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How was political imagination fostered in the constraints of colonial containment? What possibilities has “the global” offered for ideological experimentation and struggle over the conditions of political futures in Africa? And how did a relatively small group of young revolutionary thinkers in the Congo illuminate the possible horizons and contingent limits of decolonization? In Students of the World, Pedro Monaville offers answers to these questions by unpacking decolonization as an unfinished project and a “pedagogy of the world” (209) for Congolese students in the global 1960s. At its core, the book is a powerful meditation on memory work of leftist politics and an unflinching examination of students’ fraught positionality as “insurgent cosmopolitans” (xv) in the uncertain age of decolonization. 

Students of the World follows the ambitions of Congolese students as they chartered new political topographies and sought prominent places for themselves in the shifting geopolitical context of decolonial Congo. At times evocative and at other times unsparing, Monaville’s narrative situates the reader in the affective ambiance of emergent student activism of late 1950s and 1960s Congo, which was marked by a “shared structure of feeling” (8) and nourished by the words of philosophers and liberation intellectuals across the continent and the world. Congolese students drew strategically from leftist genealogies, intellectual crossovers, and influences to inform their visions for the political future, and their efforts were even more remarkable considering the fervent Belgian colonial efforts to ideologically enclose the population. Following independence in 1960, Congo sat at the crossroads of the crisis of decolonization that brought waves of UN personnel, diplomats, international experts and stalwart government officials into the country, enabling a fertile ground for political activists and intellectual luminaries to pursue a “more beautiful elsewhere” (53). Monaville foregrounds how Congolese students remapped geographies of political thought and curated new ideas during this time by invoking ties of shared experiences and global solidarity, including Vietnam; circulating new ideas through the post; and creatively reworking clothing, music, and expressive cultures.

An eclectic and expansive source base forms the foundation for this study. From the “postal archive” of the Congo Crisis, we discover students quietly contemplating potential political participation beyond Congo’s borders in their cloistered dorm rooms and writing letters that delicately balanced projections of themselves as both earnestly serious and confidently authentic representatives of broader political communities. Drawing on interviews, memoirs, and photographs, Monaville illuminates the marked fissures and ardent debates over revolutionary ideologies among activists in clamorous bars and tense meeting rooms, as well as the nostalgic yearnings of former activists who recalled the boundless days of early independence. Nearly all of these students were male, and Monaville addresses how they sought to distinguish themselves from uneducated ruffians by cultivating a worldly masculinity that defied generational, church, and institutional hierarchies. In the book’s chapters, readers learn of the weighty political affordances of material objects, including clipped headshots on crinkled letters, boudin (blood sausage) served in the campus dining hall, well-worn copies of L’Éclair, and Miriam Makeba’s records, for student mobilizations in the face of vacillating colonial and early postcolonial state and missionary control.

This roundtable consists of four reviews that grapple with the book’s key interventions in African Studies, postcolonial, and colonial studies, and the rise of the global 1960s. Didier Gondola signals how Students of the World breaks new ground by charting the robust, international linkages Congolese students forged as they sought to broaden their political and intellectual prospects in the wake of independence. Letter writing and the postal service became connective ligaments through which students could engage leftists in Europe and beyond, project their desires for anti-colonial emancipation, and hone their ideological positions. He credits Monaville with laying bare the global, internationalist dimensions of Congolese political movements that had previously been framed in internalist narratives. Gondola considers how, by drawing on a remarkably expansive archival base including interviews with political actors and untapped, far-flung documentary sources stretching from Lubumbashi to Leuven and Silver Spring, Maryland, this book offers new understandings of students as protagonists in the unfinished project of decolonization.
Andrew Ivaska commends Monaville’s nuanced approach to unearthing student activism in late colonial and postcolonial Congo, and his fresh interweaving of different writing modes that enable a “kind of atonement to the double nature of things.” He praises the way Monaville deftly exposes the contradictory and surprising ways liberal American scholars surveilled and intervened in the revolutionary politics that Congolese students pushed forward in the aftermath of former Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba’s assassination. Monaville equally avoids easy dichotomies of “global” and “local” spheres, and instead reframes the global as a category through which students refracted and sustained their intellectual experimentation on the ground. Monaville’s method of masterfully weaving together diverse oral and documentary sources foregrounds the ways student activists drew on their elite status, cosmopolitan self-presentation, and affective ties to advance campus activism. Yet, Ivaska also wonders about the dimensions of students’ lives beyond the university’s campus that may have informed their political aspirations, including their familial and kinship relations, their engagement with “vernacular political modes,” and interactions with other activist groups. Attending to these currents may open up new perspectives about how African activist groups not only assembled their visions for political futures amidst emergent global leftist networks, but also imprinted their modes of political thought and action onto global social movements.

Priya Lal highlights Monaville’s success at reframing Congo’s history of decolonization through the lens of Congolese students who worked within the conditions of foreign intervention, but whose intellectual lives and projects exceeded the constraints of top-down diplomatic and military actions. Through a multi-modal writing structure that moves between interludes and rigorous analysis, Monaville builds a rich, textured study of young, cosmopolitan elites’ experiences, anticipations, and epistemologies as they remapped their intellectual frontiers in the era of decolonization. Lal notes that Monaville attends to the diverse and sometimes polarized political stances of Congolese students, and the ways educated youth pivoted agilely at key moments and activated geographically-expansive networks through the circulation of letters and journals. In Monaville’s smart summation, President Joseph Mobutu emerges as a sophisticated tactician, with a shifting agenda that variably coalesced with and confronted elite students’ interests. While the elastic languages of decolonization initially afforded state officials and educated youth an uneasy mutuality, ultimately Mobutu’s regime worked to violently neutralize their insurrectionary ideologies and sever their ties to global leftist revolutionary networks. Lal asks what Congolese student activism in the era of decolonization can tell us about contemporary pushes to decolonize universities, scholarship, and academic organizations.

Finally, Carina Ray considers how *Students of the World* opens up new terrain for writing histories of the global sixties from Africa. Monaville’s focus on the relatively narrow sliver of elite Congolese students affords a profundity into their lifeworlds — their uncertain experiments with internationalization, mistrust amidst shifting loyalties, longings for their place in nation-making, and hopeful anticipations for their futures — that consequently reveals how the tumultuous events of the sixties offered rich opportunities for negotiating the relational contours of broader political life. While deeply rooted in 1960s Congo, the book exposes how elite students’ political imaginations were constrained, but never fully bounded, by nationalist fervor or Cold War entanglements; rather their ideological impulses and knowledge regimes expanded through the twinned mediums of post and paper through which they connected to activist movements beyond the Congo. Ray emphasizes that Monaville’s careful attention to the distinctive chronological unfolding of the Congo’s student movements (in contrast to other early anti-colonial movements on the continent that were partly driven by student activism) demonstrates the significance of their vociferous cries. The demands of young activists for decolonizing the university arrived at a crucial juncture of intensifying authoritarian rule by Mobutu’s regime — a convergence that revealed the brittle ties, and ultimately shattered relations, between Mobutu and student activists. Ray praises the ways Monaville’s narrative pushes forth new ways of understanding the connective throughlines between colonial and postcolonial Congo, and new pathways for ushering in heretofore silenced histories of decolonization.

Pedro Monaville tackles these issues in his thoughtful and engaged response. He asserts that while his book focuses on the global context of Congolese student movements, its primary contribution to the global 1960s
should be understood in methodological and analytical terms. This novel methodology, which involves not only reflexive engagement with fragmented sources but also the creation of new sources, enabled him to capture the distinctive cosmopolitan perspectives and the ways in which Congolese students translated Congo to the world and the world to Congo. In response to Ivaska's query about how students influenced global movements, Monaville emphasizes that his study is concerned with students’ engagements with the “imaginative structures” that shaped their exchanges with transnational networks. Students did not understand themselves to be appropriating ideological idioms from movements originating in the Global North, nor were they simply adapting incoming ideas for their strategic purposes. Rather, Congolese students redrew the geographies of political imagination and refracted the “global spirits of the sixties” through their forms and theories of liberatory activism. He agrees with Ivaska and Gondola on the importance of relationships between students and other activist groups, and the particular timing of elite students’ engagements with leftist movements associated with Patrice Lumumba. Finally, Monaville contends that while there are resonances between past and present struggles to decolonize higher education, the contextual differences between these moments are too vast to cast a singular explanatory story. Rather, Monaville urges that the lessons of the Congolese past illuminate the possibilities of transforming corrosive, violent entanglements into liberatory, collective movements of solidarity.

As the reviewers of this roundtable note, Students of the World is beautifully crafted. Beyond its important contributions to academic conversations around anti-imperialism, social movements, postcolonial development, and decolonization, the book’s approach offers new methodologies for understanding revolutionary struggle and contested decolonization in Africa and beyond. I would like to thank all the roundtable participants for joining and contributing greatly to this discussion.

Contributors:

Pedro Monaville is Associate Professor of History at McGill University. He is the author of Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo, published by Duke University Press in 2022. He is currently working on several book projects, including a history of Congolese intellectual life under the Mobutu regime and a co-edited volume on the works of the popular comic book artist Mfumu’Eto 1er.

Tasha Rijke-Epstein is Assistant Professor of History at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of Children of the Soil: The Power of Built Forms in Urban Madagascar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), and is currently working on book project about human-insect relationships, labor, and environmental change in Madagascar.

Didier Gondola is Professor of African History and Africana Studies at Johns Hopkins University. His publications include numerous articles and chapters on popular cultures (music, fashion, gambling, and memory), gender and postcolonial issues in Central Africa and the African diaspora in France. His most recent book, Matswa vivant: anticolonialisme et citoyenneté en Afrique-Équatoriale française (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2021) is the first comprehensive biography of Congolese activist André Grenard Mastwa (1899-1942). His ground-breaking study Tropical Cowboys: Youth Gangs, Violence, and Masculinities in Colonial Kinshasa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016) examines the ways in which young people commandeered images from Hollywood western movies to forge new standards of manliness and masculinities in 1950s Kinshasa.

of the 1960s reconfigures the global map of Sixties political activism from the vantage point of one of its most prominent Third World relay stations. The Career of Leo Milas: Radical Self-Fashioning and the Global Circuitry of African Decolonization, co-authored with James R. Brennan, is a biography of an African American man who re-fashioned himself as Mozambican and joined its liberation movement, Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO).

Priya Lal is an Associate Professor of History at Boston College. She is the author of African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and is currently completing a book manuscript about professional labor and nation building in Southeastern Africa.

Review by Didier Gondola, Johns Hopkins University

Praising Pedro Monaville’s fine-grained narrative and showing its significance from our scholarly vantage point are two inseparable things. I cannot help but laud Monaville’s book for the major contribution it makes to the intersectionality between youth and politics in Congo in a very new and innovative light while, in the process, focusing on a period that has been understudied, the late 1960s. Existing literature on youth mobilization in Congo looks inward and examines these young Congolese people en vase clos and in situ. Mutamba Makombo’s work on the évolutés, for instance, argues that they became the catalyst of nationalism in Congo.1 Charles Tshimanga’s work on youth and society in the Belgian Congo focuses on education and training and how their colonial dispensation may have shaped Congo’s postcolonial trajectory.2 Isidore Ndaywell’s two-volume study of UNAZA and even Daniel Tödt’s recently published dissertation, The Lumumba’s Generation make similar arguments.3 Even though there is value in exploring the endogenous and historical dynamics of youth in Congo, these scholars have portrayed Congolese young people, students, évolutés, and emerging politicians as though they were impervious to external influences. By and large scholars of Congo have integrated and continue to embrace the notion of the Belgian Congo as an Empire of Silence (l’empire du silence), a dystopian regime that incarcerated its colonial subjects and prevented any contact with the outside world.

The great value of Students of the World is that it rejects these historiographical assumptions and sees, instead, patterns of internationalization, interrogating the archives more critically and more poignantly than previous studies. This is one of its major contributions. It sets up a paradigm shift while drawing on all available archival sources.4 Monaville even created new sources by conducting interviews with key actors in surprising places such as Nouakchott, Abu Dhabi, Dar es Salaam, and the Netherlands. These sources allowed Monaville to cast a wider net which captures trends and developments that previous studies had overlooked.

The two first chapters of Students of the World are a real breakthrough because they show how the postal service and print media served as conduits for the slow and covert dissemination of leftist ideas. The press became a subversive amplifier to counter the Belgian deafening empire du silence. Students circumvented colonial restrictions by using the postal service to broaden their political horizons and receive their educations, sometimes with the help of the Belgian Communist Party. Monaville’s narrative focuses on two issues. First, he discusses the fascinating adoption of a rhetoric of the left. Congolese students borrowed a global lexicon from Africa’s Pan-African lodestars of Sékou Touré’s Guinea and Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana, as well as from the Eastern European Communist bloc of Czechoslovakia, East Germany, the Soviet Union, and China, because Congolese students traveled to the aforementioned countries and were connected to people in different places on the globe. Second, the author emphasizes their steadfast resolve, despite the

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4 Monaville has literally scoured the world to locate archival materials for his study, in traditional repositories in Congo-Kinshasa, Congo-Brazzaville, Belgium, France, and the United States as well as in unsuspected places like Albania, the Netherlands, and Germany.
obstacles, to decolonize higher education in Congo through revolutionary means. This was particularly challenging because newly independent Congo positioned itself as a champion of the political right.

The radicalization of students peaked as a result of two events: the assassination of Lumumba and the Kwilu rebellion led by Pierre Mulele, a Congolese rebel active in the Simba rebellion of 1964, and its rhetoric of a “second independence.”

Beyond that, Monaville is even more interested in exploring the students’ liminality and cosmopolitanism. Indeed, “being a student,” Monaville writes, “meant being a man of the world” (5). Finally, the book also explores how the Cold War and its internationalization of the “Congo Crisis” was felt and fathomed, not just by the political elite, but also by ordinary Congolese. Specifically, the author focuses on how students seized that moment of intense suffering to engage with the international realm of politics, intellectualism, ideology, and activism. Through their subversiveness—which bell hooks foregrounded as “pushing against oppressive boundaries”—they promoted the idea that independence was an unfinished project. They created what Monaville calls a “transnational space of protest” (153) that stretched from Albania to China.

There are some gray areas and gaps in Monaville’s narrative. The book’s main argument regarding intersectionality tends to equate schooling (or education) with political radicalization. Yet, we know that it was the unschooled youth who vigorously challenged the colonial status quo and shattered Belgian complacency. In the 1950s, the most radicalized segment of the youth population in Congo (especially in Kinshasa) were not the students of the world but the Bills, Kinshasa’s disenfranchised and interstitial youths. While students were nowhere to be seen during the momentous January 1959 Kinshasa insurrection, the Bills commandeered the events that precipitated decolonization in the Belgian Congo. According to Monaville’s account, students took to the streets for the first time only in March 1960 to protest the Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa’s Transvaal Province. The book also does not discuss the so-called conservative students even though, as Monaville remarked, these conservative students “harbored rebellious sentiments on campus” (138) during the Mulele Rebellion. What, then, did it mean to be a conservative student in Congo during the period that stretched from Lumumba’s short-lived political moment in 1960 to the Global 1968? Did conservative students favor regionalism and federalism, thus aligning with the anti-Lumumbist front? Or were they both nationalist and anti-Communist? How different was their language of decolonization and Pan-Africanism from the one espoused by left-leaning and leftist students? Finally, one would have liked Monaville to extend his narrative to the present in the conclusion of the book and reflect on the life and politics of Congolese students today.

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5 See footnote 9 below.
8 On 21 March 1960, the South African Police opened fire against unarmed demonstrators protesting anti-Black pass laws, killing at least 69 people, including several children.
9 Led by Pierre Mulele, who had served as Minister of Education in Patrice Lumumba’s short-lived government, the so-called Mulele Rebellion erupted in the Kwilu Province in 1963, against the backdrop of the Cold War. Referred to as Congo’s “second independence” by its leaders, it sought to free the country from (Western) foreign influence and opposed Mobutu’s military forces through guerilla tactics until it was defeated in 1965.
10 Alhman makes two points that fill some of the gaps I find in Monaville’s work. First, he argues that one of the main contributions of Nkrumahism was a synthesis of ideologies that provided a language for different groups to articulate their thoughts about decolonization and sovereignty. Second, Lumumba’s demise may have been also connected to his decision to join the radical fray as leaders such as Nkrumah, Sékou Touré, and Modibo Keita contemplated the creation an African federation to serve as a prelude to Nkrumah’s vaunted project of a United States of Africa; see Jeffrey S. Alhman, Living with Nkrumahism: Nation, State, and Pan-Africanism in Ghana (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017).
I want to begin by highlighting two characteristics of Pedro Monaville’s creative study of student activism in colonial and early postcolonial Congo. First, this book is one that, to its credit, not only raises questions, but also leaves some of them open-ended, only partially answered. Second, it is a book that invites integration as a thematic thread of engagement. In my review for this roundtable, I take off from both: using this innovative text to raise questions for the broader topics it explores, and tying my comments together using the motif of integration as an organizational through-line.

Monaville casts his study as “not strictly speaking a social or intellectual history of student politics” (Kindle location 698 of 10727; hereafter KL). In fact, I would suggest that it would more accurately be described as not only such a history. Even in the book’s organization, it combines formal chapters that do indeed track the social unfolding of Congolese students’ political work as “mediators between Congo and the world,” while interspersing these chapters with “interludes” that provide more innovative, ruminative angles on the material (KL 413). These two modes of writing open up space for the book to roam in some directions in which studies of 1960s student politics, whether in Africa or otherwise, do not normally venture. For example, nearly a quarter of the book carries out a deep dive into the history of the colonial postal service and letter-writing as an affective practice (Interlude 1 and chapters 1 and 2). What begins as a seeming detour justified by the post’s role as a vehicle for the molding of student sensibilities turns into a beautiful example of writing dedicated to drawing out the materiality of the objects, infrastructures, subjectivities, and even sentiments from which student politics unfolded. Here we sense the influence of the narrative style of scholars and texts like Nancy Rose Hunt’s Congo diptych, *A Colonial Lexicon* and *A Nervous State*, whose paths Monaville builds upon and extends. Indeed, what his book is best at is remaining attuned to the doubled nature of things—to their “hidden transcripts.” Monaville’s sharp re-appropriation of political scientist James Scott’s phrase in chapter 5 exposes Scott’s activities as a liberal American Cold Warrior in his engagements with Congolese students.

The kind of writing featured in these portions of *Students of the World* allows Monaville to avoid some of the common traps of writing on student activism: conflating it with politics outside the university’s walls, for instance, or being more one-dimensionally celebratory than analytical. Instead, his narrative walks a fine line, both capturing the sometimes elite character of student life and astutely identifying students’ cosmopolitanism as the source of these young men’s power as a constituency. (And they were overwhelmingly male, as Monaville does not shy away from stressing.) Indeed, given the tiny number of Congolese university students in 1930s through 1960s, the nature of the relationship between this constituency and the rest of Congolese society is a complex and critical one to unpack. It is complex enough that the book leaves many questions lingering. What were students’ relationships with their families like? With their neighbors? What the book still leaves room for, in other words, is a fuller view from the “outside” of university students as “others” and of their relationships with non-students. How did vernacular forms of politics, the forms that dominated the streets of Kinshasa away from campus, the kind that Didier Gondola and others have chronicled, register, or not, in students’ worlds? Monaville stresses (and accurately so, I think) the fact that Congolese students’ activism generated mobility, both physical and social. But did all activism in fact result in mobility? Or were there some forms, languages, and practices of political engagement among Congolese students’ fellow youths that did not produce mobility as much as, say, rootedness?

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Many of these questions about the relationship between students and the worlds outside their social bubble could, I believe, have been fruitfully answered via the narrative mode that Monaville employs in those portions of the book that roam beyond student politics to things like the postal service. In other words, a greater application of the narrative mode used for material that is ostensibly exterior to student politics to formal student politics itself may have opened up even further creative frontiers for the book. This is especially the case because scholarship on formal political activism, or activism that leverages its links to the global—the latter of which Monaville identifies as the essence of Congolese university student activism—is far too seldom examined with a lens shaped by vernacular political modes, those which are only uncomfortably legible within liberal frames. And, aside from further fleshing out these vernacular forms, another benefit of this would be to more precisely specify not just the power, but the constraints—not just classed and gendered constraints, but the epistemological guardrails too—of the student activism featured in Students of the World.

Two lines of integration, therefore, that the book both fruitfully pursues and could have pushed further are more thoroughly integrating its two modes of writing, and more fully articulating the relationships between campus activism and the forms of politics beyond the university’s walls. A third relates to the proverbial dichotomy of the global/local that any book on this topic almost inevitably is drawn to engage. Monaville does an excellent job of avoiding resuscitating this unhelpful dichotomy and instead provides a weave that treats “the global” and its historical cognates as “emic categories” (KL 554). Events and forms typically conceived as “global” certainly enter the narrative, and, to Monaville’s credit, they are consistently treated as important primarily for the way they served as raw material through which Congolese student activists “imagin(ed) themselves as part of a transnational political community” (KL390). This latter self-fashioning—“the cosmopolitan edge that authorized students to act as mediators between Congo and the world”—lies at the center of Monaville’s analysis of students’ importance to the history of Congo and its decolonization (KL 413). “Students mattered…due to the mediations they performed and not due to their numbers,” he writes (KL 413). Still, given that so many studies of student activism place similar emphasis on the ways non-Western students connected themselves to ideas, objects, and movements of “global” scale, making them their own in the process, this focus still leaves some queries just beyond the book’s analytical horizon. In particular is the question of whether uniquely African political forms not only connected to and made their own the signature 1960s movements that are often seen as authored by global North, but fundamentally shaped these movements. Are there ways in which Congolese student politics did this? Can we imagine African-authored political forms as not solely confined to decolonization?

A final axis of integration, which is both largely accomplished and has potential for further extension, has to do with the relationship of present to past. Monaville positions Students of the World as a prehistory of contemporary calls to decolonize the university. Particularly given the centrality of African universities to movements like Rhodes Must Fall, this argument is an important one, and essentially successful. And yet, in some ways, the book’s most original insights across this landscape lie in its reminders of some of the potentially surprising and even uncomfortable aspects of this prehistory. One is the fact that the Congolese 1960s student Left was quite welcoming of the 1965 coup d’état by Major-General Joseph Mobutu, who, installed himself in power as a US-supported opponent of the rebel followers of former Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, the democratically elected leader who had been murdered four years prior in one of independent Africa’s first CIA-backed political assassinations. Another, shown extensively by the book’s material but less explicitly noted by Monaville, is perhaps of even broader importance: if movements like Rhodes Must Fall have in some measure resulted from, and indexed, a partial but significant democratization of Africa’s universities, their precursor in student politics was defined not by mass participation and access but rather by elite privilege. This prehistory piques one’s curiosity about the intervening years of the 1980s and 1990s. How did a democratization of Africa’s universities gain momentum, and how thorough has it

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been? With greater ease of access and the revitalization of the continent’s institutions of higher learning after the continent’s economic near-collapse of the 1980s, what political place do students as a class hold today? Monaville’s study joins a rich literature on African students in the late-colonial and early postcolonial years, but more work on students and universities in the 1980s, 1990s, and into the present is needed.\(^5\)

With the way it straddles cultural, intellectual, and political/international history, *Students of the World* will have wide appeal across multiple subfields. Scholars of African studies, twentieth-century political movements, and histories of the Left, youth, and universities will all find much to appreciate here. It is also a masterful example of working with interviews in a way that would make it a useful teaching monograph for oral historians.

Review by Priya Lal, Boston College

Having thought and taught for many years about the Congo crisis of the early 1960s as a key episode in the history of decolonization, I’m delighted to finally read a book that captures what these tumultuous years felt and looked like within the Congo itself. Many scholars of international history, diplomatic history, and even African history reference the case of the Congo as a touchpoint according to what has become a rather rigid analytical formula: the Congo case constitutes the ultimate cautionary tale of foreign intervention in the Third World during the Cold War and decolonization.¹ The conventional wisdom about the Congo crisis attributes an excess of historical agency to international actors like the US and Belgium, and a dearth of agency to local Congolese people, without leaving space for understanding the nature and implications of events in the Congo outside of the relatively narrow sphere of high, official political action.

_Students of the World_ explodes this important but ultimately limited narrative by looking out onto the world from a vantage point within the Congo, contextualizing the country’s rocky decolonization process in a longer history of Congolese actors’ global engagements and probing the human experience of this period of change. Pedro Monaville’s account opens up a new landscape of not just actors and events but of thoughts and feelings, hopes and disappointments, ideas and compromises, relationships and betrayals. The reader emerges with a much richer understanding of what it meant to be a young, cosmopolitan, ambitious Congolese person during this era of political openings and closures: of what it meant to survey the global, navigate dynamics of authority closer to home, seek out and create knowledge, imagine a better future, and adjust to the disappointments the world offered. In this way, the book also contributes to an emerging body of scholarship on African education and African universities in particular, but also global histories of the student movement of the 1960s. The ongoing contemporary revival of the 1960s agenda of decolonization as an intellectual project demands that we look back more carefully at this earlier historical chapter rather than merely draw on it for vague inspiration in ways that simplify or misrepresent the past.²

I love the structure of _Students of the World_ and the way it alternates between a personal, intimate narrative style and a more traditional scholarly tone. The reader’s experience of moving back and forth between interlude and chapter mirrors the conceptual mediations that the book proposes: between the past and the present, between the Congo and the world, between knowledge and praxis.

The book’s first section on the postal system and the Congo’s colonial-era connections to the wider world offers a kind of pre-history of Congolese higher education during a time when it was not accessible to Africans, in part by unearthing the phenomenon of distance learning undertaken by young people eager to reach out to the world and develop their minds. I found this discussion fascinating. It shows how distance learning through mail correspondence was about building relationships with people far away as much as it was about improving oneself. I was especially interested in the correspondence courses organized through Paul Nyssens’ Institute for Human Culture, given their emphasis on individual discipline, which seems to overlap with but also stand apart from colonial and Catholic educational imperatives.

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In the second section on late colonial secondary schools and the early years of Kinshasa’s Lovanium University, I appreciated Monaville’s reflections on connections and resonances between traditions of Catholic and lay education, whether in the realm of intellectual traditions or institutional rituals or styles of authority. This analysis seems especially critical for moving away from the notion of a generic African colonial educational experience and bringing specificity to particular colonial styles of learning, thinking, and forging relationships in academic settings.

The third section on university student activism and left politics is the best part of the book. I found the chapter on Cold War transcripts to be especially powerful. Here we learn about the reverberations of and responses to Lumumba’s quick rise to power and assassination among Congolese university students, toggling back and forth between the accounts of American members of the US National Student Association charged with reporting on African university students to the US government, on the one hand, and the accounts and undertakings of Congolese students themselves. In a moving and sharp point, Monaville reminds us that the American informants, including those who went on to become prominent scholarly authorities on African politics such as James Scott and Crawford Young, were in the end simply young men assessing other young men. The geopolitical weight of their opinions shows us how far the lopsided power dynamics of the decolonizing world extended—far into the realm of knowledge and expertise, where they continue to reach today. In the other chapters in this section, I appreciated Monaville’s careful effort to show that students were not a monolithic group—they adopted different positions at different moments in response to the rapidly changing context of the Congo’s civil war. The close readings of student publications such as L’Éclair are especially illuminating, giving us not just insight into student efforts to fuse their understanding of comparative revolutionary contexts with the Congolese situation, but also a sense of transnational student networks formed and activated through the process of publication and circulation of the journal. Through this analysis we learn how the Congolese student community transcended national borders, extending into Europe and beyond, and overlapped with all kinds of non-academic political networks.

Finally, in a fourth section, we learn about the closure of student dreams of decolonization and autonomy as President Mobutu Sese Seko rose to power. This discussion allows us to shake off ever-pervasive conventional wisdom about postcolonial African authoritarianism as something that is self-evident and inevitable. Instead, we see how Mobutu’s power was consolidated and contested as a contingent process in which university students were clearly sophisticated political strategists. Mobutu himself emerges as a skilled actor adept at speaking in the language of student protest in ways that destabilized the platform of his domestic opponents. The theme of global connections resurfaces here as a source of constant suspicion and target of critique: Congolese students’ cosmopolitanism was officially discredited in line with the nativist discourse of authenticité, but it is clear that challenging foreign ties was part of an attempt to assert domestic control in a situation in which doing so was ultimately impossible due to global structures of power.

I will conclude with two overarching questions that remain in my mind after reading and reflecting on this rich work. The first has to do with the specific academic pursuits of Congolese students, whether at the Lovanium or in foreign universities. What courses of study did these students undertake, and what types of careers did they see themselves preparing for? Does understanding students’ relationship to the university’s function of traditional academic study and professional preparation help us understand their roles as political actors? How would paying closer attention to this information change or reinforce the story told in this book?

Second, I want to raise a somewhat provocative question. What are the lessons to take from this book for the “decolonization revival” among scholars and students in the present, by which I mean the current enthusiasm for decolonizing universities, academic disciplines, and even organizations like the African Studies

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What lessons does *Students of the World* offer, in particular, for scholars and students reflecting critically on what it means to study Africa in non-African universities today, peering in on events on the African continent from a distance?

I will close by reiterating how much I learned from this original and important book, which I will surely be discussing with students and colleagues for years to come.

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I first came to the question of the Congo in an in-depth way as a twenty-year-old study-abroad student at the University of Ghana, Legon in the early 1990s. While browsing the shelves of the campus bookstore, I stumbled upon Challenge of the Congo, written by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s iconic independence leader.¹ It was through Nkrumah’s distinctive vantage point that my understanding of Congo’s independence-era history was initially shaped. A decade and a half later, as a teacher, I immersed myself in the literature on Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba’s assassination, as his murder was the starting point for a course I developed called “Assassination: A History of 20th Century Africa.”² And then, as my interest deepened in what Egyptian filmmaker, Jihan El Tahri, has called “Cuba’s African Odyssey,” I once again found myself thinking about Congo’s turbulent 1960s, this time through the eyes of Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Victor Dreke Cruz, who led Cuban troops to Congo in 1965.³ These three overlapping contexts, along with the book’s own promise to situate Congolese decolonization squarely within the student ferment that was such a quintessential part of global 1968, primed me to read Students of the World as global history. While there is some of that to be found in Pedro Monaville’s riveting study of the social aspirations, political imperatives, and internationalist desires of students in Congo across the colonial and post-independence divide, this book’s true strength lies in its fine-grain analysis of student movements on the ground in Congo and the ways in which Congo’s vexed political history shaped those movements over the course of several decades.

There is a rather infamous statistic which has come to symbolize the depravations of late-Belgian colonial rule: at independence fewer than 20 Congolese had university degrees. Some quibble with this figure, saying it was closer to 30, but splitting hairs over this number does not change the abject state of higher education in the Congo in 1960.⁴ This statistic powerfully indexes Belgian colonial anxieties about the potent relationship between education and anticolonial dissent, a phenomenon hardly consigned to the Congo. After reading Students of the World, however, I have come to realize that this statistic risks foreclosing the very avenues of analysis that Monaville opens up in the first four chapters of his book. Through these chapters we are introduced to the competing, but at times complementary, forces that gave birth first to the figure of the “university student,” and later to the variety of Congolese student movements that animated the country’s campuses and politics, both at home and abroad. These forces, in part, were made up of the aspirations, networks, and methods that Congolese youth developed in their pursuit of both education and connection to worlds beyond those they immediately inhabited. Yet, they were also composed of the colonial and Catholic institutions that sought to provide a primary education calculated to maximize colonial productivity and minimize anticolonial sentiment. As in so many other colonial contexts, this backfired on the Belgians even though they so tightly controlled access to the most basic forms of education and were even more sparing with access to elite secondary schools.

What does seem particularly distinct, however, about the Congo case is its chronology. Congolese students’ access to university education—whether abroad in Belgium or at Lovanium University, which was established in 1954 not far from Kinshasa—was effectively coterminous with independence. As such, the university-


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based student movements came to prominence alongside and after independence. In West Africa, by contrast, there was a long tradition of sending elite African children—many of whom were mixed race—to study abroad in Europe. From this group sprang some of the earliest anticolonial nationalists in Anglophone West Africa. After World War Two ended, it was all but a rite of passage for aspiring West African nationalists to spend time studying abroad. Organizations like the West African Students’ Union became centers of anticolonial activity, placing students at the forefront of dismantling colonial rule and preparing them to assume positions of power at independence, even as the pace of Africanization varied from country to country. In other words, in places like Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria, it is impossible to think of the fact of African independence without thinking of the generations of university students who agitated for it.

Congo’s distinct chronology, as Monaville shows, meant that Congolese university students cut their organizational teeth in an entirely different political milieu than their West African counterparts, who were bound together by a clearer political mandate and a longstanding tradition that linked education to anticolonial politics. This helped me to make sense of the bewildering range of political positions and ideological orientations that individual students and various student organizations took, especially in the years that followed Lumumba’s assassination. I found it helpful to think of this book as being about Congolese students and student movements, rather than about a singular Congolese student movement. Monaville’s attention to detail in this regard is exceptional. While the overall narrative certainly foregrounds the leftist sensibilities of student activists, readers are also confronted with the ways in which internal fissures among leftists, along with the forces of moral and religious conservatism, greed, pragmatism, state control, and the politics of fear all played their part in narrowing the emancipatory possibilities of the university as a site of liberation in the Congo. This distinctive chronology and its implications for understanding so many different facets of Congo’s post-independence history are significant.

While Congolese were by and large prevented from accessing university educations until independence, in Monaville’s account they emerge as the early student vanguard of demands to decolonize the university. Much attention has been paid to this question since the rise of Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall in South Africa, but Congolese students in the 1960s were already demanding the Africanization of university faculties and curriculums in an attempt to decolonize their fledgling universities.5 It is perhaps worth pausing here to ask how the task of decolonization in this regard might have differed given how young these universities were to begin with. Nonetheless, the discussion of student activism around decolonizing the university was particularly persuasive in relation to violence. In chapter 8, Monaville writes convincingly about student demands to live and study on a university campus that was free from violence and repression. One could not be intellectually productive while being cowed into submission. President Mobutu Sese-Seko’s turn towards violence and the politics of fear to quell student dissent drew from a colonial playbook that peeled back the veneer of authenticié (also known as Zairianisation) that had fooled so many students into supporting him in the first place.6 Readers will appreciate Monaville’s careful attention to the on-again, off-again relationship that Mobutu had with university students and their collective organizations. Most students quickly came to see what Mobutu was really made of.

The framing of this book as one that opens up new ways of writing histories of the global 1960s from Africa—and Congo in particular—primed me to think that the kinds of questions that initially animated my thinking about the Congo, routed through Nkrumah and Cuba—although not necessarily these questions in


6 Kevin Dunn, "From Congo to Zaire: Mobutu’s Production of an “Authentic” National Identity," In Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 105-138.
particular—would take center stage in *Students of the World*. We certainly get a feel for those global dimensions and connections throughout the book. My understanding of the global 1960s and global 1968 in particular, was enhanced by a greater awareness of the activities and interventions of Congolese students, but it was not fundamentally changed. Rather, *Students of the World* offered me an entirely different way of understanding Congo and its twentieth-century history. For so long the connective tissue across Congo’s colonial/post-colonial divide has been neocolonialism. *Students of the World* provides a powerful parallel narrative that posits students; their writing, reading, and postal practices; their political and social aspirations—including their desire for worldliness; and their changing access to new and higher levels of education, particularly at the university, as connective tissues between these periods. While the book is still focused on a small and relatively elite group of young Congolese men, I was powerfully reminded when reading Congo’s twentieth century history through the plight of these students of all the other histories that have been obscured by Lumumba’s ghost and Mobutu’s monstrous history.
Response by Pedro Monaville, McGill University

Students of the World centers on activists who largely embraced the language of Marxism. That its title evokes the Communist Manifesto’s famous concluding sentence is quite apposite. Yet, as I explain in the book’s introduction, it was an interview with the late Kalixte Mukendi Wa Sanga, not Marx and Engels’s hopeful call to workers’ unity, that provided the immediate inspiration for the title. In the mid-1960s, Mukendi, who was then based at the University of Cologne, founded the Congolese Revolutionary Youth Union, which was pivotal in the Congolese student’s movement turn to the left. Yet, he dated his initial turn to politics to the years 1958 and 1959, when he studied at the University Lovanium. Always the anti-conformist, Mukendi found Lovanium stale and stuffy, and he tried to escape from campus as much as he could. He particularly enjoyed the nightlife of Leopoldville’s popular districts. In dancing bars and around beers, he met several journalists and activists who broadened his horizons and oriented him towards active anticolonial politics. “We were in the school of the world,” is the phrase he used to capture the significance of these encounters far away from the university campus (12).

My work adopts the perspective of Mukendi and other young Congolese who thought of themselves as students of and in the world, and who experienced the struggle for liberation and emancipation as a frontier of experimentation and self-discovery. The world took multiple forms for these students. It was the dangerous but exciting illimited space that began on the other side of the walled compounds of Catholic seminaries, elite boarding schools, and other physical and mental enclosures erected during decades of an oppressive colonial regime. My work follows these students on the paths they travelled as they ventured through the world of decolonization. In their generous reviews, Didier Gondola, Andrew Ivaska, Priya Lal, and Carina Ray respond positively to this approach. I am grateful for their engagement with my book, and their many generative reformulations of its main contributions. They are ideal interlocutors, because their own scholarship—on pan-Africanism, anti-imperialism, postcolonial development, “peripheral socialisms,” hegemonic masculinities, and mobile popular cultural productions—mobilizes the methods of African history to develop understandings of global dynamics in the twentieth century that center the continent. This is the type of historiographical intervention that I push in my book.

Several reviewers comment on the significance of the book’s global framing. Ray notes that the book provided her with a new framework to make sense of the “connective tissues” of the Congo’s recent history, but that it did not fundamentally alter her understanding of the global 1960s. To a large extent, Students of the World explores the role of an understudied group of political actors in relation to a historical canvas that is rather well established. I would argue that the book’s main contribution to the scholarship on the global 1960s is more methodological than purely analytical. My attempts to clarify the nature of the Cold War entanglements of the Congolese student movement led me to discover forgotten and unknown threads that connected the Congo to outside interveners from around the world. Yet, the global context matters in the book in as much as it registered among young Congolese.

In his review, Ivaska argues that the existing scholarship on the 1960s in Third World countries frequently focus on how students in these locations appropriated ideas authored in the Global North, while rarely

1 This roundtable follows an author-meets-critics panel on Students of the World that took place at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association in November 2022. I would like to warmly thank Tasha Rijke-Esptein for organizing this panel and for writing the introduction to the present roundtable. I am also very grateful to Frank Gerits and Diane Labrosse for all their work in making the publication of the roundtable possible.

exploring how they shaped global movements. In my book, I situate the Congolese student movement along a slightly different axis. What I try to capture is the specific cosmopolitan disposition—or optic—that determined the students’ worldviews. Most students would have taken issue with the allegation that their protest movements built on foreign political forms and affects that they appropriated and adapted to their own context. They perceived themselves as mediators, whose role was to make the Congo legible to the world, and vice versa. This meant mastering global idioms, which often used the language of Marxism, but this was different from the act of borrowing political forms and ideas (which does not mean of course that acts of borrowing did not happen). To think of the specificity of this intervention, it can be useful to distinguish between the transnational connections of the global 1960s, and the imaginative structures that enabled these connections. Whereas various internationalist traditions and ideals of world citizenship informed the extroverted politics of other student movements, my book’s argument is that young Congolese vibrated with the global spirit of the 1960s from a standpoint that was deeply rooted in the history of Belgian colonialism and its distinctly oppressive policies of ideological seclusion.

Both Ivaska and Gondola ask questions about the relationship between students and other social groups, and regret that I did not write about students today. These are legitimate observations. I had of course to make editorial choices that prevented me to develop some questions as much as I would have liked.³ I agree with Gondola that students did not play a major role in the popular uprisings of 1959 that precipitated the downfall of the colonial regime. Later in the 1960s, left activists were able to re-politicize the elitist mindset of the students to build a large movement of support for the options championed by the followers of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. Yet, the same elitism led also to much more conservative outcomes and encouraged some students to hold on to the rhetoric of expertise and dismiss radical passions and democracy. As Gondola mentions, the action of the Bills, Leopoldville’s disenfranchised youth, was much more decisive in the first wave of radicalization that led to independence. The Bills of the late 1950s, like the Mikilistes of the 1980s (the young Congolese migrants to Europe that were active in informal and sometimes illegal trade with Central Africa), could be seen as students of the world in their own rights.

As I discuss in the book, the students’ ability to draw from the defiant spirit of Congolese urban culture mattered as much their cosmopolitan imagination in their collective embrace of left politics in the aftermath of Lumumba’s assassination. At the same time, the distinctness of the students was very clear. The fact that higher education had remained an unattainable dream for Congolese until nearly the end of the colonial period explains the unique symbolic capital that students enjoyed in the 1960s. The cohesive collective identity of the students was omnipresent in the interviews I conducted and is probably reflected in my narrative. I can only hope that the book will inspire further research on this period that will emphasize what Ivaska nicely calls “a fuller view from the ‘outside’ of university students as ‘others’ and their relationship with non-students.”

The prestige of higher education conferred upon students a distinct aura, which allowed them to preserve a certain autonomy in the way that they acted in the social world. Students defended this autonomy against President Joseph Mobutu’s brutal strategy of cooption and repression at the end of the 1960s, but the first struggles they led were against university administrators whom they denounced as colonial nostalgists. In her review, Lal asks how the specific courses of study that students pursued influence their actions as political actors. There might have been stronger appetites for leadership among students in law; students in political science and the humanities may have enjoyed debating ideologies more than others; and several students in medicine talked of the connections they perceived between their future profession and the attention to the

³ I have explored the resonances of the history of the student movement of the 1960s among students of today through a collaboration with the painter Sapin Makengele and the photographer Cécile Michel that materialized in a documentary film directed by Michel, Les Fantômes de Lovanium (Belgium: AJC/SIC, 2013), which is available online: https://vimeo.com/155515032.
powerless and the afflicted that defined their politics. However, student politics clearly transcended the specificities of individual disciplinary orientations and career paths.

By the end of the 1960s, many activists had begun to significantly question their own privileges and imagined the conditions for a radically different university education system that would be at the service of the Congolese people and its needs. Mobutu’s violent repression of the student movement interrupted the development of these ideas in student circles. Earlier in the decade, this specific line of self-critique had been less prominent. Students then developed their politics mostly based on their position as the country’s educated elite, and the duties that went along with it.

Another of Lal’s questions concerns the link between the struggle to decolonize higher education in the 1960s and the movements that have embraced a similar rhetoric in the twenty-first century. In their reviews, Ivaska and Ray offer interesting answers to this question that suggest the possibility to apprehend the tensions between past and present around themes like violence and democratization. In the book, while I explicitly situate the project in relation to the more recent wave of student mobilizations around decolonization, I am careful not to impose a unilateral interpretation of these links. The differences in contexts are significant. The movement to decolonize the university in the 1960s was closely associated with a broader struggle for independence that focused on the economic, social, and institutional foundations of (neo)colonialism more than its cognitive and epistemological manifestations.

Lal specifically asks what lessons “scholars and students reflecting critically on what it means to study Africa in non-African universities today” should draw from the book. In relation this question, I would point again at the autonomy of the Congolese student movement of the 1960s. Some foreign faculty enjoyed degrees of influence on the students, but as I argue in the book, the students largely articulated for and by themselves the stakes of their movements. One lesson, for the Congo and for the world, that this history might offer is that political affects carry forces of radical transformations, and that, while webs of oppressive global ties produce violence and oppression, popular movements can turn these global connections into spaces of struggle and liberation.