Gesture and Power

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Part I

PERFORMATIVE ENCOUNTERS,

POLITICAL BODIES
Meeting Kimbangu: Everyday Encounters and Embodied Prophecies in Luozi

January 30, 2006. Wearing baggy sweat pants, an old T-shirt and sneakers, and a scarf tied over my hair, I join my friends outside, closing the door of the house behind me.

“Let’s go, then,” I say.

Kilanda (big sister), Pierre (brother), Suzanne (little sister), Phillipe (Kilanda’s baby), and I are headed to one of the family’s many fields in Luozi to plant soybeans. Up and down several winding red dirt paths, over rough troughs, past grazing goats, and through thigh-high grass, we walk until we arrive after about ten minutes in a field next to the overgrown cement foundation and half-finished walls of the future site of a bigger and better Kongo DMNA church.

“This is it,” Pierre gestures.

I gaze at the site, shading my eyes from the bright sunlight. We put down our water jugs, baskets, and hoes, and Kilanda places Phillipe in the care of his little aunt under the shade of a colorful umbrella. Kilanda and Pierre begin to test my knowledge of plants, which is not too developed, since I am a city girl. Nevertheless, I am determined to show that I had learned something during my time in Luozi. Pierre points to the first plant.
“Saka-saka” (meaning cassava-leaves), I say excitedly. He chooses another.
“Nkovi” (collard greens—now that was an easy one).
“Et ca?” (And this?) Kilanda gestures to yet another plant.
“Nguba” (peanuts), I answer.

As they prepare for all of us to plant soybeans, I begin to take photos of the plants and the field. Kilanda notices an older woman at work clearing the overgrowth in one room of the church structure, and so we go over there to say hello. She is a member of the DMNA church and looks to be in her sixties. Her head is covered with a scarf, and she is wearing a beige sleeveless tank top with a pagne wrapped around her waist. She is deftly pulling weeds and grass from the ground by hand and wipes the sweat from her brow with her forearm as she stands to greet us as we approach the structure. Kilanda introduces me as a noire-americaine (Black American), and the woman smiles, and then spontaneously breaks into song:

Tata Kimbangu weti zieta kaka mu Afelika
Weti niku nanga nsi ye kamba vo lusiama.
Ah Ah Ah lusiana AhAhAh lusiana
weti niku nanga nsi ye kamba vo lusiama
Ah Ah Ah lusiana AhAhAh lusiana
weti niku nanga nsi ye kamba vo lusiama
Ah Ah Ah tata ye mama nge wabo kulua
simba sabala kia mpeve ye kota mu mvita

Papa Kimbangu always walks in Africa
He moves the world and says to be strong
Ahh Be strong, be strong,
He moves the world and says to be strong
Ahhh Be strong, be strong,
He moves the world and says to be strong
Fathers and Mothers you who are called
Hold the sword of the spirit and enter the war

Had I experienced this same situation when I first arrived in the Congo, I probably would not have understood the implications of her impromptu song and cultural performance. However, months before this, in September, as I walked through Luozi with Ne Nkamu, my chief cultural consultant, music/Kikongo language tutor, and friend, we passed through the yard of an older couple. When Ne Nkamu introduced us, the elderly gentleman took off his hat, smiled, and said something about the prophecy coming true. A few days later, Ne Nkamu and I crossed the path of a group of men at work on con-
structing a building. As I introduced myself and tried my fledgling Kikongo by asking them their clans, some of the men responded and then asked me the same question. As Ne Nkamu stepped in to explain that I don't know my clan because of slavery and the slave trade to the Americas, another man chimed in about the prophecy of Simon Kimbangu, and some of the others nodded. Moreover, on my first meeting with representatives of Bundu dia Kongo in Luozi, the same comment was made, and they explained to me that this particular prophecy of Kimbangu was recorded in their sacred book, and they have created a list of regulations to govern the impending return of African Americans to the Congo.

Over and over again, especially during my time in Luozi, people associated my presence, my very body, with the fulfillment of the prophecy of Tata Simon Kimbangu. The prophecy that Simon Kimbangu supposedly made during the colonial period basically said that Black Americans would come back to the Congo to help liberate it, and also teach the Congolese all the technical knowledge and skills they needed to be more successful than their colonial oppressors. Although there doesn't seem to be any text that Kimbangu actually wrote himself proclaiming this, the prophecy has been immortalized in eyewitness accounts, colonial government documents, song lyrics of the Kimbanguist Church, the sacred book of Bundu dia Kongo, and in the memories of Kongo people. What exactly was this prophecy and what did it have to do with me?

An informant told anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey the following prophecy, saying it dated to 1921: “Pray to your brethren who were sold in the ivory and rubber to the country of the Americans. The Lord will send them to this country to teach crafts and give skills surpassing those of the whites” (1968, 177). Writing from Luozi in June 1921, colonial administrator Léon Cartiaux conveyed the claims of Masamba and Kinko, two BisiKongo carpenters who went to the town of Nkamba and said they heard Kimbangu say publicly that “for so many years the Belgians are our rulers and haven't done anything for us till this day, but before long Americans will arrive here in order to make war with the Belgians and become our rulers.”2 Kimpianga Mahaniah cites Belgian author Maquet-Tombu, who reported a deported prophet as saying that “the black Americans will soon come and conquer the Congo” (1993, 411). Joseph Van Wing, a Belgian Catholic missionary and longtime inhabitant of the Congo, also mentioned a variant of the prophecy when he wrote about Mpadism, another Kongo-based prophetic movement influenced by Simon Kimbangu, which occurred from 1939 to 1946. Clearly drawing on the implications and antagonisms of WWII, the prophecy foretold a war won by the Germans, who will give the Congolese access to arts and sciences, and
then, “after twenty or thirty years . . . the German king would make Black Americans come to the Congo. He will kick out all the foreign missionaries and allow the Blacks to pray to God among themselves” (1958, 600). MacGaffey also discusses the prophecy as shown in a hymn of the Kimbanguist Church:

If the King of the Americans comes
To restore the King,
The chiefs of this world shall pass away.
If the King of the Americans comes
The troubles of this world shall pass away
If the King of the Americans comes
The King of the Blacks will return.3

This prophecy is notable because it is about not only Americans, but Black Americans in particular, coming (returning) to the Congo with technical know-how and skills, to teach and aid the Congolese in gaining their independence from the Belgians. Several authors have linked this reference to the spread throughout Central Africa of the ideas, publications, and movement of Marcus Garvey. This is particularly poignant because at least one Congolese intellectual, John Panda Farnana, had been identified as a Garveyist agitator, while other Congolese had been found to have Garveyist publications in their possession. Kimbangu himself worked for a time at Huileries du Congo Belge, a British owned oil refinery, alongside Black Americans and Anglophone Africans who discussed ideas of Pan-Africanism (Kodi 1993, 263–88; Mahaniah 1993, 414–16). Thus, Kodi posits Marcus Garvey as the “King of the Americans” who is mentioned in the prophecies (1993, 278). Moreover, both Mahaniah and Kodi link circulating rumors of the arrival of a ship on the Congo River signifying the end of Belgian rule, with the Black Star Lines of Marcus Garvey (Kodi 1993, 279; Mahaniah 1993, 415). The actual presence of African Americans at the Huileries du Congo Belge and their interactions with Europeans there affected Congolese perceptions of African Americans as a group. According to Makidi Kuntilma, an informant that Kimpianga Mahaniah interviewed, even in the 1920s African Americans had a reputation for rebelliousness and had a great influence on his uncle Massamba, who also worked at the oil refinery. “He [his uncle] was so influenced by black American culture that he could speak Pidgin English. Even his temperament was affected. He respected no one, even Europeans, with whom he had many fights. . . . The black American was seen as heroic and was very much admired for challenging Europeans” (Mahaniah 1993, 416).
What also cannot be discounted are shared experiences of discrimination, mistreatment, and denigration. Frantz Fanon’s analysis of the “fact of blackness” examines how the colonial context creates both corporeal and historico-racial schemas by which Black people come to understand themselves as objectified, inferior bodies in the gaze of whiteness (1967, 109–40). By highlighting how these schemas work in everyday life in bolstering common oppressive conditions for Blacks living under White domination across the world, Fanon allows us to also consider the role of shared experiences of racial oppression in shaping Simon Kimbangu’s prophecies about African American collaborators and saviors fighting with the Congolese against the Belgians. All these factors created a greater sense of connection between Kongo people and African Americans during the colonial period.4

These exchanges and encounters that I experienced bring us back to the intersection of embodiment, performance, religion, and Kongo nationalism. The fact that I was a brown-skinned African American conducting research in a West Central African country affected the reception that I received and the development of my research in very specific ways. My very physical presence in the Lower Congo evoked cultural memories of a religious movement that challenged the authority of the Belgians during the colonial period and offered hope for a future free from European colonialism. In this way, I encountered the prophet Simon Kimbangu over and over again as he was invoked as an explanation for the presence of African Americans in the Lower Congo nearly six decades after his physical death. The constant association of my embodied presence with Kimbangu’s prophecy sparked my own interest in understanding the history and evolution of the religious movement that Kimbangu created and its continued salience in everyday life in modern-day Lower Congo. By privileging the body as center, my own body as a researcher is also implicated in the research process and interactions that inform this study. For some my presence was evidence of the truth of the prophecy; for others I was just an American student researcher. From my own perspective, I had come to the Congo as part of a circuitous journey that seemed to always have the continent of Africa at its center.

From the Bronx to Bas-Congo: Journeys and Methods

April, 1, 2005. I have been in the Congo for only a few days and am now living with a Luba host family in Kinshasa. I meet another African American working for the American embassy that then introduces me to a small group of African diasporans living in Kinshasa as employees of various state departments, governments, and nongovernmental organizations. I am invited to
meet everyone at a friendly card game of spades, and as my new acquaintance introduces me to about eight people all seated around a large table with multiple decks of cards on display, someone asks where I was from.

“The Bronx,” I reply as I sit down and accept a soft drink from the host of the party.

“What part of the Bronx? I am from the Bronx too.”

Surprised to find not just another New Yorker but a Bronx native in the Congo with me, I tell him my street intersection, and he says, “Oh, you from the projects. What is the name of those houses again?”

I pause for a moment. I am shocked that he knows my neighborhood, but even more unprepared to have my background revealed for everyone to see. I must admit, for a moment, as I sip my drink in the midst of all these middle- and upper-middle-class Black folks with great jobs, I feel inferior and a bit ashamed of my background. I clear my throat and reply, “Morrisania Houses.”

“Oh yeah, Morrisania. So what’s up? Are you going to play or what?”

The momentary shame that I experienced at this friendly card game was directly linked to the negative stereotypes associated with both the South Bronx and with public housing projects more generally. The Congo as an imagined space suffers from similar problems of negative associations—from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to present-day pessimistic international news coverage emphasizing death, mayhem, and despair. The Bronx and the Congo are two very different geographical spaces; one is an urban borough in the largest city in the United States while the other is a vast country—the second largest in Africa and the eleventh largest in the world in terms of geographic area. However, what they have in common are bad reputations. The Bronx, and especially the South Bronx, became the poster child for urban decay, concentrated poverty, crime, and drug epidemics during the 1970s and 1980s while the Congo conjures up images of war, violence, disease, rape, and political and economic instability after two civil wars (1996–97 and 1998–2003) and continued civil unrest, especially along the eastern border with Rwanda (Rose 1994; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002; Gondola 2002). When I told friends and colleagues that I was going to conduct research in the Congo, their reactions were similar:

“You are going to the Congo? Is it safe?”

“Isn’t there a war going on there?”

“I heard that a lot of women are being raped there. Aren’t you scared?”

I tried to assuage their worries and fears by pointing out that my research would be conducted on the western side of the country, far from the instabil-
ity of the east. Professor Mbala Nkanga, associate professor of theater at the University of Michigan and my dissertation committee member and mentor, was instrumental not only in giving me contacts and bolstering my applications for funding, but also in assuring me that Bas-Congo was a very different space than the larger Congo that gripped the world’s imagination. I owe my entire decision to eventually study in Bas-Congo to him. In regards to my family, I was at least comforted because they knew next to nothing about the Congo and thus didn’t really object to my going there. By then, they were used to my frequent travels across the country and around the world. For most of my relatives in the Bronx, I was just going to an undifferentiated “Africa” and their good-byes to me were combined with jokes such as “watch out for them lions and tigers out there!” In short, the images of both the Bronx and the Congo that permeate most people’s imaginations tend to focus on and exaggerate negative aspects while ignoring the positive. It is true that growing up in the Bronx I saw violence and drug use, but I also saw community togetherness and support; it is true that rape and political instability occur frequently in the Congo, but it is also true that people go to work, love their families, attend church, and try to strengthen their communities. The truth and everyday realities of living in either place, then, are much more nuanced and complex.

My interest in Africa did not start with my family, but rather with my fifth-grade teacher. Ms. Jackson, a young, dynamic African American teacher told my class of Afro-Caribbean, African American, Puerto Rican and Dominican students that the first people on earth, the oldest human skeletons, were found in Africa. Like my classmates, I scoffed at the idea that Africans were first in anything. As she told us that we were all descended from Africans, I found it hard to believe, for I harbored many negative stereotypes of Africans like other Americans, Black and White alike. That life-altering year in Ms. Jackson’s fifth-grade class planted within me the first seeds of interest and pride in having African heritage. Several years later, when I left the Bronx to attend a wealthy, majority-White high school in Pennsylvania as a student through the A Better Chance program, this interest in Africa came with me. Later, I went on to attend Brown University on a full academic scholarship as a student in the Program in Liberal Medical Education (PLME). I was the first in my family to go to college, and I decided to major in Afro-American studies and to study abroad in Ghana. I learned about a Spelman College summer program that I could use to develop a senior honors thesis topic while talking with another American student in Ghana. I participated in the summer program in Portobelo, Panama, and studied Congo dances as performed as part of the carnival tradition in this small town on the Atlantic
coast of Panama. This experience piqued my interest in examining whether the dances themselves could in fact have been brought with enslaved Africans from the Congo region to Panama.

When I decided to forego medical school for graduate school in anthropology, I focused on studying transformations in dance performance culture and initially envisioned a multisited project incorporating both Panama and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Eventually, for my dissertation, I decided to focus exclusively on the Congo, and my project evolved from a focus on dance to incorporating the multiple ways that people intentionally use their bodies for political purposes in performances in everyday life.

My interest in the politics of the body is rooted in my love of dance. My experience as a dancer gave me a different perspective on my research topic. Although dance was all around me in my family and neighborhood growing up (from hip-hop to Jamaican dancehall), I started dancing publicly in Ms. Jackson’s class (which included a “West African” dance performance in front of my entire middle school). I continued to dance throughout middle and high school and college (both at Brown with Fusion Dance Company and in Ghana through courses), focusing especially on dances of Africa and its diasporas. This continued in graduate school and gave me unique preparation for my research in Congo based on the special perspective that I gained through training as a performer of Congolese dance. I am African American, and my grandparents on both sides are originally from North Carolina. However, I had learned how to roll my hips as a young child from my Antiguan godmother and the larger Caribbean community that surrounded me in New York City. These everyday informal lessons helped when I took a Congolese dance class at the University of Michigan. The instructor then invited me to join his company. I danced professionally with Bichini bia Congo, a small Ann Arbor–based company with a MuKongo company choreographer (Biza Sompa) for two years. I performed throughout Michigan, and in places like Atlanta and Kansas City as well. This background aided me in many performance events in the Congo, in that I was able to participate along with others, rather than remaining a distant observer. Because my dance teacher in Ann Arbor is from a nearby area geographically (southern Congo-Brazzaville) and the same Kongo ethnic group, I was already familiar with some of the drum rhythms and knew many of the movements, allowing me to participate at a different level than a true novice. My Congolese (and specifically Kongo) dance background, then, allowed me to have more engaged experiences with performance while in the Congo. For some people there, my familiarity with the music and dance culture was additional proof of Congolese ancestors, no matter how much I tried to explain. My body then, became a tool of my
research approach. The next several sections of the chapter describe the Democratic Republic of Congo as a country overall and try to capture the everyday realities of life in both urban and rural Congo, by describing my two research sites: Kinshasa and Luozi.

The Ethnographic Present of Political and Economic Disarray:
Introducing Kinshasa

The Democratic Republic of Congo (also known as Congo-Kinshasa, to distinguish it from its smaller northern neighbor the Republic of Congo) is large in many ways—land mass, population, and even regarding the large number of political and social challenges that it faces. Located in West Central Africa with just 37 kilometers of coastline along the Atlantic Ocean, the Congo has a total area of 2,344,858 square kilometers, making it roughly one-quarter the size of the United States. It has an estimated population of over seventy-seven million people, and with a median age of just 17.9 years, it is one of many Sub-Saharan African countries experiencing great population growth. Bordered by nine other countries, the Congo is literally at the heart of the African continent and has both influenced and been impacted by violence and civil strife in neighboring countries, from Angola to the south to Rwanda in the east. About 34 percent of Congo’s population lives in urban areas, and its largest city, Kinshasa, has an estimated population of 8.798 million people, a number that rivals even New York City in the United States. Kinshasa is a city of contrasts, with sprawling slums and modern high-rises, congested roadways and street vendors on foot and at makeshift stalls, selling beignets, eau pure, grilled Thomson, and other goods and foodstuffs to passersby. The following vignette demonstrates some of the economic conditions and political tensions that marked my stay in Kinshasa:

May 11, 2005. This morning, the electricity went out around 10:00 AM. My friend Didier and I have plans to go to the National Library and the monument to former president Laurent Kabila. We take the taxi around 1:30 PM over to the library, a small building located right behind the national bank and near the presidential residence (the white house of the Congo) in front of which stands the mausoleum of Laurent Kabila. Didier wants to take me to see the mausoleum, and after he eats at a small restaurant located in the back of a truck, we walk over there. Four soldiers are sitting there guarding the wide walkway. Three are sitting elevated on sandbags and one on a chair. They are wearing navy blue uniforms with matching berets, black boots, and serious faces. One has dark shades on. They talk to Didier in Lingala, and I hardly say anything, letting him to the talking. One hefty guy on the sandbags asks me for my identity card. I dig in my bag and hand him the STA
travel student identification card I have, which is printed in English. He peers at me and asks Didier if I am “Rwandaise” (Rwandan) then “Ougandaise” (Ugandan), immediately taking on a hostile tone and posture. Didier quickly replies, “No, she is American.” They say collectively, “Oh.” Then another soldier asks me to come closer so that he can inspect my bag. I approach him and open the bag, and he looks briefly inside. He gestures that it is ok, and I step back. “Careful!” Didier says, pointing downward, and when I follow his gaze I see that I had almost kicked over an AK-47 that is sitting on the ground. I step cautiously away. After some more conversation, Didier gives one of them (the hefty one) one hundred Congolese francs, and they allow us to pass and give us back our identification cards. As we are leaving, they ask if I have a camera, and I say no, and Didier tells me that they are permitting me to take photos. I ask him about the Rwandan/Ugandan question as we walk, and he explains that they are not welcome here (ils sont persona non grata) because of all the trouble in the east of the country. The grounds are beautiful and well kept overall, and we walk toward the mausoleum, which consists of four bronze-colored hands holding up a white roof with a star at the top, and a recurring lion motif. As we walk around the decorated coffin under glass, and read the inscriptions, I notice four soldiers there as well, sitting in chairs, and yet another slumped against a wall sleeping. Then, I see a line of soldiers march by single file in front of the presidential palace, across from the mausoleum. When we leave the grounds, I immediately notice the contrast between the well-manicured lawns and immaculate mausoleum on the inside of the guarded compound, and the overgrown shrubbery, crumbling sidewalks, cracked and potholed roads, and trash lining the gutters on the outside, punctuated by an overcrowded, rusty taxi squealing by.

This ethnographic excerpt poignantly captures the political, economic, and overall social conditions of the Democratic Republic of Congo as I experienced them, especially during my extended field research there from March of 2005 to March of 2006. Moreover, my own “misidentification” as Rwandan and resulting hostility from the government soldiers indexes a lingering legacy of antagonism toward Uganda and Rwanda as many Congolese blame these two countries in particular for the continued civil unrest and violence in the eastern part of the country. While some might read the soldiers’ reactions as xenophobic, they index nationwide anxiety about the stability of the Congo and the perceived constant instigation of Rwanda and Uganda, neighboring countries that were directly involved in both recent civil wars in the Congo. On the other hand, such an encounter suggests that everyday life
for migrants or workers living in Kinshasa—who actually are from Rwanda and Uganda—must be difficult, following from this mistrust.

The two aforementioned Congolese civil wars (1996–97 and 1998–2003) came to involve at least five of the countries surrounding the Congo, and exacerbated the deteriorating social infrastructure and struggling economy caused by years of mismanagement and corruption under the thirty-two-year dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko. After taking over the country in 1965 through a military coup, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu (later known as Mobutu Sese Seko) ruled the Congo until 1997, when he was overthrown by Laurent Kabila, the leader of a rebel army from the eastern Congo backed by Rwanda and Uganda. After he took power, Kabila fell out with his former allies, which resulted in fighting in the eastern Congo against troops from these two countries, with Kabila backed by Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and even Chad (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002, 238–40). After his own bodyguard assassinated Laurent Kabila in 2001 (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002, 246), his son Joseph Kabila took over. He continued as the president of a transitional government (one president and four vice presidents, or une plus quatre) established after the ceasefire of 2003, and garnered the majority vote in 2006 in the first democratic elections since the country gained independence from Belgium on June 30, 1960. The impact of this political stability is reflected in civil society and everyday conditions across the country and is especially visible in Kinshasa.

As the capital and largest city in the Congo, Kinshasa remains the heart and center of the country. Before the arrival of Europeans, Kinshasa was a trading center in an area originally inhabited by both the Humbu and Teke ethnic groups (La Fontaine 1970, 8). Because it was strategically located at the point where the Congo River became navigable and at the end of the overland route from Matadi, Henry Morton Stanley founded a trading station there in 1881. After King Leopold II gained control over the vast area that became the Congo Free State in 1885, increasing numbers of Europeans moved to Kinshasa because of trade. The population of both European and Congolese inhabitants increased even further after the completion of the railroad in 1898, which started in Matadi and ended in Kinshasa (then known as Leopoldville) (La Fontaine 1970, 10–11). Leopoldville became the colony’s capital in 1930, which again led to a demographic increase, and the African population increased exponentially during WWII as the Congo became a source for sorely needed materials abroad. The demographic growth and population shifts of Leopoldville are clearly shown by looking at census and survey data. In 1923, the total population of Leopoldville was only 17,825, with Europeans outnumbering Africans by 15 to 1. By 1955, more than 300,000 people lived in Leopoldville, with 290,377 Congolese and 15,221 Europeans (La Fontaine
In 1967, Kinshasa (postindependence name for Leopoldville) had an estimated 901,520 inhabitants, in the national census of 1984, 2.6 million people, and today, an estimated 8.798 million people (De Saint Moulin and Ducreux 1969, 121; Institut National de la Statistique 1984; CIA World Factbook). Historically, race played a huge role in the arrangement of the city as spaces were marked as explicitly European or African; European residential and commercial quarters were separated from the peripheral cité indigènes (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 30). Presently, Kinshasa is now the third-largest city in Africa (after Lagos and Cairo), sprawling and ever growing across and beyond its current twenty-four communes (city municipalities).

And what about everyday life in Kin? Although the fighting that continues to this day in the eastern part of the country is what people outside of the country hear about most often in the news media, it was not the main focus or even the most relevant force shaping the everyday lives of people as I saw it in Kinshasa and Luozi. People seemed rather desensitized by it in fact. Rather, the economic depression and dysfunctional infrastructure were the most pressing, especially in the bustling city of Kinshasa. One phrase that people often used to capture the dramatic transformation that has taken place in the country over time in this regard is to say that Kinshasa has gone from “Kinshasa la belle” to “Kinshasa la poubelle” (from Kinshasa the beautiful to Kinshasa the garbage can) (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 35). This references the pristine, well-kept, and modern city Kinshasa was in decades past in comparison to what it looks like today, which is almost at the complete opposite end of the spectrum. The physical state of Kinshasa is like the material embodiment of the nation at the time I did my field research; scarred, unkempt, falling apart, a vestige of its former self. In Kinshasa in 2005–6, five hundred Congolese francs were equal to US$1; by the time I returned in 2010, the value of Congolese francs had depreciated even further to nine hundred Congolese francs to US$1. The state of civil society was not much better; civil employees were often unpaid, a military presence was in the streets, there were large numbers of homeless street kids (sheges), prostitution was rife, state-sponsored public transportation was nearly nonexistent, and urban communities were often crisscrossed with open sewers and dotted with piles of garbage. These were the conditions that I encountered on an everyday basis while living in Kinshasa. However, what was and remains the most amazing, is how people dealt with these issues every day and keep on going with their lives. People would get dressed in their business attire in the darkness because of the frequent loss of electricity, spend several hours waiting for transportation, and go to a civil service or teaching job where they may not have been paid for months. One common conceptualization of just doing
what is necessary to survive is the phrase, “il faut se débrouiller.” Researcher Emma Wild-Wood explains it best: “In the Democratic Republic of Congo the phrase ‘se débrouiller’ has entered the realm of myth, joke, and national identity. . . . The Congolese know that they must learn how to manage on their own, to sort things out by themselves, to cope somehow, to get by” (Wild-Wood 2007, 367). By the end of my time in the Congo, I, like Wild-Wood, had come to appreciate the need for flexibility and creativity in dealing with unfortunate circumstances. My upbringing in the Bronx also helped me in my approach to living in Kinshasa; keep your phone and purse close, always be aware of your surroundings, avoid large crowds, don’t flash money. So, I didn’t have any major problems while living there. Overall, people were very welcoming and gracious to me, extending all efforts to help me to further my research. Kinshasa, however, as a bustling city was very different in size, temperament, and feel than the small town of Luozi (see figure 1.1).

**Crocodiles and Rolling Hills: Introducing Luozi**

“You’re going to Luozi? There are crocodiles there.” “Have you heard about the big crocodile in Luozi?” Each time I mentioned to friends or inquisitive strangers in Kinshasa the fact that I was going to Luozi to possibly pursue...
ethnographic research, the first word that they associated with Luozi was *crocodile*. Popularized by *Un croco à Luozi*, a short novel dealing with *kindoki* (witchcraft) and the ability of some people with supernatural powers to take on animal forms and harm others (Zamenga 1979), the image of the crocodile in the national imagination is probably the claim to fame of both the town and territory of Luozi. Below, I describe my first trip to Luozi:

May 21, 2005. This will be my first exploratory trip to Luozi. I am going as a guest of Dr. Kimpianga Mahaniah, a MuKongo historian who is returning to the town for the first time in several years. He arrives to collect me a little after eight in the morning on May 21, and we, including his driver, Paul, and his friend Papa Léon, set off in his late-model white Land Cruiser toward Bas-Congo. To reach Luozi by car from Kinshasa, you have to drive southwest on the only main road that connects Kinshasa with the port city of Matadi. This road is paved for the most part, and although we stop several times when we encounter groups of men repairing the road, the trip from Kinshasa to Kimpese (the city where we take another road to Luozi) takes about four hours. We pass through Kasangulu, Kisantu, and Mbanza-Ngungu along the way, with the monotony of the drive being punctuated with huge trucks and lorries speeding by with supplemental passengers perched precariously atop the vehicle’s cargo. After passing through Kimpese, we turn right onto a dirt road that runs alongside a range of hills made of red dirt and stone. Here, the going is more treacherous, as the road is often uneven, and we pass over several rivers and ravines using small bridges that lack any kind of guard railing to prevent the vehicle from falling.

I am struck by the beautiful scenery—clear blue skies with drifting white clouds that seemed to brush the tops of the mountain range in the distance, and open lands of tall grasses and brush that, although broken up by some farms, plots, and intermittent villages, seem to go on and on as far as the eye could see. We often encounter small groups of people walking along the road that would move quickly to the side into the brush as we pass, murmuring greeting of “mbote” and covering their mouths and noses against the dust cloud that follows in our wake.10

After about two hours, we arrive at the edge of the mighty Congo River (*Nzadi* in Kikongo), the second-largest river in Africa (after the Nile), whose mispronunciation by the Portuguese led to the misnomer by which the country was known under Mobutu’s regime: Zaire. We have to wait for the ferry to return from the other side. An old, dilapidated-looking vessel, it slowly creeps back across the waters to finally arrive, its bottom scraping the shore on our side. Throngs of people wait anxiously to board, but priority goes to the paying passengers—the vehicles. Each vehicle is charged US$15 to cross,
and after the cars are loaded onto the ferry, the people can then board for free. The driver of our suv lines up the vehicle’s tires with the rusted planks, and we begin to move forward, on an upward angle over the water. Suddenly, the vehicle stalls, and several of the workers from the ferry began to fuss around the car. I glance down anxiously at the water: were there crocodiles? I hear, “American! American!” Bewildered, I begin to look around outside the car. How could they tell I was American? Then, I realize that one of the ferry workers was responding to the call. His name, or nickname rather, was American! I laugh at this coincidence, and the car finally lurches forward onto the ferry. We park, with both ropes and rocks being used to secure the vehicle. One of the hands gives the signal, and the people waiting on the shore rush to get on, holding shoes and sandals in their hands as they walk through the water, up the planks, and onto the ferry, filling all the available space in the seats upstairs and on the floors on the main level.

After the final preparations, the ferry begins to move. I carefully open the car door, being careful not to hit several passengers seated on the deck, and stand outside to stretch my legs, which are cramped from hours of travel. I look up at the upper deck of the ferry and spot several life preservers, which make me feel better about my trip across the river as I cannot swim. However, I then note the large number of people around me, some standing, some sitting, mothers removing babies from their backs, one man selling oranges, and many people relaxing and talking, and realize that those few life preservers wouldn’t do anything in the event of an accident. I silently pray that we would make it to the other side, and try not to focus on the churning waters that had transitioned from a reddish brown near the shore to a dark grayish blue in the deeper part of the river that we traversed.

After about twenty minutes we finally reach the other side. After all the people debark, we descend down the planks into the shallow water and then up onto the riverbank. We continue onto the main road into town, creating dust clouds in the red dirt as we speed up. I take in the sights as they are pointed out to me by the professor: small homemade stands where people sell miscellaneous items, a monument to those who died on a sunken ferry a number of years ago, a bridge built during the colonial period that crosses over the Luozi River, some buildings belonging to the Protestant mission, a small market, the Catholic church and mission, a number of crumbling whitewashed buildings that housed European merchants during the colonial period, a small bar with “Skol” emblazoned in yellow and red on its wall, and many homes and shops lining the main road into town. Finally, the professor points out the dusty soccer field to our right that sits next to another wide road that doubles as Luozi’s “airport.” We then pass a statue of a crocodile
holding a hoe, a monument erected in Batukezanga Zamenga’s honor at the first Festival of Culture and Arts in Luozi (FESCAL), held in 2002 (see figure 1.2). As we turn left to enter the professor’s compound, I breathe a sigh of relief. Finally, we had arrived. Welcome to Luozi.

The town of Luozi is located in Luozi Territory, which itself lies in the westernmost province of Bas-Congo, known in the past as Bas-Zaire and in English as the Lower Congo, and soon to be renamed Kongo Central. The province has been further subdivided into two cities (Matadi, Boma) and three districts (Cataractes, Lukaya, and Bas-Fleuve). Luozi is one of three territories in the district of Cataractes (Mahaniah 1989, 18), lying in between the Congo River to the south and part of the southern border of the Republic of Congo to the north (see map 1.1). During the colonial period, this area was referred
to as Manianga, based on the name of a major marketplace that existed there during the precolonial era (Janzen 1978, 12). In regards to demographics, the territory of Luozi is sparsely populated in comparison to the rest of the province of Lower Congo. While the entire province had an estimated 1,971,520 inhabitants in 1984 (54,804 square kilometers in area) or around 36 inhabitants per square kilometer, the territory of Luozi had a total population of 143,998 inhabitants (7,502 square kilometers in area), or about 19 inhabitants per square kilometer (Mahaniah 1989, 20–22). Henri Nicholaï’s assertion that Luozi was one of the least favored territories in the Lower Congo, primarily owing to its isolated location on the other side of the Congo River, rings true even today, when one looks at the higher population densities in other parts of the province (1960, 53).

Luozi territory is further subdivided into ten collectivities. The town of Luozi is located in the collectivity of Mbanza-Ngoyo and is the political and administrative capital of the territory (Mahaniah 1989, 37). A small town that in the most recent census had about 6,927 people (Institut National de la Statistique 1984, 41),12 Luozi consists of five neighborhoods and has a number of churches (the three largest of which are the Kimbanguist church, the Catholic church founded by the Belgian Redemptorists, and the Protestant church founded by the Swedish Covenant Mission), one major hospital and several small clinics affiliated with religious institutions, a few small stores selling general goods, several small open-air markets where people from the surrounding area often come to sell their produce, and a number of schools (both religious affiliated and secular) (see figure 1.3).

Life in Luozi revolves around crops as the town, and the surrounding regions are heavily agricultural, with people planting crops both for their own use and for profit. Even those inhabitants with jobs in other sectors (teachers, pastors, and so on) still have their plots of land that they farm, which can be a distance of even a number of hours away by foot. Many of the homes have been constructed with red or brown bricks locally produced in open ovens that dot the landscape of the town. Most of the roofs of homes are covered by metal, but some are covered by thatch. Goats and chickens openly roam the town, and most people get around by foot, as only a minority own cars. One of the defining characteristics of the town at the time was that it lacked electricity. So, this often affected my research as I would have to find a place with a generator running to charge my laptop and other equipment during the day, especially if I knew that there would be an event at night. Overall, the feel in the town was much more relaxed and slower paced than the bustling city of Kinshasa, and the people there were very hospitable and gracious. Also, because of the small size of the town and the fact that everyone seemed
to know one another, I felt much safer (as a woman) attending events day and night and carrying out my research than I did in Kinshasa. From weddings to funerals, I participated in myriad community events in Luozi (see figure 1.4).

The experiences that I had in Kinshasa, Luozi, and other places where I traveled during my time in Congo were not only defined by infrastructural problems or economic and political crises; they were also defined by who, in fact, I was, as a researcher. Kimbangu’s prophecy about African Americans is just one aspect of the web of meanings and perspectives that shaped my everyday experiences in the Congo. Reflecting on her experiences as an African American anthropologist conducting research in both Alabama and Guyana, Brackette Williams highlights the importance of local perceptions for delimiting the ethnographer’s role and place. “It is doubtful that anthropologists, even those in exotic lands, had the power to . . . construct an identity for participant-observation that was autonomous of the range of role identities that constituted the social order of power relations into which they entered” (1996, 92). The various ways that people made sense of my body and my presence taught me a great deal about how people in the Congo understand and shape their everyday worlds. By embracing an approach where I felt, moved, and learned through my body as center of the research process, I was able to critically analyze how my race, skin complexion, gender, class,
education, marital status, and even my hair placed me in different identity roles depending on the context.

**The Anthropologist . . . or Just Another Black Woman**

June 1, 2005. “Mama Faustine, a tout a l’heure!” (See you later!) I call out to my host mother so that she knows I am leaving. I walk briskly to the blue metal gate and step outside, closing the gate securely. I hear the footsteps of Papa Joseph, the night watchman, as he locks the gate behind me. I stand there, adjusting the hem on my tailored shirt and glancing back to make sure that the zippers of both my shirt and skirt were still lined up in the middle of my back. clutching my wide black handbag to my side, I begin to walk down the road. I nod at the off-duty soldier/policeman sitting in front of my neighbor’s home and look up at the sky. Dusk is just settling, and people in the neighborhood are out and about, with some already sitting drinking Skol, Primus, and soda at the makeshift bar across the street. I keep walking and suck my teeth in annoyance as gritty sand once again enters my open-toed sandals. Why didn’t any one warn me that Kinshasa’s streets are like a dirty beach! I stop to kick the sand out and continue on my way, passing a cobbler who once fixed the heel on one of my shoes, and a disabled man to whom I sometimes give money and/or food. My friend Charles, dressed in a
button-down shirt and khaki pants, joins me at this point, as he had agreed to show me the building that I was looking for as it was on the way to another engagement that he was attending. After another two blocks or so, we arrive at a well-maintained, light-colored two-story building, with yet another night watchman seated behind a wrought-iron gate. Dressed in a blue uniform, he stands and walks leisurely to the gate to address us in Lingala.

“Ozuluka nini?” (What are you looking for?)

I reply in French. “I don’t speak Lingala. My name is Ma Yolanda. I am here for the French conversation group.”

He responds in French. “There is no group here for you.”

“There is a conversation group meeting here tonight. I was invited.”

“There are no Congolese inside here.”

“I am not Congolese. I am American.”

Charles interjects, explaining the situation in Lingala, but the guard just looks at me skeptically and refuses to let me in. Just then, a dark Mercedes Benz pulls up to the gate, and the guard leaps to open the gate, all the while with his eyes still on us. The car pulls in, but I cannot see who is inside because of the tinted windows. He closes the gate securely behind the car, opens the passenger door for a White woman who I do not know, and chats briefly with her driver after she enters the building. He then turns his attention back to us. At this point, Charles has to leave for his meeting, and I am on my own. I realize that if I am to get pass the guard, I would have to act like an American. I did not drive up in a nice car with a chauffeur; I am not White, and I am dressed in a tailored Congolese-style outfit. I straighten my back, and address him in clear English, assuming the same entitled tone that I had heard some White and even some Black Americans use in their interactions with Congolese employees.

“I was invited here. The meeting has already started, so I must be let in.”

He smiles, as if amused by my ability to speak English, but his response is the same:

“Tu peux pas entrer.” (You can’t come in.)

My shoulders slump at the failure of my performance of American and, really, White privilege. I then smile gently, batting my eyelashes and leaning in closer to the gate. I try another tactic.

“Mon frère, vraiment, c’est la vérité. Je ne blagues pas.” (My brother, really, it’s the truth. I am not lying.)

He continues to shake his head in refusal.

I sigh in frustration. What could I do? I am already about ten minutes late. Just as I am about to give up and leave, I realize that the Portuguese woman
who had invited me to the group had given me her phone number. I dig in my bag for the card and call her with my cell phone. She answers:

“Hello?”
“Hello? Marie? This is Yolanda.”
“Yolanda! Where are you?”
“I am downstairs at the gate.”
“Well come up then!”
“I can’t. The guard won’t let me in. Can you please come down and get me?”
“Sure. I will be there in a second.”

After I hear the click of her hanging up, I stand there, arms crossed until I see Marie coming outside. She says a few words to the guard, who then quickly runs to the gate and opens it, apologizing profusely.

“You are American?” he says, as if I hadn’t told him this already.
“Yes,” I respond. Stone-faced, I walk past him, trying to ignore the sting of humiliation that is burning my face and neck. As Marie chatters excitedly about the other women taking part in the group, I try to swallow the lump in my throat. After ascending the stairs, we enter an air-conditioned room tastefully decorated with African sculptures with about six women (all White) seated around an expensive wooden boardroom table. I introduce myself to the women and thank the host for allowing me to attend. She smiles and replies, “Oh, that’s no problem. What a lovely outfit you’re wearing!”

I open with this story of my failed performance of privilege to highlight two major points: First, privilege and class status are repeatedly performed in everyday life in postcolonial Congo in ways that sharply demarcate the boundaries between the haves and the have-nots. As a researcher, I was also implicated in these performances, regardless of whether I wanted to be or not. Second, this story of the denial of access demonstrates how the perceived characteristics of the researcher (race, gender, class, and so on) affect his or her movement throughout research sites. My everyday experiences as a woman of African descent in the Congo on taxi buses, in markets and Internet cafes, in bureaucratic offices, and in nightclubs allowed me to gain a better understanding of the daily lives of Congolese because I was not as clearly marked as a foreigner. I experienced the same daily indignities, such as being told to leave my handbag at a clerk’s desk when I entered a grocery store while White women walked blithely by the clerk, swinging their handbags, oblivious to their racial privilege. Conversely, I was able to avoid
some common challenges for White researchers, such as being charged the local taxi rate in Kinshasa while the rate would have been doubled or tripled if the driver saw that I was White. Like other Black female anthropologists conducting research in Africa and its diasporas (Hurston 1938; Daughtry 1997; Jules-Rosette 1975a; Harrison 1991; Ulysse 2007; Slocum 2001; Simmons 2009; Pierre 2012), my perceived identity shaped my experiences and interactions in myriad ways (see figure 1.5).

**On Positionality and Being an African American Woman Conducting Ethnographic Research in the Congo**

Writing in 1942, Zora Neale Hurston used a common colloquial phrase to summarize the troubled relations between African Americans, often divided among themselves by class, skin color, and other characteristics. “My skin-folks, but not my kinfolks; my race but not my taste” ([1942] 1991, 168). Such a phrase captures the tensions that exist between relatedness and distance; between understanding a degree of connectedness based on shared African ancestry, but simultaneously disavowing too much of a connection. This same concept can be applied to try to understand the importance of race and perceptions of race in the field for anthropologists of African descent working...
with people who may in fact look like them. In much of what has been written on conducting anthropological field research, the main categories that have been used are those of “outsider” and “insider.” Outsider often denotes people foreign to the culture of study who are usually easily visually distinguished from the community of study. In “insider” or “native” anthropology, the anthropologist is from the community of study. Although the writings of scholars such as Kirin Narayan (1993) have problematized these designations, I’d like to turn our attention to yet another positioning that warrants additional analysis. This positioning is that of a person who was not born in the community of study, yet looks like the relatives of his or her informants; one who isn’t fluent in the indigenous language, yet intuitively understands many elements of the cultural body language. In particular, I am referring to the situation of being a brown-skinned African American woman doing research in Kinshasa and Bas-Congo in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Like Karla Slocum’s experience of being both close and distant to the Black female traders she studied in St. Vincent (2001, 141) and Irma McLaurin’s experience of studying women in Belize (1996), the position that I occupied, not by any choice of my own, hovered in between “native” and “stranger.” Because of my skin color and features, I was often seen as one of the “skinfock.” However, local understandings and perceptions of my identity impacted my research in multiple ways, as previously explained through the connections people made with my presence and the prophecy of Simon Kimbangu. My experiences in Congo contrasted vividly with a semester abroad that I spent in Ghana as an undergraduate, during which people would quickly pick me out as a foreigner, possibly because I was lighter than most Ghanaians, and I was once even called a half-caste. In the Congo, I was able to blend in more readily as there was a broader range of brown skin tones. Often, before people spoke to me, they assumed that I was Congolese, and when I explained that I was not, they continued to assume that my parents were Congolese. If I explained that my ancestors had been taken from Africa and enslaved in the United States, and that I was not sure of where I was from, people would smile, and say assuredly, “Oh, they must be from Congo.” If I was not specific about telling them that I was African American, people would make a number of guesses and try and make sense of who I was and what I was doing in the Congo. My “misidentifications” were specific to the region and Francophone nature of the Congo, as I was often asked if I was Ivorian, Togolese, South African, Haitian, Jamaican (because of my locked hair), and finally American. Initially, the identity guessing game was entertaining, but eventually, it became burdensome as I felt as though I had to explain myself to someone every day, at least at first. But later, as I reflected on the value that these cases of
misidentification have for indexing relationships, histories, and migrations to and from the Congo, I took it all in stride. The characteristics shaping people’s opportunities, interactions, networks, and social status in Kinshasa and Luozi were multifold: race, gender, class, age, education, religion, ethnicity, marital status, language, residence, experience living abroad, and parental status all played a part, depending on the context. Because of how I was perceived, I was able to experience many of the vagaries of everyday life as many Congolese do, in ways that broadly enhanced my perspective on social life in the Congo. I will examine a few of those characteristics here, focusing especially on those that impacted my own research experiences.

"YOU CAN’T COME IN": RACIALIZED BODIES
Blackness, as a concept, identity, and even political perspective, does not have the same meaning everywhere. Every country has its own history and social conditions, and people of African descent may understand and define themselves differently in different spaces. Thus, although sharing a history of enslavement and discrimination, people descended from African enslaved populations in Nicaragua can claim and primarily identify with European ancestors (Gordon 1998) while a broader range of racial categories and everyday understandings of race based on skin tone, hair texture, and racial admixture exists in other places such as Brazil (E. Williams 2013). What, then, does Blackness mean in the Congo? How is it lived and embodied, and how is it understood by everyday Congolese?

Like most other African countries, the Congo has a recent history of European colonization. From 1884 to 1908, as the personal colony of King Leopold II of Belgium (Congo Free State), and then from 1908 to 1960 under the country of Belgium itself, the Congolese were treated as inferiors, at best as children to be treated paternalistically, at worst as a scourge to be eradicated. While other works provide a better account of the atrocities committed against the Congolese population by European soldiers, traders, and explorers during the early years of colonization (Hochschild 1998; Roberts 2013), what the later, more structured colonial administration established was a social structure in which Whiteness and Blackness were often diametrically juxtaposed in everyday practice. Laws restricting movement, forced labor policies, corporal punishment, segregated housing by law, and de facto segregation in public accommodations all defined and restricted the everyday lives of Congolese under Belgian rule (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002, 39). What the everyday workings of colonial Belgian Congo reinforced was an ideology of white superiority, one that persists until the present day. A short anecdote will suffice:
Walking along a path toward the Protestant mission area in Luozi (*ku missioni*, which is how people referred to it in everyday speech), Pierre and I passed a number of mango trees with dozens of ripe mangos on the ground. Pierre stopped and picked up a huge, plump mango and turned to me.

“You know what we call these?”

“What?” I respond.

“Manga zi Mputu.” (European mango.) “Because they are the biggest, juicy and tasty. They are the best.”

He turned, and scanning the ground, picks up a small, firm, green mango. Holding it high, he continues:

“Manga ba Ndombe or Manga zi Kongo.” (Black or Kongo mango.) “It is small, no good.” He tosses it back on the ground with disdain.

“But they are from the same tree. All of these mangos grew here,” I say, gesturing to the many mango trees and all the mangos on the ground.

He shrugs his shoulders. “That’s just how people call them.”

This short exchange is just one example of how Blackness and Whiteness are imagined and understood within the Congo, where Whiteness is associated with power and positive attributes, while Blackness is associated with inferior characteristics and lack of desirability. It is telling that such an ideology is present in the most mundane of items—fruit, yet still reinforces a way of thinking that supports White privilege and Black and African denigration. In her groundbreaking book on processes of racialization in postcolonial Ghana, anthropologist and African diaspora studies scholar Jemima Pierre argues that in Ghana, intelligence, status, wealth, technical know-how, and other positive characteristics are automatically attributed to Whites. Status must be performed for those racialized as Black in Ghana; whereas for Whites in Ghana, it is assumed (2012, 86). This “normative power” of Whiteness (2012, 98) seemed to also be the case in everyday life in the Congo, especially in situations regarding access.

Bodies racialized as Black and/or African in the Congo are policed and monitored in, and often excluded from, certain spaces. My lack of a car, skin color, and propensity for wearing tailored “African” clothes often made it difficult for me to enter certain foreign-owned or foreign-affiliated compounds and buildings in Kinshasa. Once I went to the house of an African American friend for dinner, and the security guard on the ground floor of the apartment building refused to let me in and had to call her to verify and physically come down to get me. In 2010, when I returned to the Congo, I went to the U.S. compound in Kinshasa that houses the Public Affairs section of the
embassy. I approached the door and was brusquely ordered by a guard to step to the side and join the line of Congolese waiting in the hot sun while White employees and citizens were let inside without a problem. I had to show my passport before they even let me approach the door to go through security. I have already recounted my experiences with what I perceived to be racial discrimination in grocery stores in Kinshasa, especially in Gombe. Interestingly enough, on all these occasions the guards (and clerks) were Congolese working for foreign-owned or foreign-operated establishments, whose jobs apparently included keeping out any errant Africans. These experiences and others (such as being served after White customers in restaurants although my Congolese friends and I had arrived and ordered at least twenty minutes before the White customers did) exposed me to the everyday indignities that Congolese suffer in their own country, often at the hands of other Congolese. Other researchers of African descent have also written about similar experiences in regards to race in other African countries (see Pierre 2012). Indeed, the unquestioned valorization of Whiteness, seen in general attitudes and specific practices such as skin bleaching (done by both women and men in Congo), is a mindset that is explicitly challenged by movements such as Bundu dia Kongo.

Race, however, was not the only factor that impacted people’s everyday lives. Ethnicity was also a key attribute that people used to relate with others. A number of general stereotypes were repeated quite often in daily conversations, especially in Kinshasa: BaKongo as meek and docile; BaNgala as loud and aggressive; BaLuba as educated, business minded and yet selfish and insular. While ethnicity did not affect me directly, it was of great importance for others in certain situations, particularly leading up to elections. I do not address ethnic identification in great detail here, but chapters 2, 3, and 6 provide in-depth explorations of the salience of ethnic identity for BisiKongo people during the colonial and postcolonial eras. The next section uses the case of public transportation to address yet another set of social factors key to organizing everyday experience in the Congo: class and wealth.

MANQUE DE TRANSPORT: VULNERABLE BODIES

Throughout my research, and especially in Kinshasa, I experienced many of the same indignities and inconveniences that the average Kinois faced on an everyday basis. One of the major problems in Kinshasa was the lack of reliable public transportation. The fact that I did not own a car like the other foreigners and more well-off Congolese allowed me to experience the daily struggles of everyday low-income Kinois. Within a few days of my arrival, I was debriefed at embassy-associated facilities and was advised to buy a
car, but because I didn’t plan on staying in Kinshasa for very long, I did not consider it since all I could afford was a small sedan, which would prove futile in navigating the treacherous roads of rural Bas-Congo, where SUVs, pickup trucks, and big trucks reigned. I decided to make do with the public transportation. Now, public transportation in 2005–6 did not mean shiny, spacious buses with air-conditioning, or rapid subway lines. Rather, there are taxis, and taxi buses. Taxis are old, unmarked, barely running personal cars that have been transformed into taxis (three people in the front, and three, sometimes four people in the back). The other option is the taxi buses, which are decidedly less comfortable, with the worse (and more common) ones being converted cargo vans, and the best ones being old school buses from the United States. In addition, groups of youth and men often hang onto the back of the moving taxi bus. As for the train, I’d initially considered taking the train down into Bas-Congo until I saw it passing one day and noticed that there were as many people on the roof of the moving train as there were inside of it!

By the end of my time in the Congo, I’d learned to understand all the hand signals indicating the direction of the approaching taxis, gotten accustomed to grabbing the door handle of an approaching moving taxi and running with it as it slowed down to ensure that I was the first inside, and was prepared to stand for several hours waiting for transportation on crowded corners. I also became adjusted to the random flat tires, holes in car floors, and vendors and beggars approaching the windows. Once, as I was waiting with a friend for a taxi or taxi bus, a bus pulled up loaded with people, and just as we were running to board, people began shouting and jumping out of the doors and windows. The engine had caught fire, and the fire was coming through the floor! I watched in horror and backed away from the flames. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured. Unfortunately, we then had to compete with about fifty more people for a taxi!

One memory from my field notes details the everyday struggle that Kinois face when trying to get from one place to another. My friend Didier and I were taking a trip to a library of the Jesuit mission located at Kimwenza. To get there, we took a taxi and two taxi buses. The trip there was uneventful, and the buses were not too crowded because of the time of day that we departed. However, the trip home was another matter entirely.

May 6, 2005. After several hours at Kimwenza we walk a bit down the road to wait for transportation back to Kinshasa. However, this is when things really become bad. A taxi bus (this one a converted cargo van) arrives, and we run to get in, as other people are running trying to beat us to it. There is space for everyone though. As I try to ascend, I crack my right knee against
the edge of a wooden bench. Then, I have to climb over two more benches to get to the seats (a wooden plank) in the last row. I have my back to the trunk door, and hope it will not fly open. However, things deteriorate the next time we stop. A bunch of people come to get in, and several of them get in from the back door! One man kicks me in the side trying to get in, and although there is limited space, he squeezes himself between me and another woman. Oh my God, it is terrible! I am squashed against the right side of the cargo van, with only a round circle to look out of that had been cut out by a blowtorch. To make things worse, the wall is rattling, and bulging outward, and every time we go over a big bump I swear the screws will give and I will tumble out the side of the van. I also think that I am going to get a splinter right in my behind as I involuntarily slide along the wooden plank when we lurch forward. When I try to hold on to the holes in the ceiling, the metal is brown and rusted, and I hope that I don’t cut myself and get tetanus. We finally arrive at the next round point.

This tale of treacherous transportation in Kinshasa reveals how unpredictable and even dangerous getting around in Kinshasa could be. I had another Congolese friend named Patricia who was riding a taxi bus to work when the vehicle stopped suddenly, and she banged her mouth against the metal bar behind the driver’s seat. She chipped her tooth and had to see a dentist to have the tooth repaired. Sadder tales abound, involving robbery, rape, and even death in countless car and bus crashes. My experiences helped me to understand the vulnerability of the many bodies that crowded Kinshasa’s public transportation. The breakdown of the transportation infrastructure made daily life in Kinshasa dangerous in many ways.17

FROM “YOU CAN’T COME IN” TO “COME HERE”:
GENDER, MARITAL STATUS, AND DESIRED BODIES

Another experience that I shared, specifically with Congolese women, was that of being approached by White men. While Congolese men expressed their interest as well, the difference was that White, usually Middle Eastern men (who the average Kinois grouped all together as Lebanese, regardless of their actual origins), thought my interest (and body) were for sale. During the night, le Boulevard du 30 Juin (the main street going through downtown Kinshasa and Gombe) is decorated by many young Congolese women in their finest and most revealing attire, trying to attract the attention of male drivers so that there can be an exchange of cash for sexual services.18 Moreover, in the dance clubs most frequented by the foreign and wealthy, crowds
of beautiful young Congolese women could be found, who I later realized were prostitutes. Some of these White men approached me as they would a Congolese or other African woman who was a prostitute. Several times I had been walking along the boulevard during the day, and White men pulled over their cars to “offer” me a ride. I always refused. Once, a Middle Eastern man followed me out of an Internet café and pulled his car up next to the taxi stop where I was waiting. I tried to ignore him but he kept calling and gesturing to me until I went up to the window and in no uncertain terms refused his company. When I came back to join the crowd waiting at the taxi stop, one elderly man said something to the effect of, “Good for you. They think all of our women are prostitutes.”

Yet another incident, involving a taxi, demonstrates some of the possible perils of being a Black woman doing fieldwork in an African country. I was at a corner with many others around rush hour, trying to get a taxi. A small, beat-up gray sedan slowed down but seemed full, so I kept looking. A man got out of the car, came up to me, and asked if I was going to Magasin, and I said Oui, and another girl asked “Magasin?” and he said “No, only one person.” He led me to the gray car. But when I got in the car and it pulled off, I saw there was extra room. Two people were in the front, and I and the guy were in the back. He began to make polite conversation, and I slowly realized the vehicle was not a taxi as it kept passing people trying to flag down taxis going our way. I became scared and wondered if I was about to be robbed, raped, or killed. I noticed the locks weren’t automatic, and so had some hope of jumping out and running for safety. The woman (who he introduced as his aunt) asked where I was going, and I told her, hoping and praying they would actually take me there. They stopped at my corner, and as I tried to run out, the guy asked for my number. I politely declined, claiming not to have a cell phone (and hoping it wouldn’t ring, revealing my lie) and then took his number, all the while with my right foot out of the door. They pulled off, and I never saw them again, but this incident reveals the everyday dangers that women face in Kinshasa, just trying to get a taxi.

Another aspect of my identity that affected my research was my marital status. At the time that I conducted research in the Congo, I was married. My husband, Lincoln, who I met in Rhode Island as an undergraduate, is originally from Liberia. He came to visit me for a month while I was in the Congo. His presence helped me in many ways, as I was able to introduce him to people in my neighborhood in Kinshasa (especially to men who had been pursuing me romantically) and to friends and neighbors in Luozi as well. My status as a married woman, did, however, limit some of the activities that I engaged in. For example, there was a small performance group formed by
some local teenagers (all unmarried) in Luozi performing popular Congolese
dance music. I began to attend and participate as a dancer in the rehearsals,
just based on my love of soukous. During one rehearsal conducted outdoors
I noticed a few disconcerting and even disapproving looks of passersby and
one male onlooker who kept staring at me lasciviously as I danced. After-
ward, I talked to a few female friends about it. I was told that it didn’t look
very well for a married woman to dance publicly in that way. I decided then
to just attend the rehearsals and to save my dancing for weddings and other
public occasions where it would be considered more appropriate. So while
opportunities for me to perform existed, preserving my reputation and local
standing were much more important to me to assure continued access in
regards to my research and the respect of people in the community.

INSIGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES
Being mistaken for Congolese allowed me to experience the vagaries of daily
life in the Congo on a much more intimate level, regardless of the number of
inconveniences or slights to which I was subjected. First and foremost was my
ability to be “unmarked” in the sense that because people did not automatic-
ally see me as a foreigner they were less likely to change their behavior just
because I was there. My ability to blend in also allowed me a bit more ease
in getting around on foot, because, for example, when the street kids (sheges)
came begging, I was not automatically targeted as a rich foreigner (although
they did ask me for money often, as they did every other Congolese that
passed). They were much more aggressive and persistent with White people
and others driving fancy cars. My skin also provided a form of a pass in situa-
tions such as when I paid the Congolese rather than the foreigner entrance
fee, which was twice as costly, to the bonobo sanctuary outside of Kinshasa.
And had I been a White person walking the streets, I most likely would have
had to endure being called mundele or even mundele zoba (stupid White
person), which I witnessed when walking with a German acquaintance in
Magasin in Kinshasa.20 Being unmarked allowed me to listen to and partici-
pate in conversations about a wide array of topics in multiple contexts, from
taxis, to beauty salons, to churches, without people automatically changing
their behavior because of seeing me as a foreigner or visible stranger. Being
of African descent was the key to my gaining access to a branch of Bundu dia
Kongo in Luozi, when leaders refused to allow a curious young White woman
to participate or even see the ceremony, whereas I was allowed to attend and
even videotape certain parts of it, as I was “their sister.” My African ancestry
was also my saving grace when during an interview, a leader of Bundu dia
Kongo asked me what field I was studying. When I replied, “anthropology,”
he sucked his teeth and looked at me with disdain. “If I’d known you were an anthropologist, I wouldn’t even have talked to you.” A bit flabbergasted, I made my case by explaining that I knew the distasteful history of anthropology, and if we were to change how anthropology is done, more Black people need to become anthropologists. As I continued to discuss being the only African American in my cohort and in my classes, he began to loosen up, and we had a frank conversation about the potential and need for transforming the discipline and how it could be used to promote studies of Kongo culture.

My common Blackness did not, however, erase my own privilege of being a U.S. citizen. My friends who I came to know really well sometimes reminded me of this fact. While walking in Luozi, one friend said, “If anything were to happen out here, your government will come and save you. But we, we would suffer and die.” At first I disagreed, based on the history of racial discrimination against African Americans in the United States. But, as I reflected on it, I realized my friend was right. Once people did realize I was American, I had access in many ways that everyday Congolese would not. One example was my experiences accessing the African Archives in Brussels. After being forewarned by a Congolese scholar that Congolese researchers were often treated in a disrespectful manner, I told him about my largely uneventful and positive experience. “They were nice because you are American,” I was told. Like with Jafari Allen’s experiences in Cuba (2011), I sometimes had a choice of whether or not to use my American privilege in certain situations, and benefiting from that privilege.

Coming back to shared experiences that shaped my time in the Congo, another common incidence for me (and people I encountered) was a heightened sense of familiarity based on physical characteristics. In brief, I met people who looked like African Americans I knew back home. Similarly, for a few people, I reminded them of someone they knew. During my early time in Luozi, I was playing basketball occasionally with a group of youth from the town.21 In August 2005, my husband, Lincoln, and I went with a friend from Luozi to play basketball at an outdoor gym in the commune of Masina in Kinshasa. Lincoln ended up playing a pickup game with a team, and I watched, shouting words of encouragement. Suddenly, I saw a familiar face. A teenage girl was playing basketball on a neighboring court in the compound. I stared because she looked just like one of my younger sisters from a distance. How could I be seeing my sister in the Congo! I stood up and walked toward her, gazing in disbelief. She had the same eyes, same light brown skin tone, same height and build as my sister. It didn’t make rational sense, and when I got even closer, I saw that they were not exactly identical in their characteristics, but even so, she resembled my sister more than I did. Other times
I saw someone who resembled my grandmother, my uncle, and other family members. I also had several experiences when people told me I resembled someone they knew. One young man told me I resembled his ex-girlfriend, and another person likened me to his daughter.

Experiences such as these demonstrate that common African ancestry does create opportunities for more intimate understandings and connections, that however contrived, can still affect relationships between researchers and those they study. However, these perceived links are not without problems, as many negative interactions and perceived stereotypes exist on both sides (Wamba 1999). These bonds between continental Africans and those in the diaspora are not only based on shared physical characteristics or common oppression. As Philippe Wamba writes, “history reveals that far more often than they have clashed, Africans and African Americans have reached out to one another with fascination, purpose, and a spirit of hopeful kinship. And this preoccupation with one another has inspired many significant artistic, political, and religious explorations of the relationship between Africa and the descendants of Africans in America” (1999, 35). My identity as an African American doing research in the Congo was very important both because it affected my daily experiences as a researcher, and also because it had even greater significance tied directly to the history of the Lower Congo.

While I discussed race, gender, ethnicity, and other social factors separately, for my respondents in Congo, identity was intersectional, and in different contexts, certain factors might be highlighted over others. In Luozi, for instance, religious affiliation is a key method for forming social networks and circles and socializing in everyday life, while one’s Kongo ethnicity became paramount when Bundu dia Kongo rallied people in Luozi to vote for the group’s spiritual leader in the campaign leading to the 2006 elections. In their quest to unite BisiKongo people to vote along ethnic lines and specifically for BDK candidates, one of the key cultural and historical figures that animated Bundu dia Kongo’s songs, prayers, rallies, and speeches was the prophet Simon Kimbangu. Just who was Simon Kimbangu, and why was he seen as so important to Bundu dia Kongo? How did he use his body to challenge Belgian colonial authority? And how did he come to lead what Robert H. C. Graham, a British Baptist missionary called “the most remarkable movement the country has ever had” (1921, 192)?