In his history of the Congo during the reign of Belgium’s King Leopold (1876-1909), Adam Hochschild tells a riveting and terrifying story of greed and terror, as well as what he terms the “politics of forgetting” the hard truths that have emerged over the last hundred years or so. He shows how a dominant European and American technique for diverting attention from the truth involved a language of righteous zeal and religious reckoning, a scriptural rhetoric used to hide the real story of imperial greed. Several scholars from contemporary critical schools—deconstructionists, Marxists, and postcolonialists address the issue in a similar fashion. In the words of Phillippa Kafka, they work at “(un)doing the missionary position” in literature, advancing new notions of “exclusionary identity, dominating heterogeneity and universality or in more blunt language, White supremacy” (1997, xv). Relying on Henry A.
Giroux's words, Kafka defines the missionary position as "monolithic views of culture, nationalism and difference" (xvi).

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver illustrates the hypocrisy of religious rhetoric and practice that sacrifices the many for the good of the few in power, drawing a clear parallel between a missionary's attitude and colonial imperialism. To the author, Nathan Price does not represent the missionary profession: he "is a symbolic figure . . . suggesting many things about the way U.S. and Europe have approached Africa with a history of cultural arrogance and misunderstanding at every turn" (http://www.kingsolver.com/dialogue/12 questions.html). Nonetheless, Kingsolver does show how, contrary to popular opinion, religion and politics are not separate entities, but a powerful combined force used historically not only to "convert the savages" but to convert the masses to believe that what is done in the name of democratic, Christian principles is done for the greater good.

Even King Leopold understood the power of public relations: he knew "that what matters, often, is less the substance of a political event than how the public perceives it" (1998, 251), or, as Hochschild says, "If you control perceptions, you control the event" (251). Leopold used democratic, religious rhetoric to control his rape and pillage of the Congo; he "recognized that a colonial push . . . would require a strong humanitarian veneer," so he promised to abolish the slave trade and establish "peace among the chiefs . . ." (Hochschild 1998, 45). Building the infrastructure necessary to "exploit his colony," Leopold raised money through the Vatican "urging the Catholic Church to buy Congo bonds to encourage the spread of Christ's word" (92). Using Catholic and Protestant missionaries to set up children's colonies, theoretically to offer religious instruction and vocational information, Leopold's true goal was to build his own kingdom. "He deployed priests, almost as if they were soldiers . . . to areas where he wanted to strengthen his influence" (133-34). Describing 19th century colonizing behaviors, Hochschild observes, "In the Congo the Ten Commandments were practiced even less than in most colonies" (138). Ironic how almost a century after Leopold, deceptive and destructive "missionary" rhetoric persists and prevents human rights.¹ In the United States, the rhetoric appears in a variety of groups from the Promise Keepers to the Kansas Board of Education, but the message is always one of righteous coercion. In post-colonial Africa, there is "still a form of neocolonialism" that denies human rights. As Raoul Peck, award winning filmmaker of *Lumumba*, states, "things haven't changed." Both at the time of Lumumbu's decolonization movement and now, the Congo is "too rich in resources to be left to the Congolese" (Riding 2001, 13, 26).

Numerous contemporary novels, such as *Crossing the River* by Caryl Philips, *Mean Spirit* by Linda Hogan, or *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja-Keller
provide examples of the missionary position gone awry. In these novels, authors often invert the journey motif. Men who see themselves as good Christians who lead good lives learn from their journeys that the concepts of Christianity upon which they have based their lives are inherently paradoxical. Some lose their way and sense of purpose, because neither scripture nor faith offers them an understanding of the disorder in their lives. Some ironically convert to “pagan” rituals and ways; others wander seeking answers to questions that have no answers and living isolated lives. Although locales shift and the specific religious affiliation, age and race of the missionary change, one recurring theme crosses culture and class lines: the men all see themselves as carriers of the “Word,” superior to the populations they aim to convert. Over the course of the novels, most of the men alter their missionary position as their own words turn back upon them.2

One man who does not change is Nathan Price. In The Poisonwood Bible, Nathan’s evangelical, self-righteous, judgmental attitudes threaten the lives of his family, as well as the people in the remote Congolese village of Kilanga. A zealot, Nathan risks lives in pursuit of his obsessive vision. An abusive father, Nathan goes mad for the second time in his life, as he tries to convert the natives over a year and a half period of hunger, disease, drought, witchcraft, political wars, pestilential rains, Lumumba, Mobutu, Ike, and the CIA. The effects of Nathan’s missionary position on his wife, Orleanna, his four daughters, and the Congolese become clear as Kingsolver parallels Nathan’s behaviors to imperialist actions in the Congo.

Kingsolver uses multiple narrators to construct her political allegory. Orleanna, Leah, Adah, Rachel, and Ruth May tell their stories in contrapuntal turns, offering personal versions of the consequences of the Reverend’s taking them to the Congo. Despite dramatically different voices, all, even Rachel, Ms. Malaprop of the novel, tell stories of change as well as discovery. Most reveal specifics about intellectual and spiritual awakenings; the loss of one kind of belief and birth of another. All, even five year old Ruth, draw some parallel between the tyranny of politics in the Congo and the war in their private lives. And all expose the missionary tactics of the man Adah calls “Our Father” as monolithic, abusive, and destructive. As the characters tell their stories in interrupted sequences that move back and forth among speakers, the narrative point of view creates a field of reciprocal subjects, all crucial to the story but none exclusive or central. The heart of the novel emerges only by stacking multiple renditions and discerning the similarities and differences that together shape the broader view. As tension builds up to crisis, their stories accomplish one of Kingsolver’s stated aims: they “connect consequences with actions” in the Price family and the broader world as well (Sarnatoro 1998, 1).
In the beginning, “God said unto them ... have dominion ... over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). The Prices’ journey into the heart of the Congo begins with Nathan, like King Leopold, taking the words of “Genesis” literally. The daughters’ stories come from decades of journal-keeping but are recounted as circumstances unfolded; Orleanna’s story comes from a kind of guilty hindsight. The voice that opens each of the first five chapters (“Genesis,” “The Revelation,” “The Judges,” “Bel and the Serpent,” and “Exodus”) where scriptural titles set the themes is that of Orleanna Price, the wife of a man “who could never love her,” a woman who tells her story to the ghost of her dead child, and a person who sees herself as “captive witness” to events that occurred during her year and one-half (1959–61) in the Congo. To Orleanna, “hell hath no fury like a Baptist preacher” (Kingsolver 1999, 8). Her narrative focuses upon the family stepping down “on a place [they] believed unformed,” on their desire to have dominion, on their limited knowledge of almost everything, and on the unnameable guilt that she still carries with her (9–10). Orleanna’s story illustrates the complicity that comes with silence and the “common hunger” shared by Nathan and others out to conquer the Congo.

In “The Revelation,” Orleanna explains her initial ignorance about bringing Betty Crocker cake mixes into the jungle and her slow learning about Congolese cultural practices. She wanted to be a part of Kilanga and be Nathan’s wife, but she acknowledges her true position: “I was his instrument, his animal. Nothing more ... just one of those women who clamp their mouths shut and wave the flag as their nation rolls off to conquer another in war” (Kingsolver 1999, 88). Orleanna muses retrospectively on her political mistakes as well as her cultural ones, recognizing parallel behaviors between Nathan and national leaders. Thinking about Eisenhower’s need for control and retired diplomat George F. Kennan’s belief that the U.S. should not have “the faintest moral responsibility for Africa” (96), she reconstructs Nathan’s similar need for control, as well as his desire for distance from the consequences of his acts.

The longer she lives in Kilanga, the clearer Orleanna’s vision becomes. Remembering a man who seduced her with promises of “green pastures,” she now sees a “righteous” and unbending judge, an abusive husband and father for whom ownership is the norm. Trying to make sense of Nathan’s transformation to a tyrant, Orleanna correctly identifies the turning point to be World War II and Nathan’s escape from the Death March from Bataan that killed the rest of his company (Kingsolver 1999, 197). Returning home a man who blamed others for his own sense of “sin,” Nathan refuses her touch. When she jokes, Nathan hits her. When she listens to stories about the war on the radio, he tells her not to “gloat before Christ” about her “undeserved...
blessing.” When they have sex, he blames her for her “wantonness.” When she stands still, he condemns her “idleness.” When she or one of the girls suffers, he accuses them of “a failure of virtue.” Occupied by Nathan’s mission “as if by a foreign power,” she falls prey, allowing him “full possession of the country once known as Orleanna Wharton. . . .” Drawing parallel behaviors between Nathan and the colonizers, Orleanna sees how her own “lot was cast with the Congo . . . barefoot bride of men who took her jewels and promised the Kingdom” (198–201).

Reconstructing the political espionage in the Congo, when America and Belgium “divided the map beneath [her] feet,” the fifteen years after Independence, when Senator Church and his special committee looked into the secret operations in the Congo, Orleanna itemizes specifically the people and the politics involved. Appropriately she does so under the title heading of “Bel and the Serpent,” a text from the Apocrypha; to most a book “of fear mongers who . . . want to scare people” (Kingsolver 1999, 328). Her history reveals the men who fit that description, including her husband. While the Congolese station chief, hired by CIA head Allen Dulles to arrange a coup, hired a scientist, Dr. Gottlieb, to make a poison that would kill or disfigure Patrice Lumumba, Orleanna was trying to protect her children and escape the “dreadful poison” raining down upon her from her husband’s obsessive behavior. Sponging her five-year-old who was dying from malaria, Orleanna was oblivious to the “scent of unpleasant news” that she now knows: on that same August day, Mobutu Sese Seko was promoted to colonel in exchange for one million dollars in United States money to guarantee his loyalty; Lumumba is put under arrest in a house surrounded by “Mobutu’s freshly purchased soldiers;” and, after Lumumba’s execution in January, the Congo is “left in the hands of soulless, empty men” (320, 323). Tracking the history of that period, author Bill Berkeley confirms that the Congo was left in the hands of tyrants, white and black, who, throughout Mobutu’s thirty-four years of “brutality unmatched” in the colonial era and after, “took the jewels” and killed the people (2001, 117).

Plagued by unanswerable “if” questions, Orleanna closes her narrative in the “Exodus” chapter on a note that is sad, insightful, and redemptive. Free of Nathan’s control, she chooses to speak and in voice comes redemption. She begins by defining the need to understand the deceptive nature of words, a recurring theme in the novel: “Independence is a complex word in a foreign tongue. To resist occupation, whether you’re a nation or merely a woman, you must understand the language of your enemy. Conquest and liberation and democracy and divorce are words that mean squat . . . when you have hungry children . . .” (Kingsolver 1999, 383). Orleanna’s wisdom about the space between words moves her to change. She accepts responsibility for her
complicity and acquires the words for her story. For Orleanna, telling her story is a syncretic process, as she aims to reconcile what has gone before.

Like Orleanna, the highly intelligent fourteen year old twins, Leah and Adah, stand still and silent under their father’s autocratic rule for much of their time in the Congo. They stand, however, at different ends of the Nathan continuum. Leah, an avid conversationalist, likes spending time with her father more than she likes “doing anything else,” pays him due homage, and vows “to work hard for His favor, surpassing all others.” She is, as her twin sister notes with disdain, “Our Father’s star pupil” (Kingsolver 1999, 36-38). Adah, the twin who suffers from hemiplegia, loves palindromes, and does not speak until she is an adult, ridicules her father throughout her narrative with a brilliant ironic wit. Both, however, capture Nathan’s destructive behaviors in their narratives: Leah via unconscious irony that grows into conscious knowledge and Adah via conscious understanding of her father’s pride and ignorance. Both undergird their “Father” story with the a narrative of domination and greed in the Congo, demonstrating similarities. By the end of the novel, their diverse views connect, and each woman names herself a pagan of sort, an “un-missionary” (525). Like their mother they come to see that the Emperor, in this case “Our Father,” is not wearing any clothes. Like their mother, they also believe that they are responsible in some way for the horrors that happen in Africa and they seek forgiveness.

Leah begins with stories about Nathan’s arrogance and abuse. Watching Nathan correct Orleanna’s mistaken notions about items to take to the Congo, she sees his disdain for the woman he associates with the “coin-jingling sinners” in the temple (Kingsolver 1999, 13). Leah next observes Rachel fall victim to a strap thrashing when she paints her fingernails bubble-gum pink, to Nathan a warning signal “of prostitution” (15). A third example appears as the family lands in Leopodville, and Nathan arrogantly dismisses Reverend Underdown’s kind efforts as an attack on his self-reliance. Leah’s comments upon landing in Kilanga are ironic: “He led us out . . . into the light. . . . Our journey was to be a great enterprise of balance. My father, of course, was bringing the Word of God—which fortunately weighs nothing at all” (18, 19). Leah is both wrong and right about “light” and “balance” in ways that she cannot yet imagine.

In Kilanga, Leah’s sisters prefer to be mother’s helpers, but she prefers to help father “work on his garden.” Her garden story becomes a parable of the minister’s inability to harvest either seeds or souls. Nathan plans his Garden of Eden to be his “first African miracle” and instructs his daughter while they work with a moral paradigm about the balance of God’s “world of work and rewards.” He states, “Great sacrifice, great rewards!” (Kingsolver 1999, 37). When Mama Tataba cautions Nathan about both his method and the poi-
sonwood plant, he cites scripture and ignores her words. Next morning, with “a horrible rash” and swollen eye caused by the red dust from the tree, Nathan, one of “God’s own,” feels unjustly cursed. Denying responsibility for his own foolish acts, he screams out his rage at his family.

While Nathan heals, Mama Tataba reconstructs the garden shifting the design from flat to hills and valleys so that the seeds will grow, and later Leah watches as an angry Nathan levels it again. When Nathan does follow Mama Tataba’s design, plants do grow but bear no fruit, because, they lack pollinators. To Leah, Nathan’s failed efforts contradict his theory of balance and rewards, and his words about cause signify nothing: the Bible convention in Atlanta, Nathan tells Leah, “debated about the size of heaven...” and “there’s room enough for everybody,” especially the “righteous” (Kingsolver 1999, 78). Empty words, like empty vines, bear no fruit, Leah understands.

At fifteen, the more Leah learns about the ways of Kilanga, the more complicated her life becomes. As the sisters spy on Eeben Axelroot, securing information about the CIA, guns, tools, army clothes, and “distant voices in French and English” that she will later comprehend, Leah also learns the language of Kikango and begins to recognize the wide gap between cultures, between American games like “Hide and Seek” and the Congolese children’s game of “Find Food” (Kingsolver 1999, 109, 114). Embarrassed by her father’s ignorant and arrogant behavior, Leah shifts her ground. Catalysts are many, but the most important ones are her relationship with Anatole, an African teacher and co-worker whom she comes to love and marry; her increasing knowledge about war and politics, especially about Lumumba’s revolutionary struggle; and her nursing to Ruth May and Oleanna through a horrible bout of malaria. Each drives Leah to break the order of “Our Father” and join with “the inhabitants of this land” that she is coming to love (187).

The two episodes that solidify Leah’s attitude about her father and her loss of his kind of faith are the election held by the villagers in Nathan’s church and Ruth May’s death. These two episodes also signify Kingsolver’s testament to the power of language understood and her indictment of Nathan’s rhetoric. During Sunday service, in the midst of Nathan’s sermon about false idols from the “Apocrypha,” the congregation is inattentive. Finally Tata Ndu, the tribal chief, stands and cuts Nathan off to hold “an election on whether or not to accept Jesus Christ as the personal Savior of Kilanga.” Nathan shrieks that his behavior is “blasphemy,” but Ndu hoists Nathan upon his own white imperialist petard. Ndu states that “white men have brought us many programs to improve our thinking...Jesus and elections” are two. “You say these things are good, You cannot say now they are not good.” Leah feels a chill as her father begins speaking “slowly, as if to a half-wit” and then blows up, insulting the whole congregation. To Leah,
Ndu "states truth" about Nathan's, and other white men's ignorance: "You believe we are mwana, your children, who knew nothing until you came here" (Kingsolver 1999, 333). Explaining the foolishness of such thought, Ndu clarifies the history of his learning handed down across generations, the philosophy of cultural sharing, the politics of a tribal government that teaches the need to listen to each man's voice before making a choice and then to select only if the entire community agrees, and the dangers of a majority vote capable of excluding up to forty-nine percent of the people. The congregation votes and Jesus loses, eleven to fifty-six (334). Leah sees how Nathan has no sense at all of the culture he wants to civilize; his message is as irrelevant as his Kentucky seeds to the Congo environment.

Kingsolver cleverly wedgs the personal and political in both Leah's reflections and Tata Ndu's connection of Nathan's actions to other white colonizers whose "Christian" rhetoric resounds with bigotry. Interestingly, writing about ongoing evil in Africa today, Bill Berkeley like Ndu, rebuts the views of two authors who, like Nathan, continue to perpetuate stereotypes of African inferiority. He dismisses as "nonsense" their notions that current violence results from a lack of "Western enlightenment," a "new-age primitivism" or the "superstitions" that "supposedly flourish in tropical rain forests" (2001, 9).

Leah loses any faith that she had left in both her father and his God when Ruth. May dies from a venomous snake bite, and her father has no words to explain the child's death, except that his youngest daughter "wasn't baptized yet." Seeing an "ugly man" who desired the personal glory of baptizing his child with all of Kilanga's children, the daughter who had idolized her father, now could not stand to look at him. Amidst torrential rains, Nathan appears like Lear, a mad father abandoned by his daughters, wandering in the wilderness and speaking in words that few can understand. Leah notes the bizarre and almost humorous irony, when Bwanga, one of Ruth May's friends, asks, "Mah-dah-mey-I?" The children remember Ruth May's game and echo her words, looking at her dead body and asking again and again in a rising plea: "Mother May I?" While the children chant to "Mother" seeking wisdom and permission, Father, Leah observes, continued his biblical oration without any clear idea of what was going on (Kingsolver 1999, 374-75). Nathan lacks the wisdom that Lear gained from his suffering; Nathan is deaf to the truth just as he is deaf to the language nuances of the Congolese culture.

When Leah sings her part of the "Song of the Three Children," the song that closes the novel becomes a history and a promise. She knows that there is no justice in the world, but she sustains her belief in a certain kind of grace. Like Brother Fowles, she listens to the people, trusts in a dynamic Creation
which will not “suffer in translation,” and remains with Anatole and their family in Africa, the land she chooses as her own.

Adah begins her journey in a much different way than Leah. Although they are identical twins, Adah sees herself as a “lame gallimaufry” who is definitely not her father’s “star pupil.” Associating herself with both “Jekyll and Hyde” because of her dark desires and crooked body, Adah chooses silence, recognizing its advantages in certain circumstances, especially in Kilanga. Yet she aligns herself most often with Emily Dickinson, using her poetry as a kind of personal philosophy that guides her narrative: both liked to “dwell in the darkness” (i.e., a world of secrets and revelation), and both “Tell All the Truth but tell it slant” (Kingsolver 1999, 34, 295, 407). Her slanted truth carries a skeletal tone, especially about “Our Father,” who punishes his children for being female or for straying from his puritanical path with the “dreaded Verse.” Adah’s words about her father are brilliant and caustic; there is little that she does not notice.

“Our Father speaks for all of us, as far as I can see” (Kingsolver 1999, 32), Adah says as she begins her analysis of Nathan’s behavior in Kilanga. Not only does Nathan silence his family, but he insults them and has since the time of the twins’ birth. Adah sarcastically surmises her father’s attitude about her own condition: “Our Father probably interpreted Broca’s aphasia as God’s Christmas bonus to one of his worthier employees” (34). She too comments upon her father’s garden fiasco, his distance from and lack of concern about family members, and his passion for the Apocrypha. However, Adah’s stories about “The Verse,” her father’s paradoxical sermons, and his persistent insult and abuse of family all connect, and each adds a specific dimension of Nathan’s character that relates his behavior to broader public events.

“The dreaded Verse is our household punishment,” states Adah, “we Price girls are castigated with the Holy Bible” (Kingsolver 1999, 59). Nathan writes some scriptural reference for the child-offender; the offense could be any act, from painting one’s nails to saying damn, that “Our Father” considered a sin. Then the “poor sinner” must copy “Jeremiah 48: 18 . . . and additionally, the ninety-nine verses that follow it” (59). Her satiric commentary on her father’s preference for “his particularly beloved Apocrypha” slides into a reductio ad absurdum set of questions that parallel Nathan’s “impressive” outcomes with her own “grocery sums in the Piggly Wiggly” to the case of the “cursing parrot” Methuselah who was “exempt from the Reverend’s rules. . . in the same way Our Father was finding the Congolese people beyond his power. Methuselah was a sly little representative of Africa itself, living openly in our household.” Adah concludes with delicious wit: “One might argue, even, that he was here first” (60).
From “Genesis” through “The Judges,” Adah describes her father’s ignorant errors as he attempts to convert the villagers to his point of view. Her palindrome for Nathan’s sermonizing, his “high-horse show of force” is the “Amen enema” (Kingsolver 1999, 69). As the Reverend towers over the altar, Adah watches the congregation stiffen, and recalls the dead fish on the riverbank, one of her father’s conversion mistakes. Nathan promised Kilanga’s hungry people “the bounty of the Lord, more fish than they had ever seen in their lives,” but he executes “a backward notion of the loaves and fishes,” sending men out to pitch dynamite in the river. The villagers did feast all day, but there was no ice to save the thousands of fish that went bad along the bank. Nathan’s destructive act won him no converts. To Adah, he appeared incapable of understanding why, just as he could not understand how saying “words wrong” led only outcasts to his flock.

Nathan’s method is his meaning and that is his mistake, according to Adah: “Our Father has a bone to pick with this world, and oh, he picks . . . it with the Word. His punishment is the Word, and his deficiencies are failures of words. . . . It is a special kind of person who will draw together a congregation, stand up before them with a proud, clear voice, and say words wrong, week after week” (Kingsolver 1999, 213–14). Adah observes the Reverend shouting: “TATA JESUS IS BANGALA!” every Sunday, while people sit scratching themselves in wonder. “Bangala means something precious and dear. But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree. Praise the Lord . . . for Jesus will make you itch” (276). The irony seems clear to all but Nathan. He fails to see how the language of the region, rich in tonal ambiguities, describes far better than his English the complex antitheses that face people in his congregation. He expects only that they, like his family, will do as he teaches.

After the Congo achieves independence, after the family loses its stipend and all contacts with the larger world, after Orleanna and Ruth May fall “sick nigh unto death,” the girls had to endure Nathan’s “escalating rage” and physical abuse. Adah remembers the “bruises” and connects her father’s abusive behavior with the secrets she learns about Ike and the planned assassination of Lumumba (Kingsolver 1999, 219). Why the “King of America” wants a tall, thin man in the Congo to be dead is a shock to Adah. “How is it different,” she wonders, “from Grandfather God sending the African children to hell for being born too far from a Baptist Church?” Adah wants to stand up in church and ask her father: “Might those pagan babies send us to hell for living too far from a jungle?” (298). Adah never asks her father those questions, but she carries them with her when she leaves the Congo and decides to speak.
Free from Nathan’s righteous rage, Adah finds her voice in a language of self-definition and science at Emory University, where she finds a future as a neonatal physician and researcher on AIDS and Ebola. Profaning her father’s religious obsession, she states, “I recite the Periodic Table of Elements like a prayer; I take my examinations as Holy Communion; and the pass of the first semester was a sacrament” (Kingsolver 1999, 410). When she commutes back to her mother’s house, searching for Nathan’s military discharge to provide her tuition benefits, she discovers that his medal was not for “heroic service” but for “having survived.” Though the conditions were “technically honorable . . . unofficially they were: Cowardice, Guilt, and Disgrace” (414). Adah finally understands why the Reverend could not flee the same jungle twice. Sixteen years later, Adah, like Orleanna and Leah, asks, “How many of his sins belong also to me? How much of his punishment?” (491). She too tries to make sense of her complicity. Unwilling to engage in the “politics of forgetting,” Adah tells the hard truth in her own poetic way.

The youngest and the oldest of the daughters, Ruth May and Rachel, lack the astute insight, sense of complicity for wrongs done in the past, and passionate commitment to make the world better for others than their twin sisters share. Both, however, each in her own humorous and sad way, show the evil results of their father’s behavior, and both stories illustrate the consequences of white supremacy in ways the reader least expects.

Ruth May’s time in the novel is short; she arrives in the Congo at age five and dies from the bite of a diabolical green mamba snake when she is six. Her words are few, but her naive voice reveals the prejudicial attitudes shaped by her father and a religious rhetoric of white superiority and biblical truth. Her statements about African people or blacks in general, her tales about parental conflict, and her “political” comments are never completely correct, but they illustrate well the outcomes of discrimination. Ruth May begins by repeating words of her father and expands into ordinary Georgia attitudes: “God says the Africans are the Tribes of Ham,” the worst of Noah’s three sons, and “Noah cursed all of Ham’s children to be slaves forever. . . .” She thinks about “colored children” in Georgia, who are “not gifted” and, as Ruth May heard a man in church say, “. . . different from us and needs ought to keep to their own.” Ruth May continues, telling readers about Jimmy Crow who “makes the laws” excluding blacks from stores, restaurants, and the zoo. She also tells about a classmate in Sunday school teaching her to talk like the “cannibal” natives: “Ugga bugga lugga” (Kingsolver 1999, 20-21). Ironically, these words parallel those of Khruschev in a newspaper cartoon that appears in an article on Soviet plans for the Congo. Holding “hands and dancing with a skinny cannibal native with big lips and a bone in his hair,” Khruschev sings, “Bingo Bango Bongo, I don’t want to leave the Congo!”
words that sound amazingly like Ruth Ann’s (161). A five year old’s words, humorous as her mistakes may be, paralleled against the Khruschev cartoon, illustrate the breadth of white supremacist attitudes and the depth of Kingsolver’s anti-imperialist ideology that undergirds the narrative. Her story about parental conflict adds to this understanding.

Ruth May hears her parents taking different positions on a range of issues related to the natives. For example, she watches malnourished children with distended stomachs and comments, “I reckon that’s what they get for being the Tribes of Ham.” Father “says to forgive them for they know not what they do.” Mama says, “You can’t hardly even call it a sin when they need every little thing as bad as they do” (Kingsolver 1999, 50–51). When Ruth May notices the lost legs, arms, eyes, and other physical disabilities of the natives, Father says, “They are living in darkness. Broken in body and soul. ..” Mama says, “Well, maybe they take a different view of their bodies.” Ruth May observes that “Mama has this certain voice sometimes ..” and when Father states that “the body is the temple,” Mama says, “Well, here in Africa that temple has to do a hateful lot of work in a day ..” Ruth May sees Father “looking at Mama hard . . with his one eye turned mean,” for talking back to him (53–54). Even Ruth May recognizes the undertow of her parents’ relationship, but Kingsolver uses Ruth May’s voice for more. Ruth May’s story shows how her father places the people of Kilanga alongside his family, always beneath his feet, as she consistently challenges Nathan’s and other exploiters’ sense of superiority.

Nathan’s physical abuse of both her sisters and herself, his assignment of “The Verse,” his trying “to teach everybody to love Jesus” but breeding fear instead, all these acts are visible to Ruth May. So too are the broader politics that bring destruction to Kilanga. Ruth May’s story is “off the mark” in words but on target in meaning. She observes the Belgian Army arrive, recognizes that the “white one knows who is boss” and sees the shoeless “Jimmy Crow boys” who hide out and say “Patrice Lumumba!” (Kingsolver 1999, 123–24). She listens to the doctor who sets her arm argue with her father about those “boys” and “missionary work” in the same debate. When the doctor says that missionary work “is a great bargain for Belgium but . . . a hell of a way to deliver the social services,” listing the abuses of slavery, such as cutting off hands in the rubber plantations, Father becomes angry and shouts, “Belgian and American business brought civilization to the Congo!” (121). Like other colonizers, Nathan associates “civilization” with his God, his language, and his culture.

These are the words Ruth May remembers; these are the words that make her “scared of Jesus” (Kingsolver 1999, 158). These are the words that tell her that her father isn’t listening to anyone but himself. These are the
words that when she has malaria make her believe she is sick “because of doing bad things” (273). These are the words that make Ruth May believe that “being dead is not worse than being alive” but different, because the “view is larger” (540).

Rachel, as clueless and morally neutral as she is, malaprops her way into the reader’s critical vision, because she best represents America’s material culture. Capable of entertaining her sisters with imitation radio commercials—“Medically tested Odo-ro-no stops underarm odor and moisture at the source!”—Rachel is “willing to be a philanderist for peace,” but she can only go so “far where perspiration odor is concerned” (Kingsolver 1999, 148). For Rachel, fashion is more important than culture, politics, or moral issues that she neither sees nor understands. Ironically, however, Rachel sees truth about things that concern her. For example, from the moment the Prices arrive in Kilanga, she sees the truth about Nathan’s position, as well as the family’s place in the Congo. “We are supposed to be calling the shots here,” Rachel begins, “but it doesn’t look to me we’re in charge of a thing, not even our own selves (22). Yet Rachel, like her father, takes for “granite” almost everything, although his assumptions are more serious than Rachel’s expecting a “sweet-sixteen party” or a washing machines in their hut. Rachel’s stories about the welcoming party planned by the natives and the Underdowns’ visit, although only two of many often humorous tales, reinforce stories already told by her mother and the twins. But Rachel’s narrative is different: her tone is one of contempt and her focus is on pragmatic issues, mainly her own gains and losses. Rachel finds herself a place among the exploiters. Even at the end of the novel, three marriages-of-sort later and not yet out of “the Dark Continent,” Rachel still does not believe that “other people’s worries” have “to drag you down” (516).

When the Prices arrive in Kilanga, Rachel feels shoved “into heathen pandemony” as men drum and women sing, welcoming the family. Seeing women dancing and cooking “all bare chested and unashamed,” she observes Father “already on his feet” with “one arm [raised] above his head like one of those gods they had in Roman times, fixing to send down the thunderbolts and the lightening.” When Nathan begins to speak, “Rachel sees his speech as a rising storm” (Kingsolver 1999, 25, 26). Initially the people cheer Nathan’s passion, but Rachel’s stomach knots because the Reverend “was getting that look he gets, oh boy, like Here comes Moses tromping down off of Mount Syanide with ten fresh ways to wreck your life” (27). Rachel, despite her mistake, describes well the poison her father uses to destroy the people’s spirit. As Nathan preaches about nakedness and the “sinners of Sodom,” the natives’ expressions “fall from joy to confusion to dismay” (28). Nathan’s words, unlike those of the Congolese, are not of welcome but of
damnation, and throughout the novel, Nathan continues to use scripture as a weapon of attack.

When the Episcopalian Underdowns who oversee financial affairs for the Mission League bring news of uprisings and the need for the Prices to leave, Nathan’s behavior shows how little he has changed. The Underdowns carry newspapers that cite Belgians as “unsung heroes” who come into a village and “usually interrupt the cannibal natives in the middle of human sacrifice” (Kingsolver 1999, 161). They also bring news about a Soviet plan for moving forward in the Congo, depriving “innocent savages of becoming a free society,” and the election in May for June independence of the Congo. Rachel sees that for her father this news was a “fairy tale,” and she states his response: “An election . . . [w]hy . . . [t]hese people can’t even read a simple slogan . . . Two hundred different languages . . . this is not a nation, it is the Tower of Babel and it cannot hold an election. . . . [T]hey don’t have the . . . intellect for such things” (167–68). Rachel misses the similarities between her father’s words and the articles about “savages,” instead, she becomes angry at having her own wishes for leaving the Congo dashed. Rachel does, however, capture cause: “Father would sooner watch us all perish one by one than listen to anybody but himself” (169). Refusing to heed any advice to leave, Nathan assumes his intractable position.

The remainder of Rachel’s time in Kilanga is short. Under the pretense of engagement to Axelroot, the Afrikaner bush pilot, diamond smuggler, and CIA mercenary, Rachel learns about his espionage activities and eventually escapes with him to Johannesburg, South Africa, the beginning of her exodus experience. After three relationships, two real marriages, one divorce and one death, Rachel inherits her last husband’s (Remy Fairley’s) Equatorial Hotel for businessmen in Brassville and never leaves the continent she so much wanted to escape. She does, however, create her “own domain.” Although she credits herself with never looking back, her final words show that the memory of her father-as-antagonist remains: “Oh, if Father could see me now, wouldn’t he give me The Verse!” (Kingsolver 1999, 515). Congratulating herself for not being like her father, for sounding “un-Christian,” Rachel ironically misses the point that she is in a way most like him in her singlemindedness (516). Although in her own malapropism: “It’s a woman’s provocative to change her mind,” Rachel never does.

Kingsolver ends her complex novel, leaving the reader with an uneasy sense of balance between loss and salvation. Nathan dies guilty, wandering in the jungle, speaking his rote messages about his foreign God, and sustaining his myth of purpose. Ruth Ann dies, and her spirit hovers over her mother offering forgiveness. Rachel, who cares little about others, does understand that she can reap the financial rewards of her white South African hotel.
Orleanna and the twins, however, experience a redemptive sense of worth. Each in her own way learns, in Robert Coles’s words, how “to hold secure one’s own moral and spiritual self” amidst the “crushing institutional forces of the state . . . the marketplace, and . . . the church. . . .” Each is “driven by particular interests” and “passions” (1999, 167). All three women become advocates for justice: civil rights, medical research on AIDS, and revolutionary educational practices for the poor people in the Congo. The novel ends, but Kingsolver’s story is not over. The net in which the Prices and the Congo are caught still exists, because the exploitation embodied in the “missionary” position remains to haunt not only the Congolese but a broader world as well.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, one hundred years after Stanley preached the “gospel of enterprise,” seeking men to work in Africa who would be “missionaries of commerce” (Hochschild 1998, 68), conflict in Africa continues in daily acts of violence and failed efforts at peace. As Tamba Nlandu, professor of philosophy and native of the Congo, explained, the country is divided into antagonistic sections that include multiple warring factions and wars continue even after “peace” treaties are established. Citing tribal and cultural conflicts, as well as power and greed as dominant motives for both Africans and outsiders alike, he sees peace as only a remote possibility (see also Fisher 1999; Fisher and Onishi 2000; Hranjskij 1999, 2000; Shaw 1999; and Traub 2000). 3 Current information about wars appears in daily news stories about countless numbers of people succumbing to disease and hunger in burned, looted villages throughout the Congo. Citing the human toll of thirty-two months of war in “apocalyptic terms,” Karl Vick estimates the dead at three million people, especially children (2001, A1,A5; see also Knickmeyer 2001, Nullis 2001). In late May 2001, Colin Powell, Secretary of State, traveled to Africa and promised to help combat disease and nurture democracy, a hopeful note. Yet Powell’s promises are qualified by his own caution to avoid getting “too committed” and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld’s desire for a sharp reduction in overseas commitments (Knickmeyer 2001, A1,A4). Richard Holbrooke, former ambassador to the United Nations, worked hard but with little success to reduce Congressional antipathy for international peace keeping (Crossette 2001, 2-3). Despite promises of money to fight AIDS, the triumph of human rights is precarious at best, because as journalist David Rieff notes, an “entrenched moral absolutism” limits actions “to identifying atrocities, not doing good deeds” (1999, 40).

The “monolithic cultural views” that Kingsolver questions reappear in a recent interview with George Kennan. Questioned by Richard Ullman about the U.S. role in Russia, Kennan urges detachment: “I would like to
see our government gradually withdraw from its public advocacy of democracy and human rights," establishing a clear distinction between Europe which "naturally, is another matter" because "we are still a large part of the roots of a European civilization" and anywhere else where struggle and violence occur (Ullman 1999, 6). Half a century after Eisenhower, whether Russia or the Congo, Kennan feels "not the faintest moral responsibility."

The power of Kingsolver's novel lies in her ability to question that response. On the surface, The Poisonwood Bible, seems different from earlier works, such as The Bean Trees or Animal Dreams, fiction set mainly in South or Southwest America and occurring in a short span of time. In all her fiction, Kingsolver grapples with clashing cultural values, social justice issues, ecological awareness, and the intersection of private and public concerns. The Poisonwood Bible, however, is more complex; its images resonate across levels of meaning, allusions are multiple, and the stories of its narrators carry deep spiritual meaning. As re-told narratives cross and refract, shedding different shades of light on the same truth, ethical questions multiply. Unlike authors such as Joseph Conrad, who, as Chinua Achebe states, "eliminate the African as a human factor" and reduce "Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty . . . mind," Kingsolver reverses expectations and roles: it is not the Congolese who are ignorant or "savage" or say the wrong words but the colonizers (North 2001, 40). Words, Kingsolver warns, have multiple meanings, especially in the Congo. To decode those meanings, readers must "look at what happens from every side and consider all the other ways it could have gone" (1999, 8). Kingsolver dares us to do so and to discover the moments of truth in the telling. This essay offers one "particular" angled version of a multidimensional novel: it illustrates how in "(un)doing the missionary position," Kingsolver "connects consequences with actions" and challenges readers to do likewise.

Notes


3 Information comes from a lecture that Tamba Nlandu delivered to my honors seminar on February 2, 2000. Emmanuel Dongala, novelist and professor of chemistry at Simon's Rock College, confirms that view in his story of escape from the Congo in 1997 (Blackburn 2000, 1, 3).
Interestingly, in his new novel, _Little Boys Come From the Stars_ (2001), he offers the ingenuous viewpoint of a child to satirize the world of adults and to show how one preserves one's values in a corrupt and violent society.

Hochschild comments that Conrad (born Konrad Korzeniowski) believed Leopold's mission was both "noble" and "civilizing" and states that because most critical schools are not comfortable acknowledging the "genocidal scale of killing in Africa," they free _Heart of Darkness_ loose "from its historical moorings." Hochschild writes, "It was as if the act of putting Africa on paper were the ultimate proof of the superiority of European civilization (1998, 132, 142, 148). Michela Wrong disagrees, maintaining that _Heart of Darkness_ is "primarily a withering attack on the hypocrisy of contemporary colonial behaviors." She sees Conrad as a man "preoccupied with rotten Western values . . ." (2000,10).

**Works Cited**


Nullis, Claire. 2001. "Red Cross Reacts to Death of Congo Aid Workers." The Sunday Gazette 29 April, A11.


