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Professor's Bookshelf: Laura Twagira

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Assistant Professor of History Laura Twagira writes about gender in African history, and the connections the topic has to the environment and technology. The Argus sat down to talk to Twagira about her research, the importance of making African history be about Africans, and her upcoming sabbatical.

The Argus: What's on your bookshelf?

Laura Twagira: One of the things that I've read most recently that I think has been influential for some things I've been thinking about is called "Transient Workspaces: Technologies of Everyday Innovation in Zimbabwe." This is a book by Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, a historian of the environment and technology in Zimbabwe. And one of the things that I really liked about this is the way that he talks about everyday African technologies and the way that they inform the way people then integrated new technologies in the 20th century.

He's particularly interested in the introduction of the gun, which was incorporated as a hunting tool—[which was used in] very similar [ways] to other kinds of hunting tools. It wasn't used in the same way that Europeans might necessarily use it. Precise aiming during the hunt wasn't as important as using it to create a situation in which hunters could then capture the animal. It was more about hunters' skill and use of the technology, rather than the overwhelming power of the gun itself. And that is really important in discussions that people are having now about the relationships between Africa and the West in the way that Africans are really shaping what they're interested in ...in a way that makes the most sense for them locally. And the other really interesting aspect about this piece is the way that he sees technologies as being incorporated into the spiritual lives of people. This is particularly important in the forest, where people are using the gun. And control over the forest also means that there is a need for spiritual control over the gun, which I think is something that a lot of people haven't looked at in terms of technology.

I keep talking about technology quite a bit, because one of the fields that I'm really working in is the history of technology and gender in Africa... Mavhunga really draws out how, if you think about it from an African perspective, how people were using different technologies, it's really an African story, and I like that very much. And that's something that I seek to do in my own work with women and technology in West Africa.

A: Could you talk about that work?

LT: Right now, I'm working on a book manuscript that's tentatively titled "Re-Engineering the Foodscape." It's a long history of the 20th century, looking at women and their use of technology, but also environmental resources, to produce food in Mali in the Sahel region. It's a region that's often depicted as not being particularly productive in terms of agriculture. And this is a view that really comes from the late 20th century and some food crises that occurred specifically in the 1970s and 1980s.

But the [region] has a really long reputation as being one of agricultural richness and abundance; that's why, partly, the French were interested in it in the first place. And my work looks at how women actually were the ones who were making the environment particularly productive. But it was a process that involved their knowledge of different aspects of nature, of farming [techniques], and their own modest technologies—like pots, and other things that they used to transform products from the wilderness.

The book starts [with] what the picture was in the early 20th century. And then I really analyze what happens then when women come to a French development project that was highly technological. ...The landscape was really transformed by French technology in many ways, and that's how people look at this particular place. But I look at the women who came to this place and knew a lot about technology already, knew how to transform the landscape to make it abundant. They integrated a lot of the aspects of this technological process that included irrigation technologies like canals, as well as some of these larger farming machines. And they ended up using them for their own benefit in making this landscape productive.

In many ways, [the project] was a massive failure for the French. Farmers... often times didn't make very much money or didn't earn anything. But women who lived in this place were able to use all these different resources to transform the landscape... They turned the project into a kind of local food aid resource in a way that was more successful than aid from international countries.

What I'm working on now is thinking about how women can learn how to manipulate the environment and technology in moments in which there is financial or environmental crisis. How it sheds light on the way we're thinking about climate change now—that technology can transform the environment, looking at what they were able to do. Does that help us to rethink what's going on in their region now, where there really is a climate change crisis emerging?

One of the other books that I'm reading is connected to this. This is what's on my shelf: "From Slavery to Aid: Politics, Labour, and Ecology in the Nigerian Sahel, 1800-2000." [Author Benedatta Rossi is] looking at how people have engaged with the environment, [and how] the labor of different people in this environment [shapes] different political interventions from this very early period in the 1800s to now, the landscape development and aid. These are questions that I'm also interested in asking.



c/o Laura Twagira; Taken in the National Archives of Mali

A: You talked about [the importance of] making your history an African story. Can you talk about that?

LT: I think that in the field of the history of technology, it emerged really as a field that focused on technological developments in the West from the industrial revolution through the 20th century. That is increasingly being diversified by historians who are looking at women in technology and how technologies have a lot to do with our gendered identities. The way that razors can be gendered female by making them pink. How does that make it different from another razor? So, those [are the] kinds of questions that make us laugh, but end up being really important.

But, for a long time, this narrative also assumed that technology, modernization, and progress was a story of the West. And now, increasingly, there are people like Mavhunga—I'm trying to do this myself—[who] think about technology not only as a story of the West bringing some kind of technology to Africa. What does it mean, but thinking about technology not only as a Western story, but thinking about it from other regional perspectives? So, in my story, it's not even technologies that are brought by the West—though they play an important part, like those mechanized farming machines—but technologies that are produced by women or produced by African blacksmiths, like metal pots, that are part of this story and also incredibly exciting stories to tell about dynamic change in society and the way that they interact with new and different kinds of things. It's not a story of the West bringing technology. [Now, historians ask,] what are African technologies? It's a story that sort of broadens how we think about technology and what technology means in society.

A: And so, this involves talking about pots and things like that as forms of technology?

LT: Right. This is a really exciting part of the book manuscript that I'm working on. So at this particular place—at this development project. It's called the Office du Niger. It's not an office, it's not a place where people are sitting down, like in a professor's office. It's just a way the French were talking about it, being a big [development] scheme. It was a place in which there were not just these big, mechanized machines that arrived, but metal pots started arriving in markets sooner than in other places. The first ones were made out of iron. They were brought by the French, and [the French] were hoping to introduce them to sell them to African consumers in this place that they saw as being particularly modern. It was part of their development project. And they didn't sell very well at first, because they were really heavy, kind of unwieldy.

There's a shift that happened after World War II, where there's more aluminum increasingly coming into different West African ports, because of production for World War II. [Local] blacksmiths learned how to use aluminum to create light, easy-to-transport goods. And a lot of times, these blacksmiths produced items for women [and] for the domestic household. They started creating metal pots that were very light, easy to use. Women didn't have access to trees for wood fuel, which is what they used for cooking fires, so they had to go farther and farther for wood. These new metal pots cooked a lot faster. So women didn't need to get as much wood to fuel the fire for cooking. It meant, if they had a pot, they didn't have to collect as much wood. So it ended up saving them [labor and time].

There has been technology to create metal pots and all kinds of other things in West Africa for a very long time. But women were never really interested in metal pots before, because there hadn't been a great need for it. They replaced clay pots very rapidly at this technology project that I'm looking at, because there had been deforestation. And many women had a great need for these metal pots. But it did more than just ease their labor burdens. [The pots] sounded different when women cooked in them. They cooked a bit faster and they looked different when they were cooking. These changes in society, in how women were transforming the way they produced food, were very visible in society and made women's value in society visible, because they could be heard cooking in a new way, they could be seen cooking in a new way. In many ways, the metal pots helped to mark women's real importance. So that's why I like the story of metal pots quite a bit. Because it really showcases how women's sophisticated knowledge about the environment and technology and what was changing in society and how they could use all of this knowledge to improve food production and social life in [rural] Mali in this time.

A: How was the women's role really changing in this time?

LT: Well, not necessarily that their role was changing. But... they were showcasing the ways in which they were adapting to the rapid change around them. The [Office du Niger] was really intrusive. It transformed the agricultural landscape. [The canals] flooded in a lot of towns. It wasn't working very well for a lot of people who, for the early part of its history, were actually forced to come to this project to work. There was a lot of dramatic change. And the way that [women] were then able to introduce this new technology [i.e. the new pots] into their daily cooking labors was a real demonstration of how they were making the best of all of these changes. They were able to transform what had been really an agricultural failure to something where they could actually make the place livable for people.

This is part of a big book project that I'm working on. It's an enviro-tech-gender history in West Africa. I'm really interested in gender technologies of culture. It's something that I've written about in terms of men at the [Office du Niger] and their relationships with different machines and how it was part of their masculine identity. And the book itself is looking more at sort of women's roles and their gender cultures of technology.

A: You're going on sabbatical next year. Where are you going?

LT: I will probably be doing a research trip this summer to Mali. I'm finishing up the book project, and so I will probably do one or two [additional] research trips coming up this spring. And then in the summer, I'll be intensively working on finishing the manuscript.

A: What are you most looking forward to for the sabbatical?

LT: I'm really looking forward to having the intensive time to think about the manuscript, to do some reading of new work—like this book by Bendatta Rossi ["From Slavery to Aid"]—but also to relook at my material anew, relook at all of the chapters in the manuscript anew, to really have the time to devote intensively to working on this project. The research for it was incredibly exciting and fascinating for me to conduct, so to have time to spend with the project in an intensive manner is really what I'm looking forward to during my time off.

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