Gender and Decolonization in the Congo: The Legacy of Patrice Lumumba
by Karen Bouwer
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In the 1960s the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) emerged as a political hot spot in Africa. As historical records reveal, the transition from decades of Belgian colonial brutality and paternalism to independence did not go smoothly. That being said, there is a tendency on the part of scholars, especially those who write about the process of decolonization in the DRC, to neglect the question of gender. Political scientists, for instance, are apt to focus on the rise of the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviets and its impact on Congolese nationalism. Nationalist historians tend to focus on the activities of male nationalists who wrestled for political power without highlighting the contributions of female nationalists. Much scholarship on the DRC shows enthusiasm for resolving puzzles arising from a perennial question: who assassinated Patrice Lumumba?

*Gender and Decolonization in the Congo* departs markedly from the limited scope of most traditional accounts in that it utilizes a gendered analytical framework. It successfully delivers on its author’s stated goals: first, it transcends conventional wisdom by challenging androcentric (male-centered) interpretations of the process of decolonization in the DRC, and second, it brings awareness to Congolese women’s active agency in politics. The study goes...
a long way towards presenting the first truly groundbreaking investigation of women’s political participation in the DRC, a significant subject largely ignored by scholars.

It is possible that some scholars will take issue with the manner in which Karen Bouwer introduces her subject (Congolese women). The study situates Congolese women in both the colonial and post-colonial context while using Lumumba’s life and representations of his legacies as a point of departure. Bouwer persuasively puts the potential doubt to rest, however, by emphasizing that previous and contemporary works focusing on Lumumba’s legacies in particular and Congolese nationalism in general gives credence to the masculinist bias. This dominant discourse presumes gender neutrality, highlights the contributions of men and largely obscures the oppression and struggles of women.

In framing a gendered analysis, Bouwer manipulates a wide (though not unfamiliar) variety of evidence very skillfully, and writes in a lucid and unadorned manner. Some of the historical materials consulted include Lumumba’s writings and speeches, especially those covering the period from 1946 to 1960; literary works (for instance, Aime Cesaire’s A Season in the Congo); cinematic works focusing on Lumumba and the process decolonization in the Congo including Raoul Peck’s Death of a Prophet, Sometimes in April, and Lumumba; and two Congolese women (Andree Blouin and Leonie Abo) life histories. It is clear that Bouwer, a learned literary scholar and film critic, puts her best skill forward with her critical assessment of cinematic and literary works dealing with the subject of decolonization in the DRC. One area in which the author falls short, however, relates to her use of oral evidence. Interviews conducted with prominent Congolese women activists such as Madame Pauline Opongo Lumumba, Leonie Abo and Juliana Lumumba were sometimes too focused on the author’s interest and interpretative needs. This constricted approach restricts the voices of these women in the text.

The structure of the exposition follows an unconventional layout. The seven chapters are topically organized, distinct in terms of both the materials analyzed and their approach to questions on gender. If one unifying theme emerges from the chapters, it is that intellectual constructions reflecting on the process of decolonization in the DRC often exclude the agency of Congolese women. Gender and
Decolonization in the Congo is richly documented and provides a useful index, an impressive bibliography, a dependable section of notes and rare photographs of Congolese female activists. A reader seeking a chronological approach may easily be put off by this study. Nevertheless, Bouwer is careful to sketch out a historical time-line guide that covers Congolese history from 1908 to 2002 for the benefit of non-specialists. The book starts with a powerful introduction, which contains an anecdote that underscores a central point of the book: the marginalization of women in the public sphere. In addition, the introductory note raises several salient questions, which were later addressed in the study: where do Congolese women fit in the narrative on decolonization? What new ideas of masculinity and femininity were generated by nationalists during the struggle for independence? Was masculinist bias upheld in later depictions of Lumumba’s legacies and the process of decolonization in the Congo? What were the consequences of the masculinism of nationalist discourse for women in the colonial and post-colonial era?

The first two chapters offer interesting information on the harsh conditions Congolese women faced under the oppressive rule of King Leopold. What is more, the chapters highlight ideologies and strategies used to deny Congolese women access to elite institutions during the colonial period. Chapter one investigates Lumumba’s speeches and writings in order to ascertain how the martyred leader made sense of women’s status and issues of gender. Here, Bouwer highlights the masculine bias and contradictions inherent in Lumumba’s writings. Lumumba, for instance, advocated for educational opportunities for girls and boys yet he accepted ideals of female domesticity ideals propagated by members of the elite class (evolue) and Belgian authorities—which confined women to the home/domestic front. Chapter three raises interesting debates on gender struggles in the domestic realm through careful analysis of Lumumba’s personal relationships with his wives, concubines and female activists. This section demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that Lumumba found it difficult to practice at home what he preached in public.

The most interesting chapters of the book are those which deal with women’s political participation in the Congo. In chapter four, the life history of Andree Blouin becomes a focal point for establishing the premise that women
exploded dominant models of feminine subordination by taking active part in nationalist politics. Chapter Five further reveals that Congolese women asserted their agency in different guerilla formations and secessionist groups that emerged in the 1960s. The interesting profile of women such as Leonie Abo, Martine Mandinga, and Madeleine Mayimbi testifies to the high level of women’s involvement in politics. The contributions of different women’s organizations such as the Union of Democratic Women of Congo and Femmes de Allaince des Bakongo (FABAKO) also received adequate attention in the text.

Bouwer’s study should stimulate some critical discussions on the politics of memory and remembering. Chapter five explores the representation of Lumumba’s legacies and the question of gender in Aime Cesaire’s literary work. Chapter six and seven highlights, although in a sympathetic and less critical way, the masculinist bias that informs the representations of women in Raoul Peck’s cinematic works. Bouwer makes it clear that Pauline Opango Lumumba faults Peck’s film *Lumumba* on the ground that it supports the dominant version of history, which labels her as the one directly responsible for Lumumba’s death. In addition, the author brings into sharp focus the role of women as preservers of historical memory: we learn about efforts on the part of Leonie Abo to preserve the memory of the slain revolutionary, Pierre Mulele. We also learn about Justine M’poyo’s effort to preserve Joseph Kasavubu’s memory.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of this study is that it offers a promising and unfamiliar approach into the subject of decolonization in the DRC. Scholars interested in Haitian migration to the DRC will find this study to be an invaluable guide. Bauwer’s work does have limitations; although well written, engaging and well researched, the study is slightly impaired by the author’s heavy reliance on secondary materials and inability to engage critically with contemporary masculinist representations of Congolese women by the Western media. Nevertheless, *Decolonization in the Congo* is a serious work of academic scholarship, able to stir the minds of specialists in the field of gender studies, history, politics, diaspora studies, development studies and literary studies. The author reminds us that Congolese women played a huge role in the decolonization process, and that
they continue to play an important role in DRC politics today.

Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV
by Jennifer L. Pozner
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In Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV, feminist media activist Jennifer Pozner analyzes television’s most controversial genres: reality shows. As a feminist journalist, media commentator, and founder and executive director of Women in Media & News, Pozner’s approach to reality television diverges in definitive ways from traditional scholarly techniques. Pozner’s critical and insightful examination of the alarming effects of reality show trends makes Reality Bites Back an important resource for television researchers launching projects in the cross-section of reality, race, class, and gender, as well as a suitable read for all persons interested in understanding the meanings behind reality programs.

Pozner begins her book by dismissing simplistic notions that present reality television as “harmless fluff” or a guilty pleasure, and instead, stresses the importance of deconstructing the complex relationships between reality television show producers, networks, contestants, and viewers. She also dispels the myth that the proliferation of reality television is a response by networks to the public’s demand for this type of entertainment, pointing out the more likely reason there is an abundance of reality shows: they are cheap to make and can generate millions in advertising revenue. The central premise of Reality Bites Back is that reality television renews old-fashioned gender stereotypes previously considered by feminist media researchers to be fading due to the gains made by feminist struggles.

1 Women in Media & News Website, http://www.wimnonline.org/