# Mapping Africa in the English Speaking World

# Mapping Africa in the English Speaking World: Issues in Language and Literature

Edited by

Kemmonye Collete Monaka, Owen S Seda,
Sibonile Edith Ellece and John McAllister

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

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This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library



ISBN (10): 1-4438-2566-2, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2566-5

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# PREFACE

*Mapping Africa in the English Speaking World* is a collection of peer reviewed papers which were presented at the fifth international conference of the Department of English at the University of Botswana.

Of all the legacies of colonialism, the English language has remained the most visible in Anglophone Africa, and continues to captivate language policy makers in the continent decades after the end of direct colonialism. English remains an official language in almost all African countries that came out of British colonialism. This book addresses the advent of English in Africa and the consequences of this in the continent, and contributes to better understanding of the image(s) of Africa in the English-speaking world. It touches on issues of African literatures in English, writings of and on Africa and issues of language choice and representation, film adaptations of novels on Africa, language policy, language diglossia, the construction of identities, relations between gender and language, inter-relations between African languages and English, among other issues.

We hope that the book will be a source of information on English in Africa and contribute to wider knowledge of the role and future of English in Africa and the African Diaspora.

The book is divided into four parts organized thematically: Literature; Theatre, Drama and Film; Language Policy, Language Diglossia in Africa and African Indigenous Languages and Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis. Part I, on "Literature" has six chapters, of which chapters one to three are based on the popular *No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*, an eleven novel series based on Botswana and written by the Zimbabwean-born Scottish fiction writer Alexander McCall Smith. In Chapter One, '"Rules for Being Good": Exoticism and Nostalgia in Alexander McCall Smith's Botswana Novels', John McAllister argues that in the No. 1 Ladies' detective novels, McCall Smith depicts, through nostalgia and praise, a typical Western image of Africa as an exotic, not so unfamiliar Other which is nevertheless also charming. He says that in Western depiction of the continent there is always a certain duality about the exotic; the exoticized other is always partly strange and partly familiar, the two sides of Africa that make her attractive to the Western audience. McAllister writes that nostalgia and the exotic, taken together, are what hold the key

both to the meaning of the novels and to their interesting place in the history of Western representations of Africa.

In Chapter Two, "The *No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency*: Africa by the West and for the West," Neil Graves argues that despite the fact that the novels and their subsequent TV screening in the UK and USA received widespread positive praise for their romanticised portrayal of southern African terrain and natural environment, society and culture, the novels (and the film) are an escapist Western fantasy of Africa in general and of Botswana in particular. He argues that both the novel series and their TV screening depict a stereotypical Western image of Africa which is, paradoxically, opposite to but just as preposterous as the one established by the Western media, where the monolithically negative Western news and film paradigm have been replaced with an Edenic world of innocence which, albeit occasionally threatened, remains essentially untainted and uncorrupted. This is achieved through a three-stage process of engagement, disarmament and dismissal, leaving behind a saccharine utopian Western fantasy of primitive primordial Africa.

In Chapter Three, "Celebrating Human Life and Endeavour: Self, Gender and Community in Alexander McCall Smith's *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*," Irene Gilsenan Nordin addresses the themes of self, gender and community, and the communicative ethical aspects of the leading character, Mma Ramotswe's actions, in light of what the philosopher Seyla Benhabib calls "situating the self," where focus is placed on the way in which selfhood and identity are developed in the context of a concrete human community. Gilsenan Nordin argues that the narrative of Mma Ramotswe's life, as portrayed by McCall Smith, with its emphasis on empathy, tolerance and humanity, and engagement with community, shows the development of this character's sense of selfhood, agency and autonomy. McCall Smith's portrayal of Mma Ramotswe shows how this character becomes the initiator of her unique life-story, and the complete author of a meaningful tale that is situated within the cultural codes of her society and her community.

In Chapter Four, "The Language of Anguish in Dambudzo Marechera's Fiction," Tiro Sebina reflects on Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera's treatment of the issue of language conflict. He argues that Marechera treats language as thematic matter and as literary technique which is firmly anchored as a site of struggle—a terrain of contestation—in a colonial situation. Sebina argues that Marechera has a rather complicated relationship with English: he both masterfully gains competence it in while at the same time attempts to counteract its inherent racism. The chapter argues that as a result of this Marechera believes that the English language

has to be subverted and panel-beaten in order to make it articulate the anguish and the abjectness of the colonised people.

In Chapter Five, "Book Keeping in Africa," Annie Gagiano is concerned with the present and lasting value as well as the use of imaginative representations of aspects and areas of the African continent. The chapter points to the way books, as lasting records, preserve insights and experiences that might otherwise be lost. Gagiano argues that writers put the truths, insights and visions that have been given into their keeping into words and into books in order to share them with the readership. The chapter draws extensively on the works of writers from various parts of the African continent to drive home the point that African novels of and on Africa contribute to the imaginative inheritance of all Africans and constitute a proud heritage and an enrichment of world thought and literature to be celebrated and shared with others.

In Chapter Six, '"The Great Wall of China" as an Allegory of Globalization,' Peter Wamulungwe Mwikisa posits and discusses an uncanny resemblance between the situation of the narrator in Franz Kafka's "The Great Wall of China," reflecting on the whys and wherefores of the wall on the one hand and that of the modern African, on the other, as he or she may be imagined, confronting the phenomenon of globalization. Mwikisa argues that it is likely that what most people in the world generally accept as truths about globalization, the basic assumptions about who controls it, who benefits from it, who is responsible and who is harmed by its baleful aspects, are imaginary accounts which they feel the necessity to believe in only because they guarantee a sense of living in a world which makes sense. Seen from an African perspective the circuit of goods and information with which the term globalization is associated is however suspicious for it is "The creation of consumerist mentalities and the shackling of those mentalities to a specifically U.S form of capitalism by mass culture."

Part II, on "Theatre, Drama and Film" has three chapters, Seven to Nine. In Chapter Seven, "Modernist Trends and Arrested Development in Dambudzo Marechera's Drama," Owen Seda focuses on the works of Dambudzo Marechera, and analyzes modernist influences in selected plays by the author. The chapter seeks to demonstrate images of arrested development in the plays and how the modernist experience has been characterized by fragmentation and a pervasive sense of alienation both at the individual level and at the social level.

In Chapter Eight, '"*Ndenglishing* and *Shonglishing* the Stage." Reconceptualising and Reinterpreting Bilingualism and Interlingualism in Zimbabwean Theatre,' Nehemiah Chivandikwa re-examines monolingualism,

bilingualism and multilingualism in Zimbabwean performance or dramatic texts in English as a foreign language in post-colonial Zimbabwe. He concludes that a full appreciation of these factors in a multilingual society such as Zimbabwe should go beyond the politics of imperial hegemony, and that the use of the English language in Zimbabwe theatre has cultural, political, contextual, aesthetic, pedagogical and performative dimensions and implications which need to be taken into consideration. The chapter further argues that the choice of language for Zimbabwean theatre must be determined by the abilities of the playwrights, the skill of the performers, audience expectations and linguistic competencies, among other things.

In Chapter Nine, "Authenticity versus Commerce: Representing Botswana in the *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*," Connie Rapoo drives home points raised by John McAllister and Neil Graves in Chapters One and Two above, respectively. She interrogates notions of linguistic and cultural authenticity, casting conventions, and gender performativity in the TV adaptations of the Agency novels. Rapoo argues that the film is virtually bereft of anything that is characteristic of Botswana's "authentic" culture, history, and values, and basically perpetuates Euro-American imaginations of African culture as the exotic, romantic Other, and sells to the target group(s)—the Western audience, precisely because of this.

Part III, on "Language Policy and Language Diglossia in Africa and African Indigenous Languages," has six chapters; Ten through Fifteen. In Chapter Ten, "The Burden of English in Africa: From Colonialism to Neo-Colonialism," Kwesi Kwaa Prah argues that the now rhetoric arguments which have been raised against the development of African languages are limited in logic and are based on easily refutable fallacies. Prah writes that implicit within such arguments is a cultural inferiority complex against African languages *vis-a-vis* western languages; a belief that Africa is a Tower of Babel which exhibits much linguistic diversity that make it impossible for collaboration on or sharing of languages; a belief that if at all African languages could be incorporated into the education system, this could be done only in the formative years of schooling, etc. Drawing examples of linguistic and cultural imperialism from Afro-Arab borderlands, the Romanov Russian imperialism of the nineteenth century, the case of Spanish in the Americas, the European imperial domination of most of Africa, Asia and the Americas, among others, the chapter demonstrates that Africa needs to and can move forward with her own languages and on her own cultural steam, and that to do this, she must lay down once and for all the burden of English.

In Chapter Eleven, "Whose Language? Whose Literature? Which Africa? Old Paradigms, New Realities in the African Language and

Literature Debate," Katwiwa Mule questions the foundational categories of the debate on whether or not literature which is not written in African languages qualifies to be called African; and whether African writers who use European languages can play meaningful roles in the African cause for decolonization. Mule argues that this debate is driven by the following ideological ideals: to understand and transcend the depressing postcolonial condition of the majority of Africans; to find a public role for the writer; to articulate a liberating discourse in a language that is accessible to the public; and to project a future that is not imprisoned within the facile claims of colonial modernity. The chapter concludes that grounding oneself in contemporary African realities is grounding oneself in both past and present; and calls for a re-engagement with the notion of African-language literatures, linguistic identities, and methodological frameworks appropriate for the study of African literatures.

In Chapter Twelve, "From a Language of National Unity to the Language of Disempowerment and Cultural Alienation: The case of English and Zambian Languages in Postcolonial Zambia," Mildred Wakumelo Nkolola considers the effects of English as the official language in Zambia and the consequences of the recognition of some local languages for use in the media and education in Zambia. The chapter argues that English has disempowered sections of the Zambian population and made it virtually impossible for them to participate meaningfully in the affairs of the country. English has rather created a "language divide" between the social classes that have facility in it and those that do not. In addition, it has created a culturally alienated generation of Zambians who speak it as their first language—as their mother tongue, despite the fact that it is a language whose society they do not belong to. Also, the recognition of some of the indigenous languages has resulted in the endangerment of the other local languages which now compete at two fronts; they compete with English and with the officially recognised local languages.

In Chapter Thirteen, "The Case for the Use of Indigenous Languages in the Legal system in Botswana," Alfred Matiki discusses the shortcomings of delivering justice through a language in which the plaintiffs and defendants lack competence, and argues that the situation as it currently exists effectively means that the indigenous citizenry have little or no legal access because of language barriers. Matiki argues that this is cause for the consideration of other languages in the judicial system of the country, and says that, initially, Setswana as the national *lingua franca* could be introduced in the legal system as most presiding officers, plaintiffs and

defendants would most likely be competent in it. Other languages could be phased in with time.

In Chapter Fourteen, "English: A Disempowering Language for Khoe Learners in Botswana," Eureka Mokibelo discusses how English systematically disempowers Khoe learners in Botswana, and explores some of the implications of this disempowerment. Basing her study on empirical research on 500 Khoe students at primary school level and on a tracer study on some of these students at junior secondary school, her findings reveal that Khoe learners fairs dismally in learning English in the education system of Botswana. The chapter recommends a multicultural curriculum that is sensitive to the needs of, among others, the Khoe learners.

In Chapter Fifteen, "Sesotho-English Diglossia in Lesotho: The Question of Language Choice," Thekiso Khati examines bilingual-diglossic use of Sesotho and English in Lesotho, and observes that English is used for social prestigious functions and Sesotho performs less prestigious social functions. The chapter recommends that concerted language planning efforts must be made to address the functional imbalance between the two languages. Such efforts could include, among other things, the conscious linguistic development of Sesotho to expand its communicative capacity, and other corpus planning activities should be pursued with a view to rendering Sesotho linguistically developed, to, as it were, "leak" into functions that are currently the prerogative of English.

Part IV, on Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis, has four chapters, Sixteen to Nineteen. In Chapter Sixteen, "The Representation of Social Actors in a Media Debate: Negotiating Cultural Identities," Sibonile Ellece studies a televised debate on the Marriage Power Bill to examine the representation of social actors through language, the linguistic strategies used to represent social actors in the language of the debate as well as identities constructed by the participants. The Marriage Power Bill sought to rectify the imbalance of power relations between men and women in marriage, and the panellists were discussing the bill after it was enacted into law on December 1st 2004. She argues that opponents of law reforms depict social actors strategically to construct an exclusive Tswana identity and to perpetuate and legitimize traditional discourses of "male dominance" and "female subordination" in the Tswana marriage in particular and Tswana culture in general.

In Chapter Seventeen, "Sexism and the English Translation of Igbo Proverbs in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," Arua Eke Arua and Yisa Kehinde Yusuf interrogate the depiction of women through proverbs in Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart*. They observe that although many of

the Igbo proverbs rendered English in *TFA* are not gendered, those that are were masculinised in the translation despite the fact that in their original Igbo form they were gender neutral. Arua and Yusuf also note that masculinisation was done even to gender neutral pronouns and words; in the personification of animals, birds and reptiles; and in the restriction of the referents of the framing devices. They conclude that Achebe's translations of the Igbo proverbs in *TFA* contribute greatly to the invisibility and silencing of women in the novel.

In Chapter Eighteen, "The Symbiosis of Two Languages: The Case of English and Setswana," Modupe Moyosore Alimi investigates the influence of English on the Setswana lexicon by way of examining the pattern of the distribution of adopted English words in Setswana, the characteristics of the words adopted into the Setswana lexicon and factors that necessitate the adoption (and adaptation) of English words in Setswana. Alimi observes that Setswana has influenced Botswana English though borrowing and semantic modification, but has also equally borrowed from the English language. The chapter comes to the conclusion that the co-existence of the two languages in Botswana over a long period of time has encouraged a significant amount of lexical cross pollination. Thus, the relationship between the two languages can be described as symbiotic.

Concluding the book in Chapter Nineteen, "Gendered Identities in the Use of English Apologies by Basotho Youth," Konosoang Sobane examines the communicative patterns of Basotho youths to find out how they manage and mitigate face threatening acts through apologies and whether there are any differences in the way males and females use apologies. Differences between the sexes are observed, and attributed to the different socialization of the two sexes in the society and within one and the same culture.

# PART I

# LITERATURE

# CHAPTER ONE

# "RULES FOR BEING GOOD": EXOTICISM AND NOSTALGIA IN ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH'S BOTSWANA NOVELS

JOHN MCALLISTER

Alexander McCall Smith's No. 1 Ladies' detective novels have been one of the most remarkable book publishing success stories of the past decade. In an industry that has been stagnating since the end of the 90s, and where fiction lists in particular have been struggling (Stockbridge 2008; Policastro 2008), the No. 1 Ladies Detective series has sold more than 15 million copies, been turned into a popular series of made-for-TV movies, given a boost to the Botswana tourism industry in a global recession, and even created an unlikely new market overseas for Precious Ramotswe's favourite beverage (Dawley 2008).

The popular success of the novels may seem all the more remarkable considering they contain no onstage violence, little that is sensational in any ordinary sense of the word, and are completely free of sex scenes. Yet it is precisely this difference from the mainstream of contemporary popular fiction that is their key attraction. They appeal to a conservative and nostalgic taste for "positive" stories of "real" people and, by implication, for a kinder, simpler world, as hundreds of enthusiastic Amazon readers' reviews testify[1] a review posted on May 2, 2009 is typical:

> …the slower, simpler lifestyle [of McCall Smith's Botswana] feels refreshing compared to our fast-paced mania of commuting, texting, twittering, and too much television. I feel at home and connected to the [characters]…, and it makes me hopeful that yes, we humans can share something special together when we don't let technology get in the way of meeting face-to-face (Amazon 2009).

The idyllic African setting of the No 1 Ladies' Detective novels, another unlikely ingredient of a bestseller in the West, is a vital part of this

nostalgic appeal. A second thread that runs through many of the readers' reviews is praise for McCall Smith's unusually positive depiction of Africa. As an Amazon review posted on April 25, 2009 briskly puts it, the novels provide a "glimpse … of African culture apart from [the] refugee camps we see on television." As I hope to show in this chapter, the two threads—nostalgia for a simpler, gentler past and praise for an alternative, favourable depiction of Africa—are closely related. Taken together they hold the key both to the meaning of the novels and to their interesting place in the history of Western representations of Africa.

There are two stubborn myths about the West's image of Africa: first, that it is one of unrelieved violence and misery; second, that the rare departures from this gloomy paradigm count as progressive simply by virtue of being more positive. McCall Smith himself appears to buy into these simplifications. In the preface to the 2005 hardback reissue of *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*, he complains about Africa's "many outside chroniclers who dwell only on the negative and difficult" and declares that the other side of Africa—"The laughter. The kindness. The beauty—deserve to be spoken about," as if they never were (McCall Smith 2005:viii-ix). In fact, such positive attributes, and many others, have long been part of the Western depiction of Africa. Africanist discourse in the West is a diverse body of texts, as full of contradictions as the West's discourse of itself, which it mirrors. Insofar as the West has defined itself in relation to "others," those others, including Africa, have been used to confirm the West's sense of virtue and superiority but also its not infrequent self-doubts and even self-loathings. The image of "darkest Africa" was an important buttress of the Victorian idea of progress and sense of mission—and continues in barely disguised forms, especially in modern mass journalism, to help people in the West feel better about themselves. However, Africa has also been used, even by the Victorians, to critique life at home. Both dissidents like Mary Kingsley, with an interest in puncturing Western *amour-propre*, and reactionaries like Stanley, confident of Western superiority but uncomfortable with some of the social and political aspects of modernity, have found "positive" counter-examples in Africa.

The one persistent thread that runs through the West's representations of Africa is *difference*, not "darkness." Starting with the ancient Greek saying referred to by Aristotle that there is always something new out of Africa, it has been the exotic, not the negative, with which Africa has consistently been associated in the Western mind. Yet there is a necessary paradox at the heart of exoticism. The exotic is only meaningful in relation

to a sense of home, and to create something knowable out of the other, exoticism must first translate the other into the terms of the same:

> An exoticist perspective constitutes "the other" as the domesticated and known other, positing the lure of difference while assimilating its object to the circuits of [metropolitan] consumption. It constructs the other … from the point of view of the hegemonic Same, the known, the familiar (Postcolonial Studies Research Network 2009:para. 2).

What Paul Theroux calls exoticism's "charm of the unfamiliar" (Theroux 1986:146) therefore is never totally unfamiliar. Nor does it even need to be charming in the conventional sense. When the explorer Henry Stanley uses the tropes of medieval quest narrative to demonize African life in *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) and *In Darkest Africa* (1890), he is exoticizing African otherness by incorporating it into the European typology of quest romance, with the explorer in the role of the questing hero and Africa as the monstrous other that tests and validates European virtue. Thus there is always a certain duality about the exotic; the exoticized other is always partly strange and partly familiar, and it is this tension between the alien and the known that makes exotica attractive.

However there is a further sense in which exoticism plays a double game. Not only does it domesticate the other, at the bottom it is not even *about* the other. Exoticism engages in a kind of deception; the "lure of difference" that Graham Huggan (2001) identifies as the essential attraction of exotica is a lure not just in the sense of something that creates desire but also in the sense of a trick or illusion. Exoticism purports to be an exploration of otherness but in fact uses exotic characters and locales to mask the fact that its main concern is *here*, not there. This move maintains what the Postcolonial Studies Research Network (2000:para. 3) calls "the allure of exotic otherness" while using otherness as a vehicle to explore familiar issues in metropolitan discourse. Often these issues are highly contested ones that have already been debated to the point of exhaustion at home. The exotic displacement has the effect of refreshing the debate by dressing it up in native costume. This, I would argue, is the main source of the unlikely success of McCall Smith's slow-moving tales of an unassuming female detective in an out-of-the way corner of Africa. The No. 1 Ladies' Detective novels present themselves as celebrations of exotic Africa but are actually elegies for a (supposed) *Western* past.

From the beginning of the Age of Exploration, many Western travellers and writers have found in the "developing world" (to use the modern euphemism for the Enlightenment's "primitive peoples" and the Victorians' "savage tribes") an image of their own societies' imagined lost

innocence. This image is the basis for the "positive" current in Western Africanist discourse and still flourishes in, for example, the depictions that often decorate accounts of development projects of simple, joyful Africans getting on with life despite all their hardships.

The pastoral—which I use loosely here in the broad sense of any representation based on idealizing the simple, harmonious rural life—has been an exoticizing discourse ever since it lost its ancient contact with "the real social conditions of country life," as Raymond Williams (1973:16). argues happened during the Renaissance The site of exoticized pastoral, whether Arcadia in the Golden Age or an idyllic country estate like Jonson's Penshurst, is always elsewhere and idealized, yet deeply familiar. Thus, like exoticism, it depends for its appeal on a doubleness that creates a particular aesthetic currency, the nostalgic longing, simultaneously sincere and patronizing, for a simpler, more natural world we have lost. When the industrializing, urbanizing European empires encountered what they saw as simpler societies in America, Africa, and Asia, it was natural for them to interpret those societies using some of the ready-to-hand tropes of the familiar pastoral tradition. The particular slant on pastoral adopted by European travellers in exotic lands depended mainly on trends at home. Thus, in the nineteenth century, a sensual, licentious exoticism, projected most famously in the paintings of Gauguin, offered a vicarious escape from Victorian sexual constraints. Since many Victorians saw "free love" as both tempting and repulsive, both liberating and dangerous, this type of pastoral exoticism is not inconsistent with the image of *darkest Africa*, and a thread of sexualized pastoral exoticism runs through many of the classic late-century explorers' tales that established the Dark Continent stereotype.

Another important type of African pastoral stresses order and simplicity rather than sensuality, offering an escape from the complexities and ambiguities of modernity. Despite their faith in progress, the Victorians had plenty of anxieties about modernity, and this type of pastoral is also an important element in much nineteenth-century Africana. As social and cultural fragmentation has intensified in the West, the nostalgic appeal of the image of a simple, organic rural society has intensified too. This vein of pastoral exotica constructs the other as an instance of an "unspoiled" simplicity from which modernity has excluded the West but that is still available vicariously in representations of the exotic locale, whether through narratives, images, or even handicrafts. In Africanist discourse, the canonical example is *Out of Africa*, Karen Blixen's memoir of her career as a coffee planter in early colonial Kenya. As the cover blurb of the Penguin Classics edition puts it, *Out of Africa* "portrays a way of life

that has disappeared forever." That lost way of life is not simply, nor even mainly, the neo-feudal Kenyan colonial system but a *domestic* ideal of "an earlier England, a world which no longer existed" (Blixen 1937:184), but that White settlers, as Blixen depicts them, were succeeding in recreating in exotic East Africa.

Despite McCall Smith's provocative homage to Blixen in the opening sentence of *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*, the pastoral exoticism of his novels is quite different from the feudal mystique of Blixen's African idyll. To his credit, McCall Smith repeatedly stresses the injustices of the colonial past, the pride Batswana take in their independence, and the egalitarian ideals of post-colonial Botswana society. Despite being used by marketers to promote safari tourism, with its obvious links to colonial nostalgia, the No. 1 Ladies' Detective novels have nothing to do with the wave of "exotic colonial chic" (Lewis 2000:para. 3) that followed the 1991 film adaptation of *Out of Africa* and that is still a very strong element in the appeal of Africa as a tourist destination.

But, like Blixen's, McCall Smith's version of pastoral is as much about life in another time as in another place (Knipp 1990). Like Blixen, he is not just looking outward to Africa for a stability and clarity that cannot be found at home, but also backward to home in an earlier time. McCall Smith's idealized past is not the Middle Ages of Blixen's aristocratic fantasy but the pre-postmodern mid-twentieth century. The governing virtues of Precious Ramotswe's world—neighbourliness, courtesy, trust, family loyalty, and individual courage—are the virtues of an idealized, Capra-esque, mid-twentieth century small-town Britain or America. Whether or not the "postmodern turn" (Hassan 1987; Best and Kellner 1997) of the 1960s really swept away a "scene where you had rules for the game and some solid stakes that everyone could rely on" (Baudrillard and Gane 1993:100), the mid-century is a time that many people in the Anglo-American market for these novels, especially if they are of a certain age (not coincidentally, McCall Smith's own), associate nostalgically with the same simple and unambiguous values that Precious Ramotswe upholds.

I am not arguing that McCall Smith consciously identifies Precious Ramotswe's Botswana with an earlier time in another place. Indeed the No. 1 Ladies' Detective novels are very carefully situated in their own time and place; they contain references to historical events that enable readers to identify the period fairly precisely—it is 1993 when Precious Ramotswe opens her detective agency at the foot of Kgale Hill—and their slightly fussy circumstantial realism, including the copious use of real (or near-real) place names, successfully creates an impression of geographical and cultural concreteness, as I know from the experience of living on

Zebra Way in Gaborone and sometimes seeing groups of tourists combing the street in search of Precious Ramotswe's house on Zebra *Drive*.

It is the ideology behind this "effect of the real" (Pratt 1992:221) that creates the pastoral idyll and connects readers in the West to myths about their own recent past. With a couple of important exceptions, this ideology revolves around three main ideas: that duty is more important than choice, that authority should be trusted (at least in Botswana), and that there are simple, stable "rules for being good" (McCall Smith 1998:36) that are adequate for solving most human problems. These are also the ideas that theologian James Wall, discussing Alan Ehrenhalt's neo-conservative elegy *The Lost City: The Forgotten Virtues of Community in America* (1995), identifies with the "three major shifts in attitude" that swept away the supposedly stable world Ehrenhalt eulogizes (Wall 1995:947). Wall cites the belief in total freedom of choice, a reflexive hostility to authority, and the view that "sin is a social, not a personal, matter" as the three enemies of his idyllic "lost world of the 1950s" (Wall 1995:947). Precious Ramotswe would put the same three things at the top of her list of the enemies of what she refers to as the "old Botswana morality" (McCall Smith 2000:16). She regularly deplores the notion that people should be able to just "walk out" (McCall Smith 2002:120) on their duties, especially to family. She insists that the state in Botswana has always "conducted itself with complete integrity" (McCall Smith 2002:14) and ascribes Botswana's alleged freedom from corruption to the fact that the founding president "made it clear … there was to be no taking or giving of bribes, …. [and that] everyone … listened to him and obeyed …" (McCall Smith 2002:14). And as the bedrock of the traditional ideology that sustains Mma Ramotswe's life and Botswana's idyllic traditional culture is the idea of an absolute set of "rules for being good":

> Mma Ramotswe knew that there was a great deal of debate about morality, but in her view it was quite simple. In the first place, there was the old Botswana morality, which was simply right. If a person stuck to this, then he would be doing the right thing and need not worry about it. There were other moralities, of course; there were the Ten Commandments, which she had learnt by heart at Sunday School …; these were also right in the same absolute way. These codes of morality were like the Botswana Penal Code; they had to be obeyed to the letter …. Moral codes were not designed to be selective, nor indeed were they designed to be questioned (McCall Smith 2001:75).

The principles of duty, authority, and universal moral norms are of course ideals, and even in Botswana things are not as simple as that or

Precious Ramotswe would have nothing to detect. Mma Ramotswe and the author readily acknowledge that the "old Botswana morality" is under threat from modernity, and so there is an undertow of anxiety in the novels about the viability of the old ideals. However, this anxiety only strengthens the connection between the two pastoral idylls: that of 1990s Botswana and that of 1950s small-town life in the West. In particular the young people who regularly distress Mma Ramotswe with their bad manners and rebelliousness recall a key element in the West's narrative of how its own age of innocence was lost. The rude youngsters who upset Mma Ramotswe are the modern Botswana equivalent of the sullen young "rebels without a cause" of 1950s America and Britain. As in 1950s Anglo-American culture, the rebellious young in Mma Ramotswe's Botswana are agents of larger forces—the individualism, insubordination, and moral relativism of (Western) modernity—and create a subtle but powerful link between modern Botswana and the (recent) past of the West.

There are other symbols in the novels that work in the same way. The description of Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni's house in *Tears of the Giraffe* is one example:

> It was a large house by modern standards, built in a day when builders had no reason to worry about space. There was the whole of Africa in those days, most of it unused, and nobody bothered to save space. Now it was different, and people had begun to worry about cities and how they gobbled up the bush … (McCall Smith 2000:7).

Again, for readers in the West, especially those that grew up in the 1950s and early 1960s when the term *urban sprawl* first began to be widely heard, this description conceals a parallel between what is starting to happen in the idyllic Botswana of the novels and what has already happened at home. Other signs of the times that Mma Ramotswe deplores—people running away from their responsibilities "just like that!" (McCall Smith 2002:120), spouses walking out on partners they are tired of, children abandoning aged parents they are bored with, immodest displays of wealth, women dressing in "cheap artificial fibres" (McCall Smith 2000:58)—all underscore the coded message that Precious Ramotswe's Botswana is in danger of undergoing the same dismal transformation that the societies of the novels' Western admirers underwent a generation or two before.

I am not suggesting that McCall Smith's Botswana is merely an allegory. It is rendered much too concretely and affectionately for that. However, for all its exotic and particular charm, it remains a vehicle for highly symbolic moral fables in which complexity and ambiguity have to

be suppressed in favour of an almost ceremonial endorsement of traditional morality. As in other detective novels belonging to what is known, appropriately, as the 'cozy mystery' genre, the No. 1 Ladies' Detective novels present an ordered community with shared and self-consciously old-fashioned values into which crime intrudes because one or more people fail to live by those values. As in the archetype of the genre, Agatha Christie's country-house mysteries, the enemies of the community's values have to be detected and exposed in order for stability to be restored.[2] Unlike the typical cozy mystery, however, no one in McCall Smith's novels is really hurt, and the wrongdoers are usually forgiven and reintegrated into the community rather than expelled from it. This gentleness has to do with the pastoralism of McCall Smith's version of exotica. Christie's mysteries are, in part at least, satires on a decadent ruling class; McCall Smith's are reflections of an idealized world that has been lost. The duality of the exotic—using the other to lament a lost ideal at home but also to present that ideal as still workable, somewhere else, in the present—requires the suppression of contradictions.

But it also cannot work convincingly if the contradictions are completely trivialized. One result of this dilemma is that, when McCall Smith does deal with darker material, the result can feel oddly like the *darkest Africa* stereotype he emphatically distances himself from in the 2005 preface to *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*. A glaring example is his treatment of ritual murder in this first novel. The story of the missing boy is spun out over almost the entire length of the novel, as if the author, like his characters, cannot easily bring himself to face what Mma Ramotswe acknowledges as a "subject that one did not talk about," the "great taboo," and "the one thing we Africans are most ashamed of" (McCall Smith 1998:90). Indeed, this sub-plot story threatens to expose the contradictions at the heart of the whole moral argument of the novels, Precious Ramotswe's vision of the "old Botswana morality," for, as she recognizes when faced with the probable reason for the boy's disappearance:

> Right there, in Botswana, in the late twentieth century, under that proud flag, in the midst of all that made Botswana a modern country, this thing had happened, this heart of darkness that thumped out like a drum (McCall Smith 1998:91).

This is the closest any of the novels come to acknowledging the deep and probably unresolvable contradictions of its idealization of tradition and its ambivalent attitude towards modernity. The contradictions are temporarily resolved, or at least elided, by locating the "witch-doctor" outside the community in the "great dry interior" and "utter loneliness of a place

without people" (McCall Smith 1998:123), but only by sending Precious Ramotswe on a disturbingly Conradian journey into the heart of darkness, where she has to face up to "the merciless Africa", not the "comforting land she had grown up with" (McCall Smith 1998:223).

The question of how this merciless Africa relates to, or can conceivably be reconciled with, the comforting world of the rest of the novels is not addressed, except through the emotionally moving (handled particularly well by the Minghella film, not surprisingly) but philosophically unconvincing rescue and return of the miraculously unharmed boy. McCall Smith never again attempts such an ambitious treatment of evil, and the following novels in the series are both less interesting and more exotically charming, in both the senses that I have discussed, for that reason.

## Notes

[1] As of 7 September 2009, there were 436 reviews of *The No I Ladies Detective Agency* on Amazon. Overwhelmingly favourable, they are replete with references to "good people," "common sense", the "simple" or "old-fashioned" Botswana lifestyle and descriptors such as "timeless," "gentle," "feel-good," "charming,", "heartwarming," and "homey." http://www.amazon.com/No-Ladies-Detective-Agency-Book/product-reviews/1400034779/ eef=cm_cr_dp_all_helpful?ie=UTF8&coliid=&showViewpoints=1&colid=&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending

[2] I owe these insights to email discussions with Dr Jana Davis, an expert in detective fiction at Langara College, Vancouver, Canada.

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# CHAPTER TWO

# *THE NO.1 LADIES' DETECTIVE AGENCY*: AFRICA BY THE WEST AND FOR THE WEST

NEIL GRAVES

Botswana specifically, but Africa in general, received considerable positive exposure in the USA with the release of the first TV instalment of Alexander McCall Smith's highly successful detective novel series *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* on 29 March, 2009. It premiered on the highly popular HBO network in America, a station which over the last few years had generated huge commercial success and popular ratings with shows such as *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under* and *Deadwood*, deriving its appeal and generating its fame primarily by its verisimilitude and unabashed presentation of shocking realism. In the United Kingdom the same *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* TV series had been released a year earlier in 2008 following the screening of the TV film directed by the late and highly decorated Anthony Minghella (*The English Patient*) and produced by Sydney Pollack (*Out of Africa*), contributing to the considerable acclaim which the novel series had attained in the West. Both the TV show and the book series have been widely praised for their light-hearted easy-going entertainment value and romanticised portrayal of southern African terrain and natural environment, society and culture. However, the series has also been lauded by the Western media as a landmark for cultural and racial profiling on American television, being the first series set in Africa with an exclusively black African (and African-American) cast. Accordingly *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* engages in a far more fraught debate concerning the representation of colour in the United States, the relationship between African and African-American culture, and the Western—predominantly white—perception of black African society.

Critical reviews of the TV series on both sides of the Atlantic have been overwhelmingly positive; almost universally it is described as a "feel-good movie … life-affirming and luminous …beautiful, charming,

warm, funny and endearing" (Petrie 2009); pure entertainment suitable for relaxation on a Sunday evening, the time at which it is aired in both the USA and UK. Rick Porter writes a typical review for an American TV magazine: 'Sweet' is definitely one of the words I'd use to describe it. Captivating and charming too. Lovely to look at and full of life, it's one of the best new series this season" (Porter 2009). British and American reviewers have repeatedly praised the African-American Jill Scott in the lead role as Precious Ramotswe, raved about the authenticity of the locally filmed setting and delighted in the exuberant vibrancy of the characterisation and emotional appeal of the show. Criticism has been limited to occasional complaints about an overly slow-moving plot and failure to depict Mma Ramotswe performing the functions of a convincing detective. Notwithstanding these minor points, Western reviews have been overwhelmingly euphoric.

Nevertheless, although lauded primarily for its entertainment value, there will always be submerged political agendas in the depiction of "black" Africa for a racially sensitive Western public. Joshua Alston opened his review of the show for *Newsweek* magazine the day after its debut in March 2009 by contrasting it with more typical depictions of Africa:

> In "Detective agency," Africa never looked so good. The Africa in the new television series *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* isn't the one we're accustomed to seeing. There are no wailing babies with swollen bellies, no violent political uprisings and nary a hemorrhagic fever to be found.… "Agency"… is a feel-good series set in a place we're used to feeling bad about (Alston 2009:56).

Constantly recognised in reviews of this entertaining and light-hearted show is the stark contrast to more typical "negative" Western representations of Africa in both the news and entertainment media. Seeing the Africa of *Detective Agency* looking relatively prosperous, happy, self-reliant and content makes a Western audience feel good about itself, which is a welcome relief for most Westerners from the moral and economic guilt experienced while watching endemic footage of a starving, war-torn, disease-ridden and destitute Africa. Entertainment is what McCall Smith's product is primarily applauded for, but the political undertones of a representation of Africa to a Western audience are inescapable.

So much for Western entertainment critics, but what does the "educated" American public think of the TV adaptation of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*? This semester I taught 40 first-year undergraduate students in two English composition classes at Monmouth University in

New Jersey, USA, and assigned them a research project to investigate the portrayal of Africa in the Western media. The question they were asked was whether the Western fictional or non-fictional media depicted a more truthful picture of Africa. While the student results were evenly divided between news or entertainment portrayals as being more faithfully representative of "true" Africa, what was more revealing were some of the questions asked and some of the assumptions proffered by these students. Endemic in student papers was the idea that Africa was a single country, with a homogeneous culture, and was uniformly destitute and politically unstable; extreme examples included using phrases such as "starving, disease-ridden, ignorant savages" as a synonym for "Africans." After watching one episode of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, one student asked me in all seriousness whether it was actually true that people drove cars in Africa! Most considered the TV show to be boring and the plot nondescript and too slow, but a welcome relief to stereotypical images of Africa and Africans in daily news stories which were aimed primarily at creating sympathy in the general public in order to encourage financial donations by "rich" America to "poor" Africa.

This American classroom project hence engaged students, albeit superficially, with the "real" Africa debate, which has been re-energised in the last year by the multiple Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*. Depicting a destitute and uneducated male escaping from the urban slums of India and rescuing his childhood sweetheart from the clutches of a malicious and wealthy gangster, all facilitated by winning the national lottery, *Slumdog Millionaire* posits a fairy-tale solution to Indian poverty for which it has been roundly criticised. The question of the moral accountability of art is as old as the cave paintings and oral balladry of primitive society, but remains pertinent today. While *Slumdog Millionaire* is accused of escapist fairy-tale solutions to desperate real-life social problems, even my freshmen American students levelled the charge of wilful blindness at *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* for its out-of-hand refusal to engage with any of the African stereotypical problems (hunger, disease, conflict, etc), and of Botswana's epidemic of HIV/AIDS in particular.[1] Set in a country which has one of the lowest life expectancies and arguably the highest HIV/AIDS infection rate in the world, a fictional book, TV series and film adaptation which paints a quaint, romanticised image of Botswana and steadfastly ignores, and by implication refutes, the devastating reality of disease, infection and death cannot but face the accusation of irresponsibility and be held morally accountable. In the same manner in which the Western news media can be held accountable for the creation of a negative image of Africa by stories which focus exclusively

on disease, starvation, war and the provision of Western aid in Africa, so too McCall Smith's *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* is arguably culpable for an unrepresentative portrayal of Botswana as a country devoid of its desperately pressing medical problems. Both may tell the truth, but the refusal to tell the whole truth enunciates a lie which is as damaging to fictional as to non-fictional representation.

Accordingly, I argue in this chapter that *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* is an escapist Western fantasy of Africa in general and of Botswana in particular. Both the novel series and TV adaptations create a stereotypical image of Africa which is, paradoxically, opposite to but just as preposterous as the one established by the Western media, replacing the monolithically negative Western news and film paradigm with an Edenic world of innocence which, albeit occasionally threatened, remains essentially untainted and uncorrupted. Detective Agency achieves this result through a three-stage process of engagement, disarmament and dismissal, leaving behind a saccharine utopian Western fantasy of primitive primordial Africa. Universal human problems as well as genuine cultural and tribal African issues are partially confronted, only to be 'whitewashed' (the pun is intended), subsumed and forgotten in the over-arching fecundity and benignity of the life-enhancing African sun. The result is akin to the archetypal Western film fantasy of the 20th Century, *The Wizard of Oz*. Evil threatens in the guise of the Wicked Witch of the West and her henchmen with their malevolent acts of violence, kidnapping and torture, but never is this harm allowed truly to impact the heroic party of investigators. The result in the film is that all troubles are subsumed by a world of technicolor singing and dancing with cuddly and loveable fictional munchkins. A political paradox is at work in these paradigms of Western invention; while the non-fictional Western media representation of Africa as a "blighted continent" perpetuates and helps maintain the pseudo-myth of Western hegemony and power, the fictional representation in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* of an Edenic African utopia refutes inherited Western guilt for colonial exploitation and justifies contemporary apathy to address the problems of the continent.

The American screening of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* in March 2009 generated considerable media interest within a context of an overwhelming negative media depiction of Africa and Africans. This is true for both non-fictional and fictional American media. I asked my 40 freshmen students at Monmouth University to find two Western news stories which focused on Africa, with the proviso that they were to be what each student considered to be a "typical" story about Africa. The results were instructive. Of the 80 news stories, 21 concerned HIV/AIDS,

19 discussed poverty or disease caused by privation, 18 described civil war, dictatorship and political instability, 12 focused on the provision of Western aid to Africa and the rest analysed such issues as corruption and even piracy. Only four stories reflected positively on Africa, and all were character biographies. Three were eulogies of Nelson Mandela, and one lauded the work of Kofi Annan. While it is true that a disproportionally large percentage of news stories in or about any country concern negative events such as violent crime and natural disasters, the fact that the American students selected these stories based upon what they considered was honestly representative of Africa remains crucial. These results were further supported by the fictional-media research conducted by the students. They were asked to each present two reviews of Western films set in Africa. From those 80 reviews, 66 were damningly horrific portrayals of life in Africa from three recent Hollywood films: *Blood Diamonds*, *Hotel Rwanda* and *The Last King of Scotland*. Eleven of the remaining 14 reviews depicted Western fantasies of white people in Africa, either romantic dreams like *Out of Africa* or the grandiose power-complex fantasies of colonial masters such as *Lawrence of Arabia*. Only three films out of the 80 were in any way critical of Western involvement in African life through colonialism or apartheid: *Sarafina*, *Roots* and *The Gods Must be Crazy*. These are the films which Westerners watch and the news stories they hear which create their impressions and understanding of Africa (which is, as my students continually reminded me, a country and not a continent). Even if one is to argue, as my students frequently did, that these news stories and movies are "true"—the Hutu and Tutsi did slaughter one another in Rwanda, and pirates do operate off the Somali coastline—yet this "truth," while obviously partial, is dangerously omnipresent in the West. As Blake Lambert argues in a *World Politics Review* article:

> Celluloid misrepresentations might not matter if Western media and popular culture offered nuanced portraits of Africa. Instead, in most Western examinations of Africa there is a lasting paradigm of pity, suggesting Africans are incapable of managing their affairs and require salvation. Western movies contribute to that faulty perspective by depicting the continent as a monolithic land of difference and violence (Lambert 2008).

It is this perspective that has been increasingly critiqued in recent times by African writers. Important examples start with Chinua Achebe's 1975 condemnation of the pervasive neo-colonial interpretations of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and in more recent times the 2005 satiric