

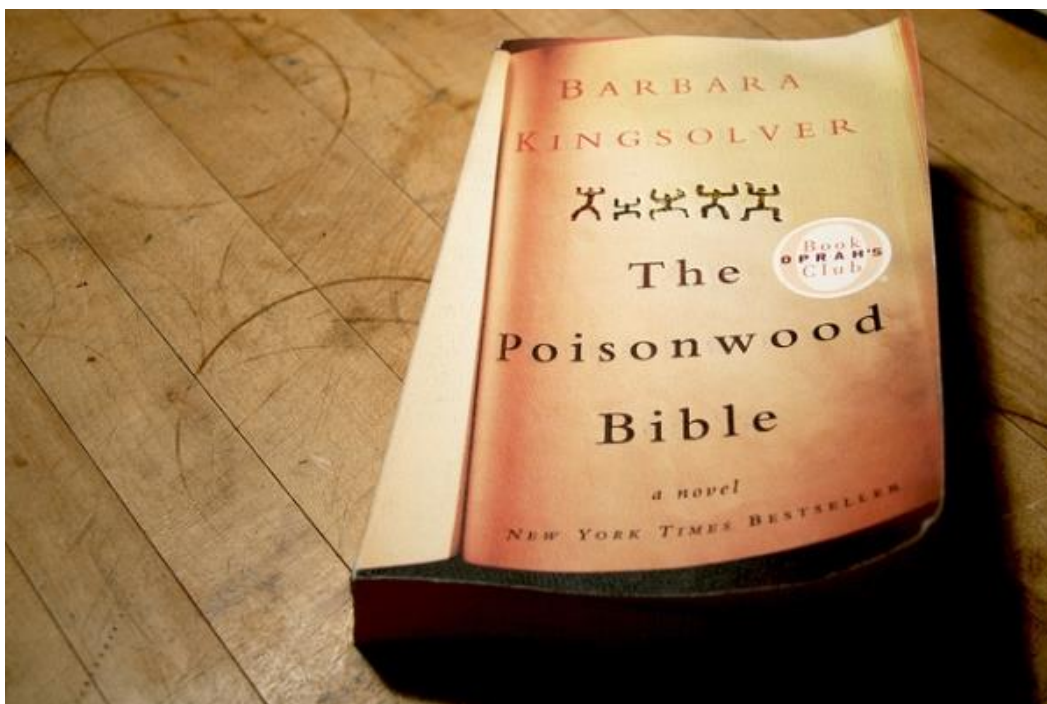
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The Poisonwood Bible, Lumumba and A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art

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by Leonard Vogt



THE POISONWOOD BIBLE. BARBARA KINGSOLVER. HARPERTORCH.

The Poisonwood Bible. Barbara Kingsolver. Harpertorch.

Lumumba. Directed by Raoul Peck. 115 Minutes.

A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art. Museum of African Art.

I divide my Urban Study "Art, Politics and Protest" course into five units: an introductory unit of many art forms (posters, cartoons, t-shirts, poetry, Web sites) representing various political themes; a unit on AIDS, both domestic and international; a unit on political protest art of Latin America (see Teaching Note on Manlio Argueta's *One Day of Life* in RT #42); a unit on imperialism in Africa; and a final unit on Art Against War. I center my imperialism in Africa unit around Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*.

When I first read the novel in 1998, I knew I had to teach it and "Art, Politics and Protest" seemed the perfect place. It is long, and the course already included a large amount of reading and writing, but I chanced it and, by and large, my students read it and loved it.

On a strictly narrative level, *The Poisonwood Bible* is about an American family from Georgia in the early 1960s that go to the Belgian Congo to Christianize the Africans. The firebrand behind this adventure is Nathan Price, the Baptist minister who brings along, with various degrees of reluctance, his wife Orleanna, and their four daughters, Rachel (the eldest), Leah and Adah (the twins), and May Ruth (the youngest). The narrative progresses from the points of view of the five females and the reader gets various perspectives on what their years in the Congo meant for each character.

Orleanna's chapters are set years later back in the States as she ruminates on Africa, religion, her husband, and her children. The daughters' chapters are set during their time in Africa and reveal very different approaches to the Congo missionary work, the children's reactions to both their father and his religion, and their impending political awareness of Patrice Lumumba's rise and fall from power. Rachel, the platinum blond teen-queen wannabe, hates and resents the trip from the beginning, but stays the longest and exploits Africa the most. The twins Leah and Ada, although initially intellectually and physically quite different, merge into close allies as they grow to maturity in their new homeland. May Ruth, the five year old, has the time of her life as she spontaneously and innocently responds to her new playground of the Congo. The first person voice of Baptist minister Nathan, as he attempts to spiritually conquer the Congo, is never directly heard, but rather dissected through the narratives of his wife and daughters.

Underneath these characters, to whom Kingsolver gives a superb richness, is the Congo itself, its years of torture by the Belgians, and its forthcoming betrayal by its former colony as well as by the United States. At its most overt level, *The Poisonwood Bible* is a novel about imperialism in Africa, but this level is only slowly revealed through, and indirectly compared to, Kingsolver's exploration of Nathan's "imperialism" over his family and the Congo through religion and patriarchy.

I create study questions for any literature I teach and, since there is never enough time to do this novel justice, these study questions become the medium through which my students understand and share their responses to the novel. I create questions that hopefully generate an interest in the relationships among the characters of the mother and her four daughters, their perceptions of the religious and patriarchal "imperialism" of their husband and father respectively, and the election and assassination of Patrice Lumumba as it unfolds through the narratives of the female characters. From the two or three class periods my students devote to discussing and sharing responses to these study questions, they get a fairly good overview of the multiple levels of politics running through *The Poisonwood Bible*.

To particularly emphasize and elucidate the very short independence of the Congo and its ultimate fall into years of dictatorship, I show the film *Lumumba* and the art book *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art*, both of which greatly enhance the students' understanding and discussion of Patrice Lumumba and the politics of the Congo. The film is excellent and, in some instances, exactly parallels the novel's perceptions of Lumumba as narrated through one of the daughters, Leah. The DVD version of the film also has historical footage "extras" of Lumumba addressing his new nation and later being arrested at the airport for being a traitor. For even greater clarity of this moment of imperialism in the Congo, I take eight pieces of art work from *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art*, showing specific moments of Lumumba's election and the events leading to his assassination: "Lumumba's Speech Causes Panic," "Cast Your Vote for Lumumba," "Belgian Congo 1885-1959," "Lumumba At a Very Serious Village Meeting," "Zaire Independence," "30th of June 1960 (Independence Day)," "Lumumba, Master of the World," and "Lumumba in Chains."

Since this Urban Study course "Art, Politics and Protest" explores the political protest of various art forms, I asked students at the end of this unit on imperialism in Africa to compare and contrast the three art forms we studied. For the final in-class exam, I asked them to explain what they had learned from *The Poisonwood Bible* about religion, patriarchy, and their ultimate connections with imperialism. *The Poisonwood Bible* has been one of my greatest teaching delights. It is a great piece of literature and political protest that challenged my students at every level.



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