

Joy Owen, *Congolese Social Networks: Living On The Margins In Muizenberg, Cape Town*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015). pp. 251.

Felipe Antonio Honorato

*Congolese Social Networks: Living On The Margins In Muizenberg, Cape Town* is a 251 page long monograph published in 2015 by Lexington Books. South Africa, as the author points out, has a contradictory relationship with African immigration to the country: “Despite the creation and ratification of a new Immigration Act in 2002, the government has been draconian and remiss in its administration of refugees, placing the burden of proof of refugee-ness on the shoulders of Congolese and other asylum seekers from Africa. This particular administrative burden has led to corruption and inefficient management of the permitting system in the Home Affairs department, as asylum seekers are encouraged to “buy” the appropriate papers.”<sup>1</sup>

Due to the “disinterest” and “ill provision” by the SA government for them, most Congolese refugees and migrants have to rely on their personal social networks to survive in the nation: “This predisposes Congolese transmigrants to the creation of social networks that extend beyond class, racial, ethnic and national lines.”<sup>2</sup> The main objective of Joy Owen’s book is showing how these social networks work in the daily life of these transmigrants in Cape Town.

Mainly because of its economical and political stability, South Africa is seen as “Africa’s America,” and attracts migrants and refugees from other parts of the continent. Since 1994, with the end of Apartheid, there has been an influx of African refugees (people generally fleeing from many kinds of violence in neighboring countries) and documented migrants (mainly skilled workers searching for better opportunities) to the country, from nations such as Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, Nigeria and the two Congos.<sup>3</sup> In 2002, they accounted for 38% of SA’s total immigrant population of 2,472 persons.<sup>4</sup>

The arrival of these migrants fed a xenophobic rhetoric within South African society. Congolese are a significant part of these flows and the book sheds light on the prejudice faced by them in their everyday life, and also on the condition of social vulnerability that they live in in this country: Congolese migrants, for

example, had to avoid traveling by public transportation, specially the train, as a number had been verbally harassed.<sup>5</sup> But Owen remarks that, “Despite the reality of structural violence and a xenophobic reception by certain locals, Congolese and other African continentals create viable livelihoods and lives within South Africa”<sup>6</sup>—in 2009, appeared, in a newspaper article, a very well-established car guarding done by Congolese men in Cape Town.<sup>7</sup>

The author conducted 15 months of fieldwork between July 2004 and December 2008, a timelapse in which Joy Owen came into contact with around 100 Congolese migrants, who were residents of Muizenberg and other places in Cape Town. Mostly the author had observed three Congolese men that all lived in the same house “and participated in their lives as and when they allowed me to”<sup>8</sup>—Ghislain, Zakia and Lyon.

Muizenberg is located in the suburbs of Cape Town; in the past, this neighborhood was predominantly a place of the white, colored, black African and immigrant middle class, but now constitutes a cheap housing option in the city, affordable for the refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>6</sup> Also, “Most Congolese had been warned away from townships in *Cape Town*”<sup>9</sup> (because of the aforementioned xenophobic rhetoric within South African society), resorting to the suburbs as a home. Owen estimates that up to 3,000 Congolese reside in the area, most of them from Kinshasa; in the 1990s, Muizenberg was often referred to as “Little Congo.”<sup>10</sup>

Far from its most glorious days, the architecture of Muizenberg is qualified as “bedraggled” and “restitute” in the book. The Congolese migrants are blamed by the nationals for the deterioration of the area, even though there is no relation between their arrival and the deterioration of Muizenberg.<sup>11</sup> An interview with the then Chairperson of the local Improvement District Committee, Mariette, uncovers this feeling: the “white Afrikaner woman” says, among many other things, that refugees have no respect for “locals” and for the police,<sup>12</sup> and that they steal and do other “illegal stuff.”<sup>13</sup>

Although centered in the experiences of Ghislain, Zakia and Lyon, the research that originated the monograph began with the author’s friendship with Jean-Claude (JC). JC is Ghislain’s brother and bouncer/doorman at a club in Cape Town when he and Joy Owen met each other. She notes that “Having completed two years of a law degree, JC left the DRC for South Africa. Walking

most of the way from DRC, the journey at times broken by rides on overland or goods trucks for a price, JC met similar migrants, mostly young men from Zimbabwe attempting to cross the river into South Africa.”<sup>14</sup>

In the beginning of chapter 3—“Muizenberg, fieldwork and “the other,”<sup>15</sup> the author introduces her biographical motivations to investigate the reality of Congolese transmigrants in Cape Town. She explains that Muizenberg was part of her childhood, as her mother used to take the family to Sunrise Beach, located adjacent to Muizenberg. About her adolescence and the memories of this neighborhood, Owen says, “In adolescence my memories are more immediate of Muizenberg’s sunshine, surfers, laughter, ice-cream cones from Majestic café and our forays, as a family of three, onto the Muizenberg walkway and Muizenberg beach”<sup>16</sup>. Apart of Joy Owen’s personal linkage to “Little Congo,” she highlights that her origins are not native to South Africa and also indicate this fact as one of the main motivations that led her to investigate the life of African “others” in the country: “I have a history of immigration by choice and a history of forced internal migration in my family.”<sup>17</sup>

It can be said that the monograph is a pioneer work, due to Joy Owen being a non-white woman investigating the life of “African others” in SA—in her own words: “How then did a South African woman of color, raised in a colored suburb of Cape Town come to study an African other with a foreign tongue? This is not usual in South African anthropology. Historically in South Africa white anthropologists usually studied the racial “other” while the “native anthropologist” opted for auto-anthropology (Palmer 2007).”<sup>18</sup> The book presents very well written contextualizations of DR Congo history and international migrations, and some reflexions that only could be done by an author, from the global south, as the South African anthropologist.

*Felipe Antonio Honorato is a PhD candidate in the Social Change and Political Participation Post-Graduation Programme of the School of Arts, Sciences and Humanities of the University of São Paulo, Brazil.*

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Joy Owen, *Congolese social networks: living on the margins in Muizenberg, Cape Town*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 216.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Joy Owen, *Congolese social networks: living on the margins in Muizenberg, Cape Town*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.