Interview - Yolande Bouka

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This interview is part of our Black History Month features. The interviews speak to the fundamental aims of Black History Month and discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for young scholars.

Yolande Bouka is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University, Canada. Her research and teaching focus on gender, African politics and security, political violence, and field research ethics in conflict-affected societies. She holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from American University. Her current research is a multi-sited historical and political analysis of female combatants in Southern Africa.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think one of the most exciting developments in IR scholarship is the renewed energy towards decolonial and global IR and the transformation of the political economy of knowledge production at the intersection of increasing feminist curiosity in the discipline. I say 'renewed energy' because I think there is sometimes a tendency by younger scholars reading about and engaging with these intellectual movements to think that this is something new. Scholars and intellectuals across various disciplines have long discussed and intellectualized the need and the means to decolonize academia. These calls have gone uninterrupted until today.

Those of us who have added our shoulder to the wheel are merely trying to build on the intellectual innovation of our predecessors and mentors. We not only benefit from a critical mass in the discipline but also from the power of a wide range of tools to disseminate and amplify our objections to the status quo. Some institutions are going beyond merely discussing the need to decolonize and globalize the discipline. They are taking small but concrete steps to disrupt the Eurocentrism and whiteness of the discipline that scholars like L.H.M. "Lily" Ling and Anna Agathangelou have long criticized.

I am also excited to see some tangible steps to address the skewed political economy of knowledge production, consumption, and dissemination. From journal editors demanding authors to pay attention to their citation practices and holding them accountable to scholars from underrepresented groups, demanding more space in existing publication outlets and creating and building legitimacy around new ones, there is movement. We still have a long way to go to truly upset the status quo. Women, racialized scholars, and scholars based in non-Western institutions are still facing stubborn barriers despite amazingly innovative and robust scholarships. But, as someone who focuses on issues of politics, gender, and security in Africa, when I hear people talking about the importance of Black Feminist Thought to their IR scholarship, or when I see the work of young African female scholars like Christelle Amina Djouldé getting published and cited, I can't help but think there is hope for our discipline. That said, I also expect that as these movements gain ground in decentering Western hegemony in the discipline, we will see either the commodification of or backlash against new approaches.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Like everyone, my identity and where I am positioned in the world substantially influence how I understand it. I am the child of two Togolese immigrants who moved to Canada in the nineteen eighties after having lived in France for a few

years. Due to my father's political activism, my family could not return to Togo for quite some time. This created in me an awareness of global injustices and how political violence can impact people in very intimate ways. But in many ways, I was also the product of the North American education system. While as a youth, I embraced my hybridity and moved through the world making connections between my local reality and the global, I still had (have) several blind spots with regards to my place in the world.

Early in my academic career, I immersed myself in the works of North American, and European scholars whose "norm against noticing" led them to 'forget' or omit people who looked like me from their analysis of world order. Similarly, while uncomfortable, I did not question our discipline's stubborn universalist application of concepts like Westphalian peace and failed states even when the paradigms were faulty. It is not until generous scholars and mentors I was lucky enough to encounter along the way introduced me to the works of Frantz Fanon, Cheikh Anta Diop, W.E.B Du Bois, and the like that alternative methods of analyzing the world became available to me.

Later, it is immersing myself in Black Feminist Thought and African Feminism that made visible power structures that went unnoticed to me before. Postcolonial African men too often framed my initial decolonial awakening. But reframing my understanding of power by incorporating Black women intellectuals mapped the intersection of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, and neo-imperialism. The work of Funmi Olonisakin, who is pushing boundaries in security studies, gave me permission to imagine the disciple and the world otherwise.

Now that I am back in Canada, after almost 20 years away, I am slowly familiarizing myself with Indigenous scholarship and coming to terms with the fact that, despite my Blackness and immigrant status, I am still benefiting from settler colonialism. I also realize how Indigenous scholarship and writings by African and other non-Western decolonial scholars have been holding an intellectual conversation that has emancipatory implications for our discipline, and I want in!

What is the importance of Black History Month and what does it represent to you?

Black History Month used to be very important to me. It was that one time in the year where, for one month – albeit the shortest month (February) in North America – I could see myself reflected and celebrated in various fields. It was a moment to attempt to center Blackness in a world shaped by white supremacy. Today, Black History Month does not hold the same importance to me. I think it is still essential to celebrate it. However, as I have given myself permission to recalibrate my scholarship, I allow Black people to exist and be recognized daily in my world.

In your article on decolonising IR, you poignantly juxtapose the celebration of African (political) agency in the *Black Panther* films against IR's systemic omission of African agency. Why has IR, unlike history and comparative disciplines, glossed over the participation of Black men and women in pivotal events like World War II and the Cold War?

I think it is important not to overstate other disciplines' inclusion of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people's presence and participation in this world. Given the racist underbelly of many social sciences, it is not unusual for work that includes or focuses on racialized peoples to either otherize them or for good scholarship to be marginalized. Cecelia Lynch argues that "racialized international political practices a century ago shaped theoretical assumptions, deferrals, and absences in ways that continued to resonate throughout the century". And yet, as explained by Robert Vitalis, the erasure of race is prevalent in IR. Gender is also important in IR. Yet, many scholars ignore feminist scholarship and the androcentrism of the discipline, which, in my view, facilitates the West's control of feminized and racialized societies. Erasing Black, Brown, and Indigenous people is part of this same logic. The anti-Black racism in IR and in most social sciences is a continuation of a long history of the erasure of the intellectual, social, and institutional footprint of people of African descent, which has made it easier to dehumanize them and justify the violent and cruel ways to exploit their labor and resources.

Aside from adding more people of colour into the syllabi, what are the integral first steps to decolonising IR and exposing/celebrating these previously ignored actors?

Scholars like Robbie Shilliam, Achille Mbembe, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Aníbal Quijano, Meera Sabaratnam, David Blaney, and Arlene Tickner offer us possible blueprints for the way forward if we are serious about pushing for a decolonial IR from both epistemological and ontological standpoints. The emerging scholarship encourages us to explore different ways of knowing and worlds or realities to center at the heart of our research. For me, in simple terms, I ask who is missing from the discussion. I use Cynthia Enloe's challenge to develop a feminist curiosity while heeding to Du Bois' warning about the importance of the global colorline in systems of domination. Ultimately, Kimberly Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is a perfect tool to discover and analyze multiple webs of power, control, and resistance in IR. Beyond race and gender, I try to pay attention to issues, ethnicity, citizenship, class, immigration status, etc. It's not really about making the subaltern speak. Marginalized groups always speak and act. For me, it's more about cutting out the noise of the mainstream and finding where these conversations are taking place and centering them.

Second, I want to ask what is missing? In my blog post on Afrofuturism and decolonizing IR, I chose to ask who was missing from accounts of WWII because of its accepted prominence in IR scholarship. I mention the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale to shake things up, but it still focuses on the Cold War. If I wanted to really push the envelope, I would have asked why WWII and not Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca as a departure point to interrogate African agency. Asking what is missing, for me, means asking what the critical junctures or the ordinary occurrences that are missing from our analysis are.

Finally, I seek to know and encourage my students to understand why these people, places, or events are missing, and we know what we think we know. There are obviously many reasons for that, including the Ethnocentrism of our discipline, which has dismissed and erased other possibilities, norms, and sources of knowledge made available through alternative cosmologies, philosophies, and methodologies. But I also recognize that I have a part to play in changing the status quo. I try to be more deliberate about how I design and execute my research programs in a way that values deep and contextualized history and knowledge. In the same vein, I think engaging with the work of David Mwambari on the intellectual property of the so-called 'local' researchers in Global South is an essential step towards decolonizing our field to avoid replicating patterns of knowledge domination and erasure. This exercise is far from complete, but I think it can help promote different ways of knowing.

Your current research project studies female combatants in Namibia's liberation war against Apartheid South Africa to understand interactions between the norms and institutions of non-state armed groups and the deliberate decision-making of enlisted women. What does your research specifically tell us about women's agency in warfare?

This project sits right at the intersection of my research priorities to gender and decolonize scholarship in IR. On the one hand, I hope to be able to revisit the war in Angola, one of the critical junctures in IR history from the perspective of ordinary African participants. This exercise hopes to move away from bipolarity as a central analytical lens to Cold War conflicts. At the same time, I wanted to contribute to the emerging gendering of the narrative of the Namibian liberation (along with Martha Akawa) and explore women as agents in their own right during this episode of violence. Scholars often want to understand why people – men and women – join armed groups. The many depictions of female rebels are presented in the context of their relationships to men. For example, women who engage in violent extremism are often said to do so because of the loss of a spouse at the hand of the state. Other studies often look at political and sexual emancipation as the main reason behind women's participation in such groups.

My project uncovered various other reasons why young women join SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation) in exile, including the importance of their pre-enlistment relationships. Many Namibians left the country to join SWAPO because of their friends and relatives. This is well in line with other research on participation in political violence that emphasized the importance of micro-level dynamics and social ties. My study also found that looking at the internal structures of armed groups is important to understand the military trajectory of female combatants. For example, in the course of my research, I found that SWAPO leaders had the final say on whether young Namibians who left the country to join the group in exile joined the armed wing or served the organization in other capacities. These decisions were based on the organization's needs and candidates' profiles. As such, a young woman could leave Namibia to enlist in PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia) only to find herself studying in

Zambia. Similarly, while someone eager to leave Namibia to further her studies as publicized by SWAPO propaganda could end up at the front. While they didn't have the final say in where they served in SWAPO, in each position, women navigated their roles as best they could. Indeed, while in both non-state and formal military institutions, men remain in control of war rules and regulations regarding gender and sexuality, women's subjectivity and agency on the battlefield are the results of a continuous power struggle between gendered dominant and subordinate groups.

As part of your book project *In the Shadow of Prison* you interviewed former prisoners accused of genocide crimes to analyse their journey in the Rwandan legal system and their experiences during the 1990's violence. What does your research tell us about the Rwandan transitional justice (TJ) program?

Following civil war and genocide in 1994, the Rwandan authorities established one of the most expansive transitional justice projects in Africa. The new government, led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), had the daunting task of restoring peace and security while attempting to legitimize its control of the state. It centered its transitional justice efforts on reconciliation through a modern adaptation of a traditional conflict resolution mechanism, while holding all who participated in genocide criminally accountable. Between 1996 and 2012 Rwanda prosecuted well over one million genocide suspects in two million cases, most of which took place in modernized local courts at the village level under the supervision of the central government. While the transitional justice project incorporated international norms of personal accountability and punishment of genocide crimes, it also served another purpose: it allowed the RPF to entrench its political control. My book interrogates the impact of Rwanda's transitional justice on the lives of those who were the objects, subjects, and in many ways, the product of that system. I explain that violence and coercion during the transition played an essential role in Rwandans' participation in transitional justice. This is an element that is rarely studied in transitional justice literature. Finally, my book argues that at the community level, local dynamics impacted how justice was rendered and, at times, yielded outcomes that ran counter to national peacebuilding goals.

What is the most important advice you would give to young scholars?

There is nothing wrong with not fitting in. By this I mean, there may be times where more traditional IR scholars will tell you that your work is marginal or that it does not belong in the discipline. It may be tempting to reshape one's research agenda towards orthodoxy to feel safe and accepted. But I find that the most exciting and compelling research is often found along unbeaten paths. Find other misfits and move forward.