mbanga and Trish Mbanga's *Seretse and Ruth* (2005), a Zimbabwean-authored, fictionalised biography of the first President of Botswana, Seretse Khama and his British wife, Ruth Williams. In the article, analysis of *Seretse and Ruth* is placed within the context of a resurgence of international interest both in Botswana as a society and in the marriage of the Khamas. The aims and methodology of Mbanga and Mbanga are compared to those of Michael Duffield, the author of their main secondary source *A Marriage of Inconvenience* (1990). The ambiguity in the "play" on cultural and racial difference in *Seretse and Ruth* is discussed in an analysis of the biography's representation of Ruth and Seretse's courtship and the antagonism between Ruth and Seretse's uncle, Tshekedi.

Drawing on the work of Doris Sommer (1993) on the romance as foundational fiction in nineteenth-century Latin American writing, the paper argues that *Seretse and Ruth* presents the story of the Khamas as a foundational fiction in which "star-crossed lovers" from different races and regions eventually unite the new nation of Botswana. Moreover, the retelling of this story has resonances in contemporary southern African politics and culture. *Seretse and Ruth* contributes to the "myth" of Botswana as a successful, harmonious society that can be contrasted with the divided society of neighbouring Zimbabwe. The paper concludes that *Seretse and Ruth* presents a way of imagining a foundational fiction for Zimbabwe based on consensus rather than exclusion.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is gebaseer op Wilf Mbanga en Trish Mbanga se *Seretse and Ruth* (2005), 'n gefiksionaliseerde biografie geskryf deur Zimbabwe se outeurs oor Botswana se eerste president, Seretse Khama en sy Britse vrou, Ruth Williams. Die artikel plaas 'n analise van *Seretse and Ruth* binne die konteks van 'n herlewing in internasionale belangstelling in beide Botswana as 'n samelewing en in die huwelik van die Khamas. Mbanga en Mbanga se doelwitte en metodologie word vergelyk met dié van Michael Duffield, die outeur van hul vernaamste sekondêre bron, *A Marriage of Inconvenience* (1990). Die dubbelsinnigheid in die woordspeling ten opsigte van die kulturele en rasseverskille in *Seretse and Ruth* word bespreek in die analise van die biografie se voorstelling van Ruth en Seretse se hofmakery en die antagonisme tussen Ruth en Seretse se oom, Tshekedi.

Die artikel gebruik die werk van Doris Sommer (1993) oor die roman as grondslagfiksie in negentiende-eeuse Latyns-Amerikaanse werke, om aan te voer dat *Seretse and Ruth* die storie van die Khamas as grondslagfiksie voorstel waarin die “gedoemde paartjie” van verskillende rasse en streke uiteindelik die nuwe Botswana-nasie verenig. Meer nog, die hervertelling van hierdie storie vind weerklank in die kontemporêre Suider-Afrikaanse politiek en kultuur. *Seretse and Ruth* dra by tot die “mite” van Botswana as ’n suksesvolle, harmonieuse samelewing in teenstelling met die verdeelde samelewing in die buurland, Zimbabwe. Die artikel kom tot die slotsom dat *Seretse and Ruth* ’n manier aantoon om ’n grondslagfiksie vir Zimbabwe te verbeeld wat op konsensus eerder as uitsluiting gebaseer is.

Introduction

Botswana’s place on the international literary map in the twentieth century was secured through the residence of Bessie Head, the South African-born writer who lived in Botswana from 1964-1986. Head’s fiction includes racial prejudice and mental breakdown in its subject matter. Head had an uneasy relationship with her adopted country. Therefore to associate Botswana with Head is to reveal the fissures in the post-protectorate society in relation to ethnicity and gender.

More recently, Botswana has become known through the success of the Rhodesian-born Scottish writer Alexander McCall Smith’s popular fiction series *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* (1998-2007). McCall Smith’s protagonist, Precious Ramotswe, celebrates her country as a tolerant society that harmoniously unites the courtesy and communality of tradition with the best of modernity. Through his heroine, a composite of southern African good sense and moral probity, McCall Smith suggests that Botswana is the ideal African country. Mma Ramotswe believes the peace and stability in her country are due to the lasting influence of Seretse Khama, the first President of Botswana, and that his virtues draw attention to the faults of other African (particularly southern African) leaders.¹

In *Tears of the Giraffe* (2000), Mma Ramotswe remembers the prequel to Seretse Khama’s benevolent rule in Botswana, the British refusal to recognise him as chief or *kgosi* of the Bangwato² and his exile from

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1. There are connections between Bessie Head and Seretse Khama in life and in writing. Head’s *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981) includes histories of Seretse’s grandfather, Khama, and his uncle, Tshekedi. In 1971, Head publicly displayed a list of unsubstantiated accusations against Seretse Khama. That she was then confined for a short time in a psychiatric hospital but not expelled from the country is often cited as proof of her madness and Khama’s benevolence. The episode is fictionalised in her major novel *A Question of Power* (1973).
 2. I follow Williams (2006a) in using the name Bangwato for Seretse Khama’s people.

Bechuanaland: “Look at the way the British had treated him, refusing to recognize his choice of bride and forcing him into exile simply because he had married an Englishwoman. How could they have done such an insensitive and cruel thing to a man like that?” (McCall Smith [2000]2003: 59).³ The situation was more complex than Mma Ramotswe suggests. In 1948, Seretse Khama, then heir to the chieftainship and a law student in London, married a white British woman, Ruth Williams. The British refusal to recognise him as *kgosi* and their decision to exile him were made on political grounds – the fear that the “mixed marriage” of a member of a ruling family in a neighbouring country would result in the South Africans annexing Bechuanaland and leaving the Commonwealth. The ensuing controversy was an important episode in southern African and British colonial history but it is Mma Ramotswe’s version that has always held sway in the popular imagination. The marriage of Seretse and Ruth is read as a story of the adversity and triumph of two people whose love affair was supported by “ordinary” people in Britain and Bechuanaland and opposed by politically powerful and (in some cases) racist and dishonourable men.

The story has been told a number of times. John Redfern, a journalist who knew the Khamas, wrote his near-contemporary account of the politics surrounding the affair in 1955. Michael Dutfield’s biography *A Marriage of Inconvenience* was published in 1990 and, in the same year, Dutfield wrote and directed a drama on the subject for British television. The story has also been retold in histories of Botswana and southern Africa. Two further books have recently been published on the Khamas: *Seretse and Ruth* (2005) by Wilf Mbanga and Trish Mbanga, and the historical study *Colour Bar* (2006a) by Susan Williams.

Seretse and Ruth and *Colour Bar* both frame and market their subjects within the context of the success of the *No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series. McCall Smith has written the “Foreword” to Seretse and Ruth and Williams, in an essay on her publisher’s website, refers to Precious Ramotswe’s high esteem of Seretse Khama as “the man who established the moral tone of Botswana”. Williams claims her own book “offers, too, just like the adventures of Precious Ramotswe, a world in which truth and virtue really do win out against lies and deceit” (Williams 2006b). The review of Williams’s book in the Botswana journal *Mmegi* begins with the words “Not another book on Seretse and Ruth Khama!” (*Mmegi* 2006) and, although the review does suggest that *Colour Bar* makes an original contribution, the question of why there is a resurgence of interest in the Khamas at the beginning of the twenty-first century remains.

3. McCall Smith has Mma Ramotswe think of Seretse Khama as “Paramount Chief of the Bamgwato [sic]” ([2000]2003: 59) even though he renounced his right to the title.

Part of the answer, I would suggest, lies in the re-emergence of international interest in Botswana and the way in which Seretse and Ruth Khama metonymically represent the nation. In order to explore this issue and relate it to wider concerns in southern Africa, I intend to focus on the Zimbabwean-authored *Seretse and Ruth*, comparing it, where appropriate, to its main published source, Dutfield's *A Marriage of Inconvenience*. My reading of *Colour Bar* informs this essay but it is the fictionalising of the story in *A Marriage of Inconvenience* and *Seretse and Ruth* that interests me.

The Writers' Journeys

A Marriage of Inconvenience is based on archival documents and interviews conducted by Dutfield with people who were involved in the story of the Khamas in Bechuanaland and in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s. Dutfield claims that his work is based on factual information; it is "a synthesis of the memories of those who were involved and of the hitherto secret documents left behind by powerful men now dead". To engage the reader, he has created dialogue for the historical characters. Nevertheless, he states, "on every occasion, such creations are based on clear documentation or the vivid recollection of one of the participants". He adds that the story "is as true to what actually happened as surviving testimony will allow" (Dutfield 1990: ix).

Dutfield asserts that he is investigating a story he believes has only been partly told. He admires Ruth Khama and wants to be the conduit for her version of what had become a very public affair. The biography is framed by Dutfield's first meeting in Gaborone, after four years of correspondence, with Ruth whom he describes as a forceful woman who "commanded deep respect in Botswana" (1990: xi). When after further correspondence Ruth agrees to let Dutfield tell her story, he speculates:

Perhaps she was persuaded by the prospect of revealing the scale of the British government's deceit for the first time. After more than forty years there would be some satisfaction, surely, in letting others know how she had been misused. Perhaps, too, she was prompted by her pride in the love that had kept her husband and her united in defiance of all that could be thrown against them.

(Dutfield 1990: xiii)

At the end of his "Introduction", Dutfield explains that he sent Ruth a music cassette by the Ink Spots, an American group popular in the 1940s. The tape acts as an aural *punctum*, an intersection between present and past. Dutfield suggests that listening to the Ink Spots may have taken Ruth "back to that warm, humid night in London more than forty years before" (1990: xiii). At

this point, the “Introduction” segues into the first chapter describing Ruth and Seretse’s first “date” at an Ink Spots concert.

Dutfield’s book, published in Britain, and, one assumes, for a largely British readership, took him on a journey to southern Africa. In his chapter “The Children of the Kalahari” he gives a brief history of Bechuanaland, describing how the ethnic groups in this region came under threat from other indigenous groups in southern Africa and from colonial settlers and explorers. He tells the history of Seretse’s family including the reign of his grandfather, Khama, and his uncle, the regent Tshekedi, who was prepared to defy the British in defence of the rights and laws of the Bangwato.

Wilf and Trish Mbanga’s research followed much the same pattern as Dutfield’s. They consulted archival material and published biographies and interviewed people who had known the Khamas. Like Dutfield, they write fictionalised biography with imaginary dialogue and their explanation as to why they use this hybrid genre is similar to his; it is a better way of engaging the reader than a factual historical narrative. They state in their “Preface”: “We have interspersed the narrative with vignettes depicting imagined meetings, events and conversations. But even these are based on ... research. They are intended to give the reader a deeper and richer insight into the story than would be possible from a mere re-stating of the historical records” (Mbanga & Mbanga 2005). They add that “memories do fade and for this reason we do not claim that this is an authoritative work” (p. 10).

Where *Seretse and Ruth* differs from *A Marriage of Inconvenience*, though, is the more personalised approach the Mbangas have taken in researching and writing their book. Wilf Mbanga, a black Zimbabwean and Trish Mbanga, a white Zimbabwean, married in Rhodesia in 1978 and suffered racial discrimination there. They explain why the story of Ruth and Seretse is important to them:

We wrote this book because we felt a special affinity with Ruth and Seretse. On a lesser scale, their journey has been our own Above all, like Ruth and Seretse, we know what it is like to be caught up in a love so powerful that the normal boundaries of colour, class, creed and public opinion cease to matter This book is a celebration of cross-cultural marriage, which thankfully is so much more acceptable in many parts of the world. In a sense, Ruth and Seretse were pioneers, and we who follow in their footsteps salute them.

(Mbanga & Mbanga 2005: 11)

Seretse and Ruth, published in South Africa, appears to have been written for both a southern African and a universal readership. Details about the history, geography and politics of the Bangwato are interspersed throughout the book but there is no dedicated “history lesson”. An example of this is the episode of Tshekedi’s punishment of a white man, Phineas McIntosh, for assault and for molestation of a Bangwato woman and his subsequent

brief deposition by the British. This is described factually by Dutfield in his chapter on the history of Bechuanaland. In *Seretse and Ruth*, the incident is relayed by Seretse to another student, Forbes Burnham⁴ at breakfast. The story is told, from Seretse's point of view; in a jocular fashion, McIntosh "was recognised by everyone in the village, including the white traders as a ne'er-do-well"; his uncle "ordered the obnoxious boy to be whipped" (p. 33). The interlacing of Bangwato history and the love story turns the biography into a historical romance.

Mbanga and Mbanga carried out research in Botswana but it is their research in southern England that took them on a personal journey – "we traced the couple's steps to many of their favourite haunts" (p. 10). Their journey appears to have been as much about physical location as imaginative geography. Post-World-War-II London is recreated for the reader. It is a "grey" London of austerity with dull weather and rationing in contrast to the light, heat, and livestock farming of southern Africa. Through their interviews with friends of the Khamas and their reading in the archives, Mbanga and Mbanga construct a London and a world that are on the cusp of social and political changes. In doing this, they uncover a colonial history which is new to them and then introduce it to southern African readers.

Mbanga and Mbanga show the development of the Khamas' relationship within different social milieux. In their recreation of scenes in England and Botswana, they draw on the "play" of racial and cultural difference. This can be seen in the examples discussed below: firstly, their representation of Seretse and Ruth's early courtship and, secondly, their representation of the antagonism between Ruth and Tshekedi during Ruth's first period of residence in Bechuanaland.

Courtship: "With a Greedy Ear/Devour up My Discourse"

The first chapter of *Seretse and Ruth* describes the Khamas' first meeting when Ruth and her sister, Muriel, attend a drinks party held at Seretse's residence, Nutford House, a London hostel for international students run by the Colonial Office. Seretse is situated within a discourse of embryonic nationalism. The education these elite students experience is "The Holy Grail that would liberate them – and help them to liberate their countries – from poverty, ignorance, fear of the unknown and colonial domination" (p. 13).

Despite the formality and propriety of the party, the representation of the students and their guests hints at transgression: "most of the men were black and all the women were white. Against the dark suits and complexions of the men, the pale women with their silky, shoulder-length hair looked like

4. Burnham was later Prime Minister of Guyana from 1964-1980 and President from 1980-1985.

hothouse lilies” (p. 14). In this construction of white femininity as exotic, the women are represented as objects of desire. Although it is not explicit, the reader assumes that the women are the object of the black male gaze. Yet, elsewhere, in the early chapters of the book, it is Ruth who is the desiring subject. This contradiction reveals a tension between the recreation of a (presumed) 1940s discourse representing interracial/intersexual communication as border crossing – traversing and transgressing social boundaries – and a modern discourse of sameness which seeks to elide racial difference within common humanity. This is compounded by the fact that the biography is premised on difference since that is what first attracted the authors to the story.

Ruth’s interest in the students is put within the context of difference, the “Negro glamour” (p. 18) of the period and a developing British interest in jazz, popularised by US soldiers stationed in Britain during World War II and new immigrants from the colonies. Muriel and Ruth are part of a “transitional generation” (p. 19). Muriel, who has already visited the hostel has persuaded a reluctant Ruth to accompany her: “Muriel’s enthusiasm about the excitement and novelty of socialising with the foreigners had been so infectious that she had agreed” (p. 18).

The courtship itself slips between different discourses. There is the colonial romance. When Seretse sees Ruth at the party, “[h]er hair glowed in the light of a nearby lamp and he caught himself thinking of sunrise across the plains around Serowe, when the sandy expanse turned just that shade of reddish gold” (p. 16). This coexists with a discourse that is resonant of the early relationship of Othello and Desdemona with Ruth/Desdemona expressing wonder at the Africa revealed to her by Seretse/Othello: “[S]he sat motionless, her eyes fixed on his face, totally absorbed” (p. 25). However, a third discourse emerges in which Ruth is seen as a principled young woman who opposed anti-Semitism during the war and is now prepared to challenge racial prejudice in British society. After Seretse has asked Ruth to go out with him alone, Ruth, sitting on a park bench, thinks about the social ramifications of having a relationship with him:

Would she ever dare to walk through the park arm in arm with Seretse? Did she care? Did he care? Why did she not mind that he was black? Everyone else seemed to, but it didn’t bother her. In fact, most of the time she didn’t even notice that he was black. He was courteous, kind, intelligent, funny – those were the things that mattered.

(Mbanga & Mbanga 2005: 43)

This discourse can be seen as progressive within the social environment of 1940s Britain but it is also politically naïve. Seretse’s blackness may not matter to her but her whiteness is an issue for the Bangwato and the London Missionary Society (LMS) which had a prominent role in Bechuanaland Christian society. As *Seretse and Ruth* goes on to describe, after Tshekedi

insisted that the Bangwato would never accept a white woman's child as *kgosi*, Ruth and Seretse married in a civil ceremony without the permission of the Bangwato and after church and colonial officials had prevented them from having a church wedding.

Regent and White Queen

After her arrival in Serowe, Ruth is initially represented through difference. Driving through Serowe with Seretse, she finds the welcome of the crowd unnerving: "She could not help herself from shrinking back from the thousands of dirty hands stretching out to touch her. She felt as though she couldn't breathe". As she begins to distinguish individual faces, she comes to accept her role: "These were Seretse's people. How they loved him! These were her people now. She would love them, she would care for them. They needed her" (p. 180). Since Elizabeth II did not become queen until 1952, the representation of Ruth as the "White Queen" draws on the mythology of Queen Victoria in Bechuanaland mythology.⁵ Ruth, like a foreign queen, is a spectacle – watched by the Bangwato, the white settlers, the colonial officials and the press – but also a spectator, observing and commenting on the people and landscape of Bechuanaland.

Mbanga and Mbanga describe the departure of Tshekedi following his vow that "he would not share Serowe with Ruth" (p. 179). Tshekedi is represented as the old guard, bitterly disliked because of the belief that his opposition to Seretse's marriage was derived from his coveting of the chieftainship and resented because of the taxes and work he had imposed on the Bangwato. Seeing his red trucks being loaded with his possessions, people "watched the move with malicious approval, referring to the vehicles as *kgaphamadi* – the colour of blood" (p. 179). When the British set up the Harragin commission of inquiry to report on whether Seretse was a fit person to be chief, they named Tshekedi as plaintiff and Seretse as defendant against the wishes of both men. Mbanga and Mbanga show Tshekedi's angry reaction to this news. He focuses on Ruth, telling his wife Ella that the British commission "is going to be a waste of time unless they address the real issue. The problem is the woman. Not Seretse. He is perfectly fit to be Chief and everyone knows that. It's that white woman who has caused all this trouble" (p. 200).⁶

5. In the late nineteenth century, Cecil Rhodes had been eager to transfer Bechuanaland to his British South Africa Company. Khama and two other chiefs had visited Victoria in 1895 and had persuaded her that Bechuanaland should remain as a British protectorate.

6. Tshekedi's intense dislike of Ruth is part of his gendered world view. Ruth was not the only woman to suffer at the hands of Tshekedi. Tshekedi's

Seretse and Ruth provides a more descriptive account of Ruth's first meeting with Tshekedi in Lobatse than other biographies. Shopping at the general store, Ruth becomes aware of the "stunned silence" (p. 268) around her, and then Seretse invites her to meet his uncle. As Tshekedi greets her, she realises that "this was not just another uncle – this was The Uncle – the man who had prevented their marriage in church, the man who had instigated the judicial inquiry, the man who had almost broken Seretse's heart, and hers with it" (p. 269). She greets Tshekedi "through stiff lips" (p. 269). When Tshekedi says he would like to see their baby daughter, Seretse invites him to tea with cream scones; Tshekedi replies that this will be a treat because he has not had cream scones since he was in Oxford. This cordial interchange puts a serious conflict into the context of a family squabble that can now be resolved by old-world (in this case, European) courtesy and custom.

When Ruth criticises Seretse's friendly behaviour towards Tshekedi, Seretse takes a diplomatic position, arguing that his uncle was a pawn of the British and has suffered as much as they have. Nephew and uncle are partly reconciled, settling their dispute over cattle, but when Ruth asks Seretse if Tshekedi is reconciled to their marriage, he replies, "I'm not going to open it up for discussion unless he does. Our relationship is too tentative still" (p. 270). Seretse explains that he and his uncle have both come to the conclusion that chiefs are an outmoded institution and that they need to find a modern form of government which "doesn't totally destroy the positive aspects of our culture and heritage" (p. 270). Thus, Seretse avoids the double bind of the native in the colonial situation; either petrification, if colonialism, has prevented the development of his indigenous culture, or catalepsy, if the native's education alienates him from his culture (Jan Mohamed 1983: 5). Ruth has to be seen to agree with this position, "[s]he, too, had spent many of her lonely hours in Serowe thinking about how the Bamangwato could move forward into the modern world without sacrificing too much of their precious past" (Mbanga & Mbanga 2005: 271). In this way, Ruth is portrayed as more than a consort. Although a woman and from a different race, "she, too" can play a determining role in the putative nation's inclusive future.

Endings

To discuss endings, I want to return to a comparison between *A Marriage of Inconvenience* and *Seretse and Ruth*. The main text of Dutfield's book ends

sisters and Seretse's half-sister, Oratile, challenged Tshekedi when he used traditional laws to deprive them of their inheritance (Williams 2006a: 57-58).

with Seretse, Ruth and their daughter, Jacqueline, being ordered out of Bechuanaland by the British authorities. At the airstrip in Gaborone, Seretse addresses the crowd of Bechuanaland leaders who have come to see their departure. He tells them that he leaves only because he has been ordered out of the country and that he regrets not being able to stay with them and implement reforms for the betterment of Bechuanaland.

Dutfield begins the “Postscript” by announcing that “[t]he years that followed the exile of Ruth and Seretse were, in the end, kinder to them than to those who did them harm”. In England, Ruth and Seretse became a “rallying point” for those in favour of decolonisation (Dutfield 1990: 208). After Seretse had renounced the chieftainship in 1956, Seretse and Ruth were allowed to return to Bechuanaland. Dutfield suggests that Seretse was at the forefront of radical thinking about ways in which traditional African societies needed to change: “As the vision of emergent independent Africa became clearer in the 1950s, so Seretse was among the first to realise that the continent’s future lay not in the old tribal institutions of the Chief and the Royal Household, but in new political structures better able to cope with the challenges of imminent nationhood which lay ahead” (1990: 212).

Seretse formed the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) in 1962, became Prime Minister when he won a landslide election victory in 1965 and became the first President of the independent nation of Botswana in 1966. From this point on, Dutfield sees Botswana as a success story: “Fighting and winning three subsequent elections, Sir Seretse established a political and social framework in Botswana which serves as an example to every other country in Africa” (1990: 212). After his death from cancer in 1980, Seretse was praised “as a pragmatic politician who skilfully nursed his impoverished country towards prosperity, always putting the welfare of his people before ideology and yet never compromising their independence in the face of South African threats” (p. 213).⁷ Dutfield explains Ruth’s ceremonial, rather than political, role. She is an “unofficial Queen Mother” (p. 213), leading the Botswana Council of Women in its work on nutrition and healthcare and acting as President of the Botswana Red Cross. Despite Seretse’s realisation that the future of Botswana did not lie in the role and power of chiefs, his eldest son, Ian Khama, did take on the ceremonial role of *kgosi* shortly before his father’s death. For Dutfield, the importance of this lies in the Bangwato overcoming “the last of their prejudices, a mixed-race chief” (p. 215).

Dutfield’s “Postscript” ends with a brief description of the burial ground of the Bangwato elders where Tshekedi and Seretse are buried. He concludes, “Ruth goes there frequently. Apart from the desert wind that roars across the plain, it is a quiet place to be alone with memories” (p. 215). Dutfield’s retelling of Seretse and Ruth’s courtship and marriage has

7. This is reproduced verbatim in Mbanga and Mbanga’s “Postscript” (Mbanga & Mbanga 2005: 363).

come full circle from the Ink Spots concert in 1940s London to tombs in the Kalahari in 1990. It begins with Ruth's memories and it ends with them.

Seretse and Ruth takes the story beyond the point where Dutfield's main text finishes with the Khamas going into exile. The final chapter, "Black Knight", covers the period from 1959-1966, includes Seretse's illness and the death of Tshekedi, and finishes with Seretse's inauguration as President of Botswana. After Seretse is diagnosed as suffering from diabetes, Ruth ensures that Seretse follows a strict diet, policing his consumption of red meat and alcohol. Ruth's main function is to save Seretse from himself: "To this day, Batswana from all walks of life credit Ruth with having kept Seretse alive for another 20 years (Mbanga & Mbanga 2005: 344)." Seretse, who is at Tshekedi's bedside when he dies, tells Ruth that, before his death, Tshekedi said, "There's no such thing as race, you know" and "It is finished. Let there be peace" (p. 340).⁸ Seretse sees this as Tshekedi's acknowledgement that he was wrong to oppose his marriage to Ruth. When Ruth says that she "always felt deep down that he disapproved of me" (p. 340), Seretse tells her that they now know this was not true. At Tshekedi's funeral "[t]he graveside orations rang with praises of this extraordinary man who, despite his rough edges, had dedicated his life unselfishly to his people in true and noble Khama tradition" (p. 341).

However, immediately after the description of Tshekedi's funeral, Mbanga and Mbanga refer to the British Prime Minister Harold Mac-Millan's visit to South Africa and his "Wind of Change" speech in Cape Town. Seretse and Ruth "would often look back on this moment, the significance of which they could not possibly have fathomed at the time" (p. 341). The chapter moves towards the independence of Botswana, detailing Seretse's involvement in the development of democracy and the writing of a constitution. Seretse is opposed by the radical nativist opposition party, the Bechuanaland People's Party (BPP), which accuses him of being a European. Mbanga and Mbanga counter this by describing Seretse as a pragmatist: "He believed it was ridiculous to talk about Africa for the Africans if they had no training or experience and were not ready to run the

8. Mary Benson was among a group of family and friends attending to Tshekedi during his final illness. She states that a few days before he died, Tshekedi greeted Seretse with the words, "I am glad you have come. Let's forget the past and start afresh". Tshekedi called his sons to his bedside and told them that they were to be guests of his British friend, David Astor. He reminded them of the hospitality they had received from a German family in Ireland and a white South African in London. He then said to them, "There is no such thing as race. *All* these people are our friends. I want you to remember this" (Benson 1960: 303).

show” (p. 347).⁹ In not taking an Africanist stance, Seretse’s view appears to be in keeping with that of his latter-day admirer, Precious Ramotswa. Seretse believes that the move towards democracy and independence must be gradual (“Rushing ahead would be disastrous. Look at the mess all around us!” (p. 347))¹⁰ and tribalism must be eradicated (“Just look at the harm it’s done in the Congo and Kenya” (p. 347)).

Ruth encourages Seretse to become Prime Minister, “committing herself to sharing him forever with the entire nation” (p. 348). Before independence, the country is affected by severe drought but the new nation of Botswana emerges from adversity to become a diamond-rich country with a developing economy and a reputation as “one of the least corrupt countries in sub-Saharan Africa” (p. 359). At Seretse’s swearing-in as President on 30 September 1966, he walks towards Ruth and kisses her: “He couldn’t have made it without her, and he didn’t care if all the world knew it” (p. 362).

In the “Postscript”, Botswana under Seretse Khama’s rule is described as “a model non-racial, multiparty democracy” and “an oasis of racial tolerance and peace” (p. 363) as wars against settler rule are waged in the surrounding countries. Mbanga and Mbanga quote Julius Nyerere’s oration at Seretse’s funeral in which he describes the marriage of Seretse and Ruth as “one of the greatest love stories the world has known”, adding that “it touched the surface of the pain caused by colonialism and racial discrimination (p. 364). The “Postscript” finishes with Ruth having taken her place beside Seretse in the burial ground of the Khamas.

Foundational Fictions

Doris Sommer, in her study of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Latin American novel, *Foundational Fictions* (1991), describes classic romances in Latin America as “almost inevitably stories of star-crossed lovers who represent particular regions, races, parties, economic interests and the like. Their passion for conjugal and sexual union spills over to a sentimental readership in a move that hopes to win partisan minds along with hearts” (Sommer 1991: 5). The writers of these novels, according to Sommer, “were encouraged both by the need to fill in a history that would help to establish the legitimacy of an emerging nation and by the opportunity to direct that history toward a future ideal” (p. 7).

9. Abdi Ismail Samatar states that state institutions in Botswana were developed on two principles, skills and merit. The government employed expatriate workers while Botswana were being trained (Samatar 1999: 8).

10. This comment is a little difficult to interpret as most of southern Africa was under settler rule at this time. It may be proleptic.

Clearly the parallels between the Latin American foundational fiction and the story of Seretse and Ruth Khama are not exact. Ruth, in the beginning, was “outside” the protectorate and, although she claims her place in the nation, she does so as an individual rather than as a representative of any ethnic group. However, I would argue that *Seretse and Ruth* is a foundational fiction in as far as the marriage of Seretse and Ruth is seen as the foundation for contemporary Botswana. Mbanga and Mbanga make great claims for Ruth; they write of Seretse and Ruth: “[T]ogether they transformed his country from a poverty-stricken tribal society into the modern nation of Botswana” (Mbanga & Mbanga 2005: 9). McCall Smith, in his “Foreword”, sees the marriage as an exemplar of racial and social integration which was crucial in the formation and development of the nation:

In the face of great difficulties and opposition, Seretse and Ruth were united in a fruitful marriage which showed the world how people from different traditions might live in harmony and happiness. In many respects, their personal story, so movingly recounted in this book, is the story of the country itself, for Botswana as state has always stressed the importance of social harmony.

(McCall Smith in Mbanga & Mbanga 2005: 7)

In Sommer’s analysis of how foundational fictions work, this is the marriage of national destiny and personal passion, the “interlocking ... relationship between erotics and politics” (Sommer 1991: 43). In that other great southern African love story of the father and mother of the nation, Nelson Mandela and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, the faultlines appeared long before Mandela’s inauguration as President of South Africa in 1994. It is, therefore, easy to see why *Seretse and Ruth* is such an appealing story. From beginning to end, Ruth is seen as pivotal. In political terms, her role was, at various times, only that of catalyst, cipher or symbol. Nevertheless, she defied her own father and government in marrying Seretse and living with him in Africa. This border crossing of racial and geographical lines would seem to make her a transgressive figure. However, in Mbanga and Mbanga’s representation of her, there is frequent slippage between Ruth as a non-conformist, challenging convention and delighting in difference and Ruth as a benevolent and paternalistic moderniser, teaching hygiene to the natives. Moreover, despite the tribute to Tshekedi from the “fictional” Seretse and Ruth and their biographers, *Seretse and Ruth* presents the nationalist, tough ruler Tshekedi as a transitional figure who will, in the end, not go into the new order whereas Seretse, Ruth and their “golden children” (to use Mbanga and Mbanga’s phrase, adapted from Seretse Khama) are the future.

Mbanga and Mbanga’s own experience of a southern African cross-cultural marriage is a subtext in *Seretse and Ruth*. The settler history of Rhodesia provides a justification for this. In 1949, the Prime Minister of

Southern Rhodesia, Godfrey Huggins, wrote to Evelyn Baring, the British High Commissioner in South Africa, informing him that the installation of Seretse as chief with Ruth as his “white chieftainess-to-be” would cause problems in Southern Rhodesia: “We consider an official Native-European union in Bechuanaland would increase our difficulties here, and also add a little fuel to the flames of the fire kept burning by our, fortunately diminishing, band of anti-Native Europeans” (quoted in Williams 2006a: 69).

Edward Said argues that “texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted” ([1983]1984: 4). In Mbanga and Mbanga’s native country, Zimbabwe, the foundational fictions were based on war and the liberation struggle, not sexual desire. There is, I would argue, a national, as well as a personal, subtext in *Seretse and Ruth* and that is a history manqué of Zimbabwe. At Independence in 1980, Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party, like Seretse Khama’s BDP, had a landslide victory and subsequently announced its policy of reconciliation and integration. However, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the dominant national discourse is centred on a politics of exclusion. Mbanga and Mbanga, like four million other Zimbabweans, live outside Zimbabwe and Wilf Mbanga edits an oppositional newspaper, *The Zimbabwean*. Implicit in Mbanga and Mbanga’s text is the idea of another country, Zimbabwe, as a nation which has lost its way but which can be restored if another foundational fiction like that of Botswana – the ideal, prosperous society where different races and ethnic groups live in harmony – can be constructed.

In reality, there *is* a stark contrast between the prosperity of Botswana and the economic collapse of Zimbabwe. However, comparison between the two countries relies on the reader not probing too deeply into the “myth” of Botswana as *the* democratic African society at peace with itself. Kenneth Good describes the political system in Botswana as “authoritarian liberalism” in which the executive president has extensive powers (Good 2004: 4-5). Olufemi Vaughan refers to major divisions in Botswana society “between traditional and modern elites, between rural and urban populations, between a growing professional class and the masses of local people” (Vaughan 2003: 172). Botswana is ruled by an urban elite, including Vice-President Ian Khama, which is part of the legacy of Seretse Khama. Moreover, Botswana’s relocation of the San people in the mid-1990s bears some comparison to the Zimbabwean government’s urban clearances, Operation Murambatsvina in 2005.

It is tempting to see Tshekedi, at least in the period when he opposed Seretse and Ruth’s marriage, as a proto-Mugabe, stubbornly adhering to tradition and autocratic rule. However, the different historical trajectories, with one country diplomatically negotiating the transition from protectorate to independence with the British and the other fighting a war of liberation

against a settler regime, cannot be rendered immaterial even when history is fictionalised. The young Ruth is not bothered by Seretse's blackness and Tshekedi finally comes to the conclusion that "there's no such thing as race", but race cannot be eradicated from the story of Zimbabwe.

It may be difficult to see how a love story, with its origins in a colonial encounter, can offer a commentary on contemporary Zimbabwe, but foundational fictions "hypostatize desire as truth and then slide easily between them ... they know themselves to be performing and seducing" (Sommer 1991: 45). The story of Seretse and Ruth Khama is a foundational fiction that wins the hearts and minds of sentimental readers.¹¹ If the dream of harmony and prosperity that Zimbabwean independence promised has now turned into a nightmare, then a search for a new "originary" moment signifies the desire for a new nation.

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11. I use the term "sentimental reader" here in the sense that Sommer uses it, drawing on eighteenth-century notions of sensibility, sympathy and compassion.

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