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**Poisonwood Bible (Kingsolver) - Discussion Questions**

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**Discussion Questions**



1. What are the implications of the novel's title phrase, the poisonwood bible, particularly in connection with the main characters' lives and the novel's main themes? How important are the circumstances in which the phrase comes into being?
2. How does Kingsolver differentiate among the Price sisters, particularly in terms of their voices? What does each sister reveal about herself and the other three, their relationships, their mother and father, and their lives in Africa? What is the effect of our learning about events and people through the sisters' eyes?
3. What is the significance of the Kikongo word nommo and its attendant concepts of being and naming? Are there Christian parallels to the constellation of meanings and beliefs attached to nommo? How do the Price daughters' Christian names and their acquired Kikongo names reflect their personalities and behavior?
4. The sisters refer repeatedly to balance (and, by implication, imbalance). What kinds of balance—including historical, political, and social—emerge as important? Are individual characters associated with specific kinds of balance or imbalance? Do any of the sisters have a final say on the importance of balance?
5. What do we learn about cultural, social, religious, and other differences between Africa and America? To what degree do Orleanna and her daughters come to an understanding of those differences? Do you agree with what you take to be Kingsolver's message concerning such differences?
6. Why do you suppose that Reverend Nathan Price is not given a voice of his own? Do we learn from his wife and daughters enough information to formulate an adequate explanation for his beliefs and behavior? Does such an explanation matter?
7. What differences and similarities are there among Nathan Price's relationship with his family, Tata Ndu's relationship with his people, and the relationship of the Belgian and American authorities with the Congo? Are the novel's political details—both imagined and historical—appropriate?
8. How does Kingsolver present the double themes of captivity and freedom and of love and betrayal? What kinds of captivity and freedom does she explore? What kinds of love and betrayal? What are the causes and consequences of each kind of captivity, freedom, love, and betrayal?
9. At Bikoki Station, in 1965, Leah reflects, "I still know what justice is." Does she? What concept of justice does each member of the Price family and other characters (Anatole, for example) hold? Do you have a sense, by the novel's end, that any true justice has occurred?
10. In Book Six, Adah proclaims, "This is the story I believe in..." What is that

story? Do Rachel and Leah also have stories in which they believe? How would you characterize the philosophies of life at which Adah, Leah, and Rachel arrive? What story do you believe in?

11. At the novel's end, the carved-animal woman in the African market is sure that "There has never been any village on the road past Bulungu," that "There is no such village" as Kilanga. What do you make of this?

*(Questions issued by publisher.)*

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A WELL-READ ONLINE COMMUNITY

**Poisonwood Bible (Kingsolver) - Author Bio**

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**Author Bio**

- Birth—April 8, 1955
- Where—Annapolis, Maryland, USA
- Education—B.A., DePauw University; M.S., University of Arizona
- Awards—Orange Prize
- Currently—lives on a farm in Virginia

Barbara Kingsolver was born on April 8, 1955. She grew up "in the middle of an alfalfa field," in the part of eastern Kentucky that lies between the opulent horse farms and the impoverished coal fields. While her family has deep roots in the region, she never imagined staying there herself. "The options were limited--grow up to be a farmer or a farmer's wife."

Kingsolver has always been a storyteller: "I used to beg my mother to let me tell her a bedtime story." As a child, she wrote stories and essays and, beginning at the age of eight, kept a journal religiously. Still, it never occurred to Kingsolver that she could become a professional writer. Growing up in a rural place, where work centered mainly on survival, writing didn't seem to be a practical career choice. Besides, the writers she read, she once explained, "were mostly old, dead men. It was inconceivable that I might grow up to be one of those myself..."

Kingsolver left Kentucky to attend DePauw University in Indiana, where she majored in biology. She also took one creative writing course, and became active in the last anti-Vietnam War protests. After graduating in 1977, Kingsolver lived and worked in widely scattered places. In the early eighties, she pursued graduate studies in biology and ecology at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she received a Masters of Science degree. She also enrolled in a writing class taught by author Francine Prose, whose work Kingsolver admires.

Kingsolver's fiction is rich with the language and imagery of her native Kentucky. But when she first left home, she says, "I lost my accent.... [P]eople made terrible fun of me for the way I used to talk, so I gave it up slowly and became something else." During her years in school and two years spent living in Greece and France she supported herself in a variety of jobs: as an archaeologist, copy editor, X-ray technician, housecleaner, biological researcher and translator of medical documents.

After graduate school, a position as a science writer for the University of Arizona soon led her into feature writing for journals and newspapers. Her numerous articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including *The Nation*, the *New York*

*Times*, and *Smithsonian*, and many of them are included in the collection, *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never*. In 1986 she won an Arizona Press Club award for outstanding feature writing, and in 1995, after the publication of *High Tide in Tucson*, Kingsolver was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from her alma mater, DePauw University.

Kingsolver credits her careers in scientific writing and journalism with instilling in her a writer's discipline and broadening her "fictional possibilities." Describing herself as a shy person who would generally prefer to stay at home with her computer, she explains that "journalism forces me to meet and talk with people I would never run across otherwise."

From 1985 through 1987, Kingsolver was a freelance journalist by day, but she was writing fiction by night. Married to a chemist in 1985, she suffered from insomnia after becoming pregnant the following year. Instead of following her doctor's recommendation to scrub the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush, Kingsolver sat in a closet and began to write *The Bean Trees*, a novel about a young woman who leaves rural Kentucky (accent intact) and finds herself living in urban Tucson.

*The Bean Trees*, originally published in 1988 and reissued in a special ten-year anniversary edition in 1998, was enthusiastically received by critics. But, perhaps more important to Kingsolver, the novel was read with delight and, even, passion by ordinary readers. "A novel can educate to some extent," she told *Publishers Weekly*. "But first, a novel has to entertain—that's the contract with the reader: you give me ten hours and I'll give you a reason to turn every page. I have a commitment to accessibility. I believe in plot. I want an English professor to understand the symbolism while at the same time I want the people I grew up with—who may not often read anything but the Sears catalogue—to read my books."

For Kingsolver, writing is a form of political activism. When she was in her twenties she discovered Doris Lessing. "I read the *Children of Violence* novels and began to understand how a person could write about the problems of the world in a compelling and beautiful way. And it seemed to me that was the most important thing I could ever do, if I could ever do that."

*The Bean Trees* was followed by the collection, *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989), the novels *Animal Dreams* (1990), and *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), and the bestselling *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now and Never* (1995). Kingsolver has also published a collection of poetry, *Another America: Otra America* (Seal Press, 1992, 1998), and a nonfiction book,  *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 1989, 1996). *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) earned accolades at home and abroad, and was an Oprah's Book Club selection.

Barbara's *Prodigal Summer* (2000), is a novel set in a rural farming community in southern Appalachia. *Small Wonder*, April 2002, presents 23 wonderfully articulate essays. Here Barbara raises her voice in praise of nature, family, literature, and the


joys of everyday life while examining the genesis of war, violence, and poverty in our world.

Two additional books became best sellers. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* came in 2007, again to great acclaim. Non-fiction, the book recounts a year in the life of Kingsolver's family as they grew all their own food. *The Lacuna*, published two years later, is a fictional account of historical events in Mexico during the 1930, and moving into the U.S. during the McCarthy era of the 1950's.

### Extras

- Barbara Kingsolver lives in Southern Appalachia with her husband Steven Hopp, and her two daughters, Camille from a previous marriage, and Lily, who was born in 1996. When not writing or spending time with her family, Barbara gardens, cooks, hikes, and works as an environmental activist and human-rights advocate.
- Given that Barbara Kingsolver's work covers the psychic and geographical territories that she knows firsthand, readers often assume that her work is autobiographical. "There are little things that people who know me might recognize in my novels," she acknowledges. "But my work is not about me...."
- If you want a slice of life, look out the window. An artist has to look out that window, isolate one or two suggestive things, and embroider them together with poetry and fabrication, to create a revelation. If we can't, as artists, improve on real life, we should put down our pencils and go bake bread. (*Adapted from Barnes & Noble.*)

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## AFRICA

11 December 2012 Last updated at 10:36 ET

# Republic of Congo profile

**Civil wars and militia conflicts have plagued the Republic of Congo, which is sometimes referred to as Congo-Brazzaville.**

After three coup-ridden but relatively peaceful decades of independence, the former French colony experienced the first of two destructive bouts of fighting when disputed parliamentary elections in 1993 led to bloody, ethnically-based fighting between pro-government forces and the opposition.

A ceasefire and the inclusion of some opposition members in the government helped to restore peace.

### Civil war

But in 1997 ethnic and political tensions exploded into a full-scale civil war, fuelled in part by the prize of the country's offshore oil wealth, which motivated many of the warlords.

The army split along ethnic lines, with most northern officers joining President Denis Sassou Nguesso's side, and most southerners backing the rebels. These were supporters of the former president, Pascal Lissouba, and his prime minister, Bernard Kolelas, who had been deposed by President Sassou Nguesso in 1997.

By the end of 1999 the rebels had lost all their key positions to the government forces, who were backed by Angolan troops. The rebels then agreed to a ceasefire.

Remnants of the civil war militias, known as Ninjas, are still active in the southern Pool region. Most of them have yet to disarm and many have turned to banditry.

### Oil and diamonds

The Republic of Congo is one of sub-Saharan Africa's main oil producers, though 70 percent of the population lives in poverty. Oil is the mainstay of the economy and in recent years the country has tried to increase financial transparency in the sector.

In 2004 the country was expelled from the Kimberley Process that is supposed to prevent conflict diamonds from entering the world supply market. This followed investigations which found that the Republic of Congo could not account for the origin of large quantities of rough diamonds that it was officially exporting.

IMF debt relief to the country was delayed in 2006 following allegations of corruption.

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## AFRICA

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21 May 2013 Last updated at 07:16 ET

### Republic of Congo profile

**Full name:** Republic of the Congo

**Population:** 4.2 million (UN, 2012)

**Capital:** Brazzaville

**Area:** 342,000 sq km (132,047 sq miles)

**Major languages:** French, indigenous African languages

**Major religions:** Christianity, indigenous African beliefs

**Life expectancy:** 57 years (men), 59 years (women) (UN)

**Monetary unit:** 1 CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine) franc = 100 centimes

**Main exports:** Oil, timber, plywood, sugar, cocoa, coffee, diamonds

**GNI per capita:** US \$2,250 (World Bank, 2011)

**Internet domain:** .cg

**International dialling code:** +242

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## AFRICA

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10 October 2012 Last updated at 05:37 ET

# Republic of Congo profile

### A chronology of key events:

**1400s** - Bakongo, Bateke and Sanga ethnic groups arrive in what is now the Republic of Congo.

**1482** - Portuguese navigator Diogo Cao explores the coastal areas.

#### French rule

**1880** - French explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza negotiates an agreement with the Bateke to establish a French protectorate over the north bank of the Congo river.

**1907** - France restricts the role of concessionaires following widespread outrage at revelations of the brutalities of forced labour.

**1910** - Middle Congo, as it was known then, becomes a colony of French Equatorial Africa.

**1928** - African revolt over renewed forced labour and other abuses carried out in the course of building the Congo-Ocean railway, which resulted in the death of more than 17,000 Africans.

**1946** - Congo given a territorial assembly and representation in the French parliament.

**1958** - Congolese vote for autonomy within the French Community.

#### Independence

**1960** - Congo becomes independent with Fulbert Youlou as president.

**1963** - Youlou forced to resign following workers' unrest; Alphonse Massamba-Debat becomes president and Pascal Lissouba prime minister.

**1964** - Massamba-Debat sets up the National Revolutionary Movement as the sole party and proclaims a non-capitalist path of economic development.

**1968** - Massamba-Debat ousted in a coup led by Marien Ngouabi, who continues his predecessor's commitment to socialism but sets up his own party, the Congolese Workers Party (PCT).

**1970** - Ngouabi proclaims Congo a Marxist People's Republic with the PCT as the sole legitimate party.

**1977** - Ngouabi is assassinated. Massamba-Debat and the Archbishop of Brazzaville, Emile Cardinal Biayenda, are killed shortly afterwards.

Joachim Yhombi-Opango becomes president.



**1979** - Yhombi-Opango hands over the presidency to the PCT, which chooses Denis Sassou-Nguesso as his successor.

**1981** - Congo signs treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union.

**1990** - The PCT abandons Marxism.

**1992** - Voters approve a constitution which establishes a multi-party system.

Pascal Lissouba becomes president in Congo's first democratic election.

#### **Civil strife**

**1993** - Bloody fighting between government and opposition forces over disputed parliamentary elections.

**1994-95** - Ceasefire between government and opposition established; opposition given government posts.

**1997** - Full-scale civil war breaks out; pro-Sassou Nguesso forces, aided by Angolan troops, capture Brazzaville, forcing Lissouba to flee.

**1999** - Government and rebels sign a peace deal in Zambia providing for a national dialogue, demilitarisation of political parties and the re-admission of rebel units into the security forces.

**2001 April** - Peace conference ends by adopting a new constitution, paving the way for presidential and parliamentary elections.

**2001 September** - Transitional parliament adopts a draft constitution. Some 15,000 militia disarm in a cash-for-weapons scheme. IMF starts clearing Congo's \$4bn debt.

**2001 December** - Former president, Pascal Lissouba, convicted in absentia on treason and corruption charges, and sentenced to 30 years' hard labour by the high court in Brazzaville.

**2002 January** - About 80% of voters in constitutional referendum approve amendments aimed at consolidating presidential powers.

**2002 March** - Denis Sassou Nguesso wins presidential elections unopposed after his main rivals are barred from the contest.

#### **Clashes with rebels**

**2002 March** - Intense fighting between government and "Ninja" rebels drives many thousands of civilians from their homes in Pool region. The rebels, loyal to former PM Bernard Kolelas and led by renegade priest Pastor Ntumi, name themselves after the famous Japanese warriors.

**2002 June** - Government troops battle Ninja rebels in Brazzaville. About 100 people are killed.

**2003 March** - Government signs deals with Ninja rebels aimed at ending fighting in Pool region. Ninja leader Pastor Ntumi agrees to end hostilities and allow the return of the rule of law.

**2004 June** - World diamond trade watchdog removes Congo from list of countries recognised as dealing legitimately in diamonds.

**2005 April** - Government says a group of army officers, arrested in January over an arms theft, had been planning a coup.

**2005 October** - Former PM Bernard Kolelas is allowed home to bury his wife after eight years in exile, during which time he was sentenced to death on war crimes charges. He is given an amnesty in November.

**2006 January** - Congo is chosen to lead the African Union in 2006 after disagreements within the body about Sudan's leadership bid.

President Sassou Nguesso accuses France of interfering in his country's affairs, following a decision by a French Appeal court to reopen an investigation into the disappearance of more than 350 refugees in 1999.

**2007** June - Former "Ninja" rebels led by renegade Pastor Frederic Ntumi ceremoniously burn their weapons to demonstrate their commitment to peace.

**2007** June-August - Parliamentary elections, boycotted by some 40 parties. Ruling party wins 90 percent of seats.

#### **Debt cancelled**

**2007** November - London Club of private sector creditors cancels 80 percent of Congo's debt.

**2009** May - French magistrate opens probe into alleged embezzlement by President Sassou Nguesso and two other African leaders following lawsuit by an anti-corruption group.

**2009** July - President Denis Sassou Nguesso gains another seven years in power following elections boycotted by the opposition.

**2010** March - Paris Club of creditor countries and Brazil agree to cancel all the debt owed to them by Congo - about \$2.4 billion.

**2010** November - French appeal court gives go-ahead for probe into corruption charges against three African leaders, including President Denis Sassou Nguesso.

UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples urges government to protect rights of Pygmy people, saying they are subject to discrimination.

**2012** October - Former defence minister Charles Zacharie Bowao is charged with responsibility for an accident that blew up an ammunition stockpile in Brazzaville in March, killing about 240 people and injuring more than 2,300 others. He was dismissed in September, and accuses the government of using him as a scapegoat.

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(RE)VIEWS

## **“History Will One Day Have Its Say”: New Perspectives on Colonial and Postcolonial Congo**

*Yaël Simpson Fletcher*

Ronan Bennett, *The Catastrophist*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*. Translated by Ann Wright and Renée Fenby. London: Verso, 2001.

Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaïre*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Pagan Kennedy, *Black Livingstone: A True Tale of Adventure in the Nineteenth-Century Congo*. New York: Viking, 2002.

Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

*Radical History Review*

Issue 84 (fall 2002): 195–207

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*Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, directed by Raoul Peck. San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1992.

*Lumumba*, directed by Raoul Peck. New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2000.

*Pièces d'identités*, directed by Mweze Ngangura. San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1998.

From Belgian King Leopold II's brutal Congo Free State to the assassination of Patrice Lumumba on the morrow of Congolese independence, from Joseph-Désiré Mobutu's repressive Zaire to Laurent Kabila's war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo, over a century of turmoil and tragedy has marked the modern history of Congo. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the ongoing African war in eastern Congo, and the latest disaster, the destruction of Goma by volcanic eruption, has attracted world attention to the region. When not blaming eternal ethnic hatreds, commentators have sought the roots of the horrific violence of the past decade in brutal colonial practices and deathly conflicts over resources—rubber then, diamonds today.<sup>1</sup> Although the government's hold on some parts of the country continues to be tenuous, the relatively peaceful accession to power of Laurent Kabila's son, Joseph, after his father's assassination on January 16, 2001, has given rise to cautious hopes about Congo's future.

In the 1960s, at the height of African decolonization and black liberation, Americans were very aware of events in Congo. Beginning in the 1970s, however, the United States focused its attention on the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and lost sight of the rest of the continent. Consequently, younger activists have little knowledge of the history, politics, and popular culture of Congo. In this context, the publication of a number of historical studies, novels, and films on Congo/Zaire over the course of the past few years proves particularly welcome.<sup>2</sup> From the time of Leopold II, this vast region located in the interior of the continent has been the subject of fascination for European and American writers. At least since the publication of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Congo has provided a fertile environment for the investigation of European psyches and traumas.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, Adam Hochschild, Sven Lindqvist, and other writers have argued that the Belgian annihilation of untold numbers of Congolese under Leopold II's suzerainty represented the extremes of colonial racist brutality, an African genocide whose ideology and practices prefigured and enabled the Holocaust in Europe.<sup>4</sup> But the many-sided story of Congo has an alternate scenario to that of Africa in torment. Independent Congo became part of the epic narrative of anticolonial resistance and national liberation with first prime minister Patrice Lumumba's denunciation of Belgian colonialism in 1960. His subsequent assassination, in which many saw the hand of the

CIA, immediately came to stand for neocolonial U.S. intervention worldwide. The name of Congo's new ruler, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, became synonymous with not only dictatorship and corruption, but also a rhetoric of Africanization.<sup>5</sup> For the Congolese themselves, making sense of their own historical experience has been a more complex and nuanced process of self-understanding than the mythologizing of the past by outsiders.

This essay examines recent work on Congo dealing with the three key periods of its colonial and postcolonial history: the consolidation of colonial rule in the early 1900s, the moment of independence in 1960, and the long-lasting postcolonial regime of Mobutu. My texts include novels, popular journalistic accounts and exposés, scholarly monographs, and films. This range necessitates a set of broad questions. How are the histories of the United States, Europe, and Congo intertwined? What are the effects of shifts in focus from ordinary people to leaders, from men to women, from American to European to African? What is revealed and what is hidden by different ways of presenting the past? How does imperialism interfere with and distort the very telling of Congolese history? Rather than presenting a strictly chronological survey or a typology by genre or medium, this essay groups the texts by theme. Reading these narratives with and against each other illuminates how insights and understandings shift with changes in perspective.

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It has become commonplace to regard missionaries as witting or unwitting agents of European colonialism. Imperial governments usually preferred their own nationals as missionaries for colonial territories, but King Leopold II was willing to permit any missionary to work in his Central African possessions. Hence a long tradition of American evangelicals going to Congo, ignorant of both the region and the nature of Belgian colonialism. Americans, missionaries and others, are central to the narratives of Barbara Kingsolver, Adam Hochschild, and Pagan Kennedy. With their recent bestsellers, Kingsolver—a feminist progressive novelist—and Hochschild—an investigative journalist—have already successfully re-presented Congo and its history to a broad cross section of the American reading public. It remains to be seen if Kennedy, a novelist, will achieve a similar success with her just published biography of an African American missionary.

A summer 2000 Oprah Winfrey selection, Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* tells the story of a white American missionary, Nathan Price, who arrives with his family in Congo on the eve of independence. Undoubtedly this figure of an evangelical fundamentalist symbolizes the willful ignorance and indifference that has abetted colonialism across the centuries. Every action that Nathan Price attempts—from gardening to baptizing the children of the village, Kilanga—is not only thwarted, but also has disastrous consequences for his family. They survive only because of the kindness of the villagers. Against a vividly evoked backdrop of the

Central African rain forest, Kingsolver portrays a family trapped in the claustrophobic world of a religious fanatic. She focuses on the experiences of Nathan's self-sacrificing wife, Orleanna, and the couple's four daughters, cheerleader manqué Rachel, tomboy Leah, wordsmith Adah, and baby Ruth May. Through first-person narratives of Orleanna and each daughter, Kingsolver delineates their painful and parallel struggle to escape Nathan's control and come to terms with their presence in Congo. Only the very young Ruth May experiences Kilanga as home. Until the last section of the novel, there are just hints of the world outside the village—mainly remarks by the local African schoolteacher, reported by Leah. She is the one through whom we learn about contemporary Congolese politics. Yet Leah, despite her marriage to Anatole, the schoolteacher and village activist, remains an outsider. This irrevocable difference is highlighted on January 17, the anniversary of both Lumumba's assassination and Ruth May's early death. Kingsolver contrasts Anatole's grief, part of a shared public (albeit secret) "day of mourning for lost Independence," and that of Leah, a private, personal distress (430). The author leaves open the degree to which this difference derives from either national identity or gender.

Despite its ethnographic detail and historical context, *The Poisonwood Bible* is not so much a story about Congo as a profoundly American parable of enlightenment. Drawing on memories of happy childhood years in Congo with her public health worker parents, Kingsolver deliberately crafts a very different kind of couple for the novel (x). By focusing on the family of a fundamentalist missionary, Kingsolver is able to show the literal transformation of a Christian consciousness of original sin to an awareness of the oppression of Africans by Europeans and of women by men. The American women achieve this understanding by telling their own stories; their narratives become increasingly self-reflective and conscious of the outside world. They all, however, retain the religious language of the girls' childhoods. Even the radical Leah looks to a "new agriculture, a new sort of planning, a new religion" for the salvation of Africa (525). At the end of the novel, the spirit of the forest, merged with the ghost of the long dead Ruth, buried in Kilanga, whispers to her still guilt-ridden and grieving mother: "You will forgive and remember. . . . Move on. Walk forward into the light" (543). These optimistic final words suggest that a deep charity enables both self-knowledge and the possibility of a better world.

For the reader whose interest in Congo has been piqued by Kingsolver, it seems natural to turn to Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Hochschild recounts the history of the nineteenth-century conquest of this Central African region and the subsequent creation of the Congo Free State as the Belgian king's personal fiefdom. In part 1, Hochschild weaves together evidence from numerous missionary, diplomatic, and journalistic accounts to create a damning indictment of the depredations of Leopold II's agents on the people and forests of the rubber-rich Congo. In part 2, he recounts

the organization of the Congo Reform Association by E. D. Morel and Roger Casement and the machinations of Leopold to counter bad publicity and influence the U.S. government in his bid for international recognition as "protector" of the Congo. Hochschild paints a bizarre picture of Leopold's obsession with Africa, connecting it to the king's dysfunctional personal relationships. He concludes with a meditation on the example set by the early anti-Leopold reformers for human rights activists today.

An interesting counterpoint to Kingsolver's tale, in which the evils of colonialism are personified by a twentieth-century bigoted white American missionary, Hochschild's account foregrounds the efforts of nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries to expose the brutality of Belgian conquest and rule. Although the reformers didn't quite succeed in transforming the structures of rule in the Congo—unsurprisingly, since many of them had a vision of a "better" colonialism actually fulfilling its "civilizing mission"—they did force Leopold to sell the Congo Free State to the Belgian government.<sup>6</sup> Just as Kingsolver's fictional narrative focuses on Americans, whether guilty or innocent, Hochschild's historical narrative deals mainly with Europeans and Americans, whether allied with the colonizer or speaking for the colonized. The main difference between the two texts is not so much genre, or even time period, but rather their protagonists and their addressees. In contrast to the highly personal interior monologues of Kingsolver's female characters, Hochschild's history presents the public statements and secret maneuvers of mostly male actors. While both authors offer a moral narrative of the struggle between good and evil, Hochschild's is a story of action rather than reflection, with those who seek to enlighten the world to the atrocities in the Congo Free State forming the vanguard of the virtuous.

In *Black Livingstone: A True Tale of Adventure in the Nineteenth-Century Congo*, the novelist Pagan Kennedy offers a somewhat different perspective on one of these early human rights activists, the African American missionary William Henry Sheppard. Kennedy's openness about her lack of qualifications for the task—neither African American nor a scholar of African American history, the Methodist Church, or Congo—stands not only in refreshing contrast to the confident authorial voices of Kingsolver and Hochschild, but it also draws the reader into her own learning process. In deceptively simple prose, Kennedy presents an insightful and sensitive analysis of how Sheppard's experiences as a black man in the post-Civil War South informed his actions in Congo. Sheppard did not feel any particular kinship (based on skin color) with the Africans, or they with him, but he was able to quickly comprehend the key cultural practices of whatever group he encountered. These skills enabled him to enter ("discover") the impressive Kuba capital of Mushenge, closed to outsiders. Kennedy's description of the geometrically laid-out city, the elegant aristocrats with their elaborate rituals, and the beautifully decorated objects

(collected by Sheppard) vividly conveys the values of a civilization and the tragedy of its destruction in the following decade by the multinational corporation Compagnie de Kasai (CK). Indeed, Sheppard is best known for his documentation of the CK's human depredations in Congo. Kennedy shows how the missionary reluctantly became one of the reform movement's key spokesmen, pressured by circumstance and white associates unwilling to recognize the particular risks faced by a black man speaking out about white brutality to American audiences.

In contrast to Kingsolver's fictional fanatic, Sheppard, his wife Lucy Gantt Sheppard, and several other African American missionaries were able to create the semblance of home in a utopian settlement on the edge of the Kuba kingdom. Overcoming the paucity of archival records, Kennedy paints sympathetic portraits of Lucy Sheppard and the other missionary women who kept the community going even as nearby villages were destroyed. Through its focus on Sheppard and his American and African friends, family, and associates, this biography explores the mutability of racial and cultural identity even in a racially polarized era. The title, *Black Livingstone*, is ironic, a reference to the role of explorer self-consciously played by Sheppard in order to engage audiences on his fundraising tours. By 1910, however, both the Kuba and the mission had been destroyed, and the Sheppards had returned to an America with little tolerance for well-traveled, knowledgeable, and outspoken black people. While Kennedy's account makes explicit the same American framework implicit in Kingsolver's and Hochschild's narratives, her focus on an African American subject complicates the story.

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In the new preface to the recent edition of *The King Incorporated: Leopold the Second and the Congo*, the author Neal Ascherson notes, "In my 1963 introduction, I remarked that the Belgians had avoided any real reassessment of the Congolese past, and that Leopold II was still honored as a national hero for his *mission civilisatrice*. It never occurred to me that this would remain the case thirty years later."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Belgian officials still challenge Hochschild's figures. A decade's worth of revelations, however, has prompted the Belgian government to take responsibility for events leading to the death of the Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, offer apologies, and set up a fund to promote democracy in Congo.<sup>8</sup> The events surrounding Lumumba's death have also inspired recent work in a variety of media. In an ironic and self-reflective novel, Irish writer Ronan Bennett interrogates the meaning of events in Congo for outsiders. Belgian historian Ludo De Witte unravels the tangled web of lies, half-truths, and evasions that have obscured the facts of Lumumba's assassination, and Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck commemorates Lumumba in a lyrical documentary and a powerful feature-length biopic.

A historian as well as a novelist, Ronan Bennett smoothly integrates the key events and individuals of Congo's transition to independence into the personal nar-



rative of *The Catastrophist*. As in *The Poisonwood Bible*, the most significant activity of *The Catastrophist* takes place in the protagonist's mind. In contrast to the women journeying from ignorance and oppression to some kind of knowledge and freedom, however, Bennett's Irish narrator, James/Seamus Gillespie, is an antihero who actively resists any deeper kind of knowing, whether about himself or the ideals animating the struggle for independence. A foreign correspondent, he is bombarded with self-serving facts and fictions from Belgian colonists, American officials, and Congolese activists. The sole reason for Gillespie's presence in the Congo is yet another interpreter of the shifting scene, a beautiful Italian communist woman journalist, with whom he has fallen in love. The narrator's angers and desires lead him in contradictory directions—deliberately obtuse to the political implications of his activities, he writes articles with information fed to him by an American CIA "friend" and then joins Lumumba's party on the deposed prime minister's fateful final flight.

The novel gives two accounts of Lumumba's unsuccessful attempt to escape house arrest in Leopoldville and reach safety among his supporters in Stanleyville. The first, Gillespie's own version, begins with the capture of Lumumba by Mobutu's troops after he has returned across the Sankuru River from the sanctuary of the opposite bank. While the soldiers are surrounding stranded Lumumba supporters, including Gillespie, the Italian journalist, and Lumumba family members, Gillespie makes it clear that he does not see this as sufficient reason for Lumumba to give himself up. Rather, it is a fitting end to what he characterizes as a "farce," a bumbling journey without concern for security or speed (303). But Gillespie also presents the version recognized by nearly everyone else present. In this mythic account, Lumumba, the populist leader, enralls villagers and even opposition soldiers along the route with visions of democracy and independence, and returns across the Sankuru River to save his wife and child. While Gillespie disparages this account as a dream, the novelist Bennett's juxtaposition of the two narratives indicates not so much the opposition between "reality" and "dream" as the dynamic tension between two ways of knowing. With irony, Gillespie himself registers how his own use of the first person plural in the initial account places him among Lumumba's companions, the true believers satirized in the second account (302). The novel culminates several years later, at the height of the troubles in Northern Ireland in 1969, with the narrator's reiterated refusal to claim an essentialist Irish identity. He does, however, explicitly recognize that the idealism and commitment of those he loves, his mother and sister in Ireland as well as the Italian journalist, do indeed produce a kind of truth.

Ludo De Witte's historical monograph *The Assassination of Lumumba* approaches the production of truth in a completely different manner. De Witte specifically argues not only that the prime minister represented a movement, but also that he had developed before his fall a viable program that could have provided

the basis for a democratic Congo. He builds the case for Belgian guilt, U.S. complicity, U.N. indifference, and African collaboration detail by detail. De Witte places Lumumba's murder at the epicenter of a continent-wide "neo-colonial counter-offensive," with, again, Belgium claiming the Congo, using journalists as well as soldiers as shock troops (xxv).<sup>9</sup> He briefly points to the renewed revolutionary nationalist rebellion in 1964 and 1965, which was put down by Mobutu with Belgian and American assistance.<sup>10</sup> While commenting on the "ill-digested" nature of the past due to Mobutu's rewriting of history and Belgian prevarication, De Witte sees himself as merely the transmitter of the past. Any action on the basis of this history is for the Congolese people themselves to determine (166).

Although the "digestion" of the past may not be apparent in contemporary Congolese politics, Caribbean, African, and Afro-Belgian artists are certainly exploring the complicated interweaving of the personal and the political, the past and the present, in postcolonial Congo. Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck's French-language documentary *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* [*Lumumba: La mort du prophète*] (1992) is a deeply personal response to the memory of the Congolese leader. This poetic documentary embeds investigative interviews about the fate of Lumumba into a visual narrative of snapshots and home movies portraying Peck's own childhood in 1960s Congo. In the absence of a Congolese middle class ready to fill the posts abandoned by Belgian officials and technicians, Haitians like Peck's father were recruited as a stopgap measure. The filmmaker notes the ambiguous position of these professionals, remarking on his own black Haitian family's status as "whites," living in the former homes and neighborhoods of the departed Europeans. The documentary itself is self-referential, posing not just the problem of how to resurrect a personally traumatic past, but also recounting the political and financial difficulties of the filmmaker—he fears arrest in Zaire (the former Congo) and cannot afford to use more than a few minutes of newsreel footage. Setting eloquent voice-overs against apparently mundane images of bundled-up residents in the bleak Brussels streets, Peck does more than "make do" with his limited resources. The documentary's "homemade" quality gives it an extraordinary power.

The film is frequently punctuated by the phrase "my mother says/tells [*raconte*]," words given particular poignancy because his mother had died before filming began. This narrative structure lends to the often elliptical voice-overs a mythic storytelling quality, but the fact that Peck's mother was a secretary to the mayor of Leopoldville/Kinshasa gives her words a certain authority. Even though couched as nightmarish tales, her accounts contain insights absent from official Belgian and Zairian histories. The reiteration of the phrase "ma mère raconte" also keeps open the question of the role played by Haitian "experts" in Mobutu's regime. Ultimately, however, the documentary is a poetic elegy to Patrice Lumumba, man and myth.

One of the most moving scenes in *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* begins in the Christmas-lit central square of Brussels with the words, "The prophet roams the Grand Place. He returns to tickle the feet of the guilty. Did I tell you about the prophet's end?" The invisible cameraman then enters a black-tie affair in ornate rooms off the Grand Place. A voice-over describes in detail the dismemberment of Lumumba's body while the barely acknowledged camera focuses in on the white faces and the formal dress of the guests. Raoul Peck's recent fictional film *Lumumba* (2000) begins and ends with this disturbing scene of physical obliteration. This time the voice-over consists of Patrice Lumumba's own words, "This is what happened that last night in Katanga—don't tell the children, they would not understand. Tell them [I was] fifty years too soon." The repetition of these words (or similar phrases) throughout the film has a multivalent impact similar to that of "ma mère raconte" in Peck's earlier film—the viewer is not just an observer of these terrible acts, but is accompanied by Lumumba's spirit as a witness and guide testifying to the truth of the images. Already knowing what is going to happen sets up the film as an investigation into what "really" happened and gives it a certain distancing effect. In particular, the horror of the dismemberment scenes provides a telling counterpoint to Lumumba's jokes about Belgian views of Africans as cannibals.

Peck portrays Lumumba as a humane, thoughtful, and charismatic leader with a deep faith in the force of words, in speaking truth to power. This deliberately accessible film offers a wonderful scene of Lumumba's famous speech denouncing Belgian colonialism during the ceremonial transfer of power presided over by King Baudouin. Here, as elsewhere, the accompanying music carries a different message than the image. Dissonant tones suggest that divisions will soon appear in the delicately balanced Congolese coalition government. The unfolding story of Lumumba's fall and martyrdom is dramatic, even if some viewers might wonder whether the tale of a leader caught between family and politics is too conventional.

The intercut scenes of Mobutu's various activities provide an ominous counternarrative, often accompanied by musical references to Mobutu's future policy of "authenticity," or return to supposedly pure African traditions. Significantly, Mobutu is portrayed as a complex character rather than as the mere stereotype of a despot. As Peck notes in an interview, "The history of humanity has shown that men are capable of the worst crimes with the best of justifications."<sup>11</sup> One of the most striking scenes shows Mobutu's 1966 rehabilitation of Lumumba. In front of massive posters of himself and his adversary, Mobutu declares Lumumba a national hero to a mixed audience of African and European dignitaries. Only a Congolese soldier and a young woman with braided hair do not clap, suggesting that they, at least, have kept alive the memory of the real Lumumba, hinting at the hope expressed in the final voice-over quoting his political testament: "History will one day have its say; it will not be the history taught in the United Nations, Washington, Paris or Brussels,

however, but the history taught in the countries that have rid themselves of colonialism and its puppets. Africa will write its own history, and both north and south of the Sahara it will be a history full of glory and dignity.”<sup>12</sup> As the first independent state in the Caribbean, Haiti, like Congo, has served as both a beacon of hope for anticolonial revolution and a terrible warning of the devastations wrought by dictatorships. So, despite his outsider status in Congo itself, Raoul Peck can claim Lumumba’s history as his own in a way closed to European or American observers, however sympathetic they might be.

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Just as it is difficult to get beyond Patrice Lumumba as a symbol of a revolutionary African democracy, it is difficult to comprehend Joseph Mobutu other than as the ultimate African dictator, impervious to revolt or reform. From within postcolonial Congo, however, it is obvious that Mobutu and his milieu were far more complex. Investigative journalist Michela Wrong charts the dynamics of power and resistance in Zaire, Congolese filmmaker Mweze Ngangura explores the legacy of colonialism for his compatriots in Brussels, and the anthropologist Johannes Fabian presents the visual history produced by Zairian painter Tshibumba Kanda Matulu.

In *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu’s Congo*, Wrong interviews and observes a wide range of Congolese across the political and socioeconomic spectrum. She exposes the role of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and Belgian and U.S. business and political interests in propping up Mobutu’s regime. As the reference in her title to Conrad’s protagonist indicates, Wrong’s account is also a narrative of her own “adventure” and attempt to comprehend Congo/Zaire. She interviews the historian Jules Marchal, one of Hochschild’s major sources, but also the Congolese historian Isidore Ndaywel e Nziem, and visits sites in Belgium still celebrating the days of colonial glory, such as the Royal Museum for Central Africa. While Wrong makes the usual comparison between Mobutu and Leopold in their rule by fear and personal aggrandizement, she also maps the mechanisms of the “kleptocracy” that kept the system functioning for some thirty years. She attributes the lack of organized political resistance among the Congolese not just to Mobutu’s divide-and-rule tactics, but also to repressed memories of Belgian colonial terror, an “amnesia [as] . . . the only way of dealing with horror” (59). Wrong does suggest, however, that resistance within Mobutu’s system was expressed by “La Sape,” a resolutely apolitical focus on not just getting by, but doing so with style and self-respect (176–84). By giving voice to such individuals as a taxi driver in Kinshasa and a Congolese woman in Brussels who considers shoplifting designer labels “repay[ing] the colonial debt,” Wrong challenges easy stereotypes of victims and oppressors (54).

In a recent essay, Adam Hochschild remarks, “With African voices still mostly unheard in Europe, colonial history remains largely swept under the rug.”<sup>13</sup> But as

Wrong shows, African men and women do form an active and vocal presence in contemporary Europe. Indeed, colonial history is a significant theme in Congolese filmmaker Mweze Ngangura's *Pièces d'identités* [Identification documents] (1998) about the Congolese community in the Belgian capital. It focuses on the relationships among Zairian officials, exiles, and immigrants and Belgian ex-colonial officials and missionaries in Brussels. A gently humorous fairy tale of sorts, the film features a Congolese king, a lost princess, a disguised suitor, an apparently evil agent, and other well- or ill-intentioned characters. Thefts and holdups represent both colonial exploitation and deserved reparations. Like Raoul Peck's *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, *Pièces d'identités* is filmed mainly in contemporary Brussels, incorporating newsreel footage to indicate the past. The noble protagonist, however, is unmistakably a member of the collaborating elite. Indeed, fond memories of a 1958 trip to Brussels, in which he was received by King Badouin of Belgium, and his admiration for Belgian "efficiency and progress" prompted Manu Kongo to send his now lost daughter Mwana to Belgium for her education. Arriving in Brussels to search for her, Manu Kongo soon learns that all is not quite as it seems, from the obsequious Congolese *sapeur* to the friendly ex-colonial official. Having lost all, Manu Kongo is brought by "the prophetess of the African renaissance" to the obscure graves of the first Congolese to die on Belgian soil—people brought over for the 1897 Colonial Exhibition. These tombstones also feature in *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, where they signify the countless deaths inflicted by Belgian colonialism. In *Pièces*, Manu Kongo chants a prayer for their souls to rest in peace. From Manu Kongo's pawned royal insignia to Mwana's false identification documents, questions of official and unofficial identities and truths are central to this film dedicated to the "African diaspora."

One of the most interesting histories of Congo is available in the form of paintings from inside Mobutu's Zaire. Tshibumba Kanda Matulu draws on the Shaba popular painting tradition to create his own images of key events from the past. The first part of *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* is the record of a collaboration in the 1970s between Dutch anthropologist Johannes Fabian and the Zairian painter Tshibumba. Paintings such as "Victims of the Miners' Strike," representing the 1941 massacre of Gécamines workers (59), "*Colonie Belge: Under Belgian Rule*," showing the routine whipping of prisoners (92), and "The Katanga Women Protest," representing a 1962 women's march to confront U.N. soldiers (112), are embedded in Tshibumba's explanatory narrative and annotated by Fabian.<sup>14</sup> Self-identified as a historian, Tshibumba points out the significance of his paintings: "It is to help one another so that we learn the history of our country correctly (15)." In the second part of *Remembering the Present*, Fabian presents a fascinating and subtle analysis of Tshibumba's "praxis." Fabian uses his own interactions with the painter to show how what cannot be said, even in private, is expressed in elliptical and unfinished phrases and images. He suggests that "Tshibumba's vision is

critical and political rather than moral. The challenge he poses to established historiography goes much further than that of critical academics who expose the wrong We did to Them. He . . . urges us to ponder universal loss, the damage that colonization as betrayal and deception did to the very ideals of rational understanding and critical emancipation that may guide our efforts to understand and explain ‘what really happened’ ” (296).

There is no denying the appeal of moral tales in which “good” and “evil” are clearly delineated, but history is complex and chaotic. Neither transcendent nor fixed, historical truths are embedded in particular narratives that force us to make choices and consider what we can’t know or understand. Africa, as historian Achille Mbembe points out, serves as a key “imaginary signification” for “the West,” the ultimate “Other” defining Western identity, a function that effectively hobbles attempts to claim historicity for African societies.<sup>15</sup> It is crucial that we as readers and viewers take the risk of encountering and experiencing other ways of narrating history, even if that means we lose our bearings and sense of certainty. It is time to recognize the abyss within ourselves without the mediation of “Africa,” and time to recognize the plurality of histories of Congo, on their own terms.<sup>16</sup>

#### Notes

My thanks to the innumerable colleagues, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers who over the past eighteen months have shared with me their thoughts on the books and films reviewed in this article. In particular, I would like to express my appreciation to Judith DeGroat for starting me on this journey and to Ian Christopher Fletcher for sustenance along the way. I take the first part of my essay title from Patrice Lumumba, “Political Testament, 1960,” qtd. in Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, 185.

1. For the latest example, see Ted Koppel, “Heart of Darkness,” *Nightline*, January 22–25, 2002.
2. In addition to the works under review, other recent publications include the reissues of V. S. Naipaul’s prizewinning novel, *A Bend in the River* (1979; reprint, New York: Vintage, 2001), and Norman Mailer’s account of the 1974 match between Muhammed Ali and George Foreman in Kinshasa, *The Fight* (1975; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1997). *When We Were Kings* (dir. Leon Gast), a fictional film of the famous match, came out in 1996.
3. See the new edition, with an introduction by Caryl Phillips: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Selections from The Congo Diary* (New York: Modern Library, 2000).
4. Sven Lindqvist, “Exterminate All the Brutes”: *One Man’s Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide* (New York: New Press, 1996). Also see Tom Engelhardt, “The Cartography of Death,” *The Nation*, October 23, 2000, 25–34. This exposure of the dark underside of European civilization is hardly new. The links between racism, colonial violence, and Nazi extermination form a key theme in Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire’s eloquent call for anticolonial revolt, first published in 1955. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review, 2000).
5. See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

6. For an interesting discussion of the "reformist critique of imperialism," see Frederick Cooper, "Conditions Analogous to Slavery: Imperialism and Free Labor Ideology in Africa," in *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies*, ed. Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 106–49.
7. Neal Ascherson, *The King Incorporated: Leopold the Second and the Congo* (1963; reprint. London: Granta, 1999), 10.
8. "Report Reproves Belgium in Lumumba's Death," *New York Times*, November 17, 2001, A5; "Belgium: Apology for Lumumba Killing," *New York Times*, February 6, 2002, A6.
9. For a challenge to De Witte's interpretation, see Brian Urquhart, "The Tragedy of Lumumba," *New York Review of Books*, October 4, 2001, 4–7; and "The Tragedy of Lumumba: An Exchange," *New York Review of Books*, December 20, 2001, 103–4.
10. For a less sanguine view of the revolutionary troops, see William Gálvez, *Che in Africa: Che Guevara's Congo Diary*, trans. Mary Todd (Melbourne: Ocean, 1999).
11. Olivier Barlet, interview with Raoul Peck, *Africultures* 31 (2000): 83–85.
12. Qtd. in De Witte, *Lumumba*, 185. The French voice-over and English subtitles in the film may be slightly different.
13. Adam Hochschild, "Leopold's Congo: A Holocaust We Have Yet to Comprehend," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 12, 2000, B4.
14. For humorous contemporary political critique, see Zairian painter Chéri Samba. *Chéri Samba: A Retrospective* (Ostend, Belgium: Provinciaal Museum voor Moderne Kunst, n.d.).
15. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 2–5.
16. *Ibid.*