



From the 'Theatre of the Tree' to the Necrocity: Ngong Kum Ngong's Poetic Vision in *Blot on the Landscape*

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Introduction

Extractive violence in the domain of deforestation is often slow and attritional. While studies have predominantly focused on oil politics, including petrodollar capitalism and the necropolitical violence associated with it, this study focuses on deforestation in one of the Congo Basin countries, Cameroon. The article argues that the delayed effects of deforestation such as soil erosion, species extinction, and biodiversity loss are forms of slow violence implicated in the ever-expanding debate on necropolitics and ecological decline. Taking a postcolonial ecocritical tract, I explore the nexus between deforestation and urbanization, which I describe as a "necrocity" because of the slum existence that largely defines the lives of the urban poor. Drawing on Rob Nixon's slow violence and the "death-in-life" existence (Mbembe 2019: 75) that characterizes the lives of these urban poor, such as exposure to varied forms of pollution, poor housing, and disease, I show the various forms of death that afflict the multitudes. Then, to better illustrate these theoretical insights, I focus on the poetry of the Cameroon Anglophone poet John Ngong Kum Ngong. His poetry collections, such as *Walls of Agony* (2006), *Chants of a Lunatic* (2012), *Snatched from the Grave* (2012), *Strange Passions* (2012), and *Blot on the Landscape* (2015) span a range of issues. However, it is his preoccupation with postcolonial environments and geopolitics that is most relevant here. Indeed, Eunice Ngongkum contemplates John Ngong Kum Ngong's poetry in terms of its preoccupation with "ecological degradation, crisis and transformation in Cameroon/Africa as being intimately bound up with colonial and neocolonial capitalist practices" (2020: 94). In analyzing these dynamics, I focus in particular on the poetry collection *Blot on the Landscape* (2015).

To be sure, scholars like Kenneth Toah Nsah and Eunice Ngongkum have variously examined the issue of deforestation in Cameroon and the Congo Basin region more broadly. Nsah, for example, examines issues of "water pollution and land (ab)use through disorderly urbanization in two plays from the Congo Basin" (2021: 314). While Nsah elects to use



dramatic literature to make a case that “urban sprawl” and water pollution are a consequence of “deforestation” (2021: 316), this article explores the medium of poetry, particularly the compelling and more cryptic poetic imagery that Ngong Kum uses to make the case that deforestation and death are closely related phenomena. Put differently, the “ravages of deforestation” (Ngongkum 2017: 63) result not only in disorderly urbanization and land abuses but expose the multitudes in extraction sites and cityscapes to a slow, attritional form of violence that makes Mbembe’s necropolitics appropriate to the theorization of this phenomenon.

The article will proceed in two sections. Section one focuses on “the theatre of the tree,” and is concerned with deforestation and its delayed effects as radiated through the poetic medium. The second section discusses the “necrocity,” and analyzes the various forms of slow violence and death in the cityscape as represented in Ngong Kum’s poetry.

Section One: From Petroviolence to Timber Extraction

Elizabeth DeLoughrey describes the Anthropocene as an era in which “human activity has attained the scale of a geological force akin to a volcanic eruption or a meteorite changing the Earth System” (2019: 2). In the ongoing scholarly work that is shaping the Anthropocene debate in Africa, extractive violence is central to this phenomenon. The attention on petroviolence is exemplified in book-length studies and articles that take up “petro despotism and the resource curse” (Nixon 2011: 69). For Rob Nixon, the “notion of resource curse hinges on the paradox of plenty, whereby nation states blessed with abundant mineral wealth are often concomitantly blighted” (2011: 69). Many scholars have since buttressed Nixon’s views (see Iheka 2018; Chibuikwe 2020; Olalekan 2022; Egya 2020; Okunoye 2008). These studies have largely focused on oil violence in Africa, bearing witness to Amitav Ghosh’s provocative reflections on the “Oil Encounter” (1992: 29), where he argues that death follows wherever oil is found. However, oil is not the only type of resource extraction today bordering on the necropolitical. Meredith J. DeBoom’s exploration of uranium mining in Namibia, for instance, espouses the view that “nowhere is the possibility that responses to climate change might reinforce rather than redress the violent social relations underlying the declaration of the Anthropocene clearer than in Africa” (2021: 901). DeBoom is a political geographer; her position on extractive violence in Africa resonates with scholars across disciplines concerned with the fate of a continent in the throes of climate and environmental catastrophe. Historian Iva Pesa, for instance, examines copper, gold, and oil extraction in three African countries: the DRC, South Africa, and Nigeria respectively—linking the precarity of the African resource industry and the environmental hazards that follow to “global capitalism,” which benefits an “imperial core” (2022: 389).



I argue that ecological violence, notably its slow and attritional forms and particularly in the context of timber extraction in Cameroon, constitutes a fertile site in the theorization of necropolitical power. In this context, necropolitics does not involve state-orchestrated murder but the deliberate exposure of populations near extraction sites to the delayed effects of the slow violence that deforestation engenders in both human and non-human environments. In documenting the conditions of the “living dead” (Mbembe 2019: 92) in or near extraction sites, which implicates both human and environmental “actants” (Latour 2004: 237), I give voice to what Iheka has called in another context the “aesthetics of proximity” (2018: 22). Examining the imbrication of man in nature, Iheka’s “aesthetics of proximity” posits that there is a “distributed agency” (2018: 23) between human and nonhuman components of the environment as a way to index capitalism’s concurrent impact on human and nonhuman environmental agents. This idea helps to delineate “suffering and death as well as shared victimhood in the neoliberal machine’s instrumentalization of bodies” (2018: 5). Iheka’s ideas here expand my thinking on resource violence and necropolitics, particularly in his effort to show the consequences of capitalist forces on all elements of the environment, biotic or abiotic, especially within the “extractive zone” (Gomez-Barris 2017: xvi). This partly echoes what geographer Connor Joseph Cavanaugh suggests:

a framework of the necropolitical is thus particularly relevant to analyze the contemporary times of crisis where we see the occurrence of livability alongside killability, rescue alongside killability, protection alongside abandonment, and celebration alongside violent erasure in order to bring everyday death worlds into view. (2018: 7)

In light of the views above, I argue that since human life is tied to other life worlds in the context of multispecies existence and entanglement, the death of trees (deforestation), water bodies (droughts), as well as human beings become implicated in the debate about necropolitics and ecological decline.

Cameroon: Forest Depletion and Climate Change

Cameroon is one of the key countries in the Congo Basin area, and no conversation about environmental issues in this area can be complete without reference to the Congo Basin Forest. In fact, the Congo Basin Forest is to Africa what the Amazon Forest is to South America (and the world). Agricultural economist Ernest Molua points out that “the Congo Basin, together with the Amazon Basin and Southeast Asia Basin forest, store a vast amount of carbon; according to FAO (2011a), the world’s forests store 652 gigatons (GT) of carbon in their biomass, dead wood litter and soil” (2015: 77). Recognizing the great value of the forest, Molua cautions that “it is now recognized that deforestation and forest degradation



through agricultural expansion, conversion to pasture, infrastructure development, destructive logging and possibly fires account for nearly 20% of global greenhouse emissions..." (2019: 77). Though Molua focuses on "climate smart agriculture," the ecological challenges he raises are relevant to understanding how the decimation of this valuable resource is akin to what Nixon calls "imperceptible violence" (2011: 15) against Earth's resources, which often eludes spectacle.

The World Resources Institute in the Global Forest Watch Cameroon Report recognizes the importance of Cameroon's forests in the Congo Basin region. The opening statement of the report states:

Cameroon contains some of the Congo Basin's most biologically diverse and most threatened forests. In recent decades, Cameroon's forests have undergone extensive conversion with half of the historic forest cover cleared for farms and settlements. Timber generates more than a quarter of Cameroon's non-petroleum export revenues, along with some 60 million dollars in taxes. (2005: 8)

The statement above clearly illustrates the enormous potential that lies within Cameroon's forest—that is, its extensive biodiversity and carbon storage capacity. Unfortunately, there is a problem, as the report further illustrates that "with depleting oil resources it is expected that forests would come under increasing pressure as a source of export revenues" (2005: 9). In fact, the report darkly warns that "Cameroon has the second highest annual deforestation rate in the Congo Basin, after the Democratic Republic of Congo" (2005: 11). The pressure on the forest is particularly excessive because oil as a source of export earning in Cameroon is being depleted.

The forest is an important trope in postcolonial discourse, one that has long been a creative preoccupation of writers, scholars, and social anthropologists. From Chinua Achebe's engagement with the forest in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to Nol Alembong's *Forest Echoes* (2012), the forest has been viewed as a spiritual realm, habitat, and source of livelihood. In this light, Eunice Ngongkum dedicates the second chapter of her book *Anglophone Cameroon Poetry in the Environmental Matrix* (2017) to the power of the forest. She writes about the exploitation of the forest in the following words:

Today, more than fifty years after independence, the strain on [Cameroon's] forest is devastating. Over exploitation and unsustainable management practices affect the socio-economic fabric reducing the resilience of the environment and increasing its vulnerability to the adversities of climate change. (2017: 57)



The adversities that follow forest depletion are multifaceted. They include but are not limited to shortages in water supply, starvation, heat waves, faster desertification, urbanization and its effects, as well as the elimination of biodiversity. This article takes a leaf from Ngongkum's book in its engagement with the forest, illustrating that its depletion gives way to manifold problems that often result in misery and death. Quoting Ed Mitchard, who has observed that due to "the cost of industrialization, Cameroon's Vision 2035 is at the cost of the poor and the ecosphere" (Mitchard in Ngongkum 2017: 58),¹ Ngongkum shows the "interweaving of complex socio-politics and global economics in Cameroon's forest" (2017: 58).

I argue that the debate should be carried further than the question of "global economics." Environmental necropolitics, which illuminates how slow violence and death are inflicted on both human and non-human life forms, can be conveyed from the perspective of the disappearing forest in Cameroon. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey and George B. Handley submit that deforestation and human-induced climate change generate conflicts over Earth's resources leading to "300,000 deaths a year due to increased drought, flooding and other environmental consequences, a figure that will dramatically increase if mitigation against climate change is not pursued" (2011: 27). It is also important to note that while deforestation plagues the Southern part of Cameroon, desertification is advancing in the Northern Sahelian area (Nyongkaa 2022; Epule 2014; Neba 2010). Consequently, apart from demonstrating the imbrication of man and nature such as has been the case in previous discourses on the forest, this article engages the forest—its depletion—as one of the areas where necropolitics and ecological decline intersect.

Resource Extraction and Necropolitics

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics is largely seen as a critique of Foucault's biopolitics. Quite applicable to the postcolony, necropolitics is considered to reside at the "peripheries of capitalism" (Gomes 2021: 259). Mbembe's work is a sustained and penetrative study of postcolonial realities and the nature of power, exhibiting that the "political order is reconstituting itself as a form of organization for death" (2019: 7). In an age characterized by wars, insecurity, the refugee/migrant crisis, and ecological hazards, Mbembe describes the calculated political strategies put in place to accelerate the work of death, amplifying the view that "for a larger share of humanity, the end of the world has already occurred" (Mbembe 2019: 29).

¹ Cameroon's Vision 2035 is a political vision adopted in 2009. Its objective is to transform Cameroon in the next 25-30 years into an emerging, democratic, and united country in diversity. Aspects like poverty alleviation, transforming Cameroon into a middle-income country, consolidating democracy, and national unity are some of the objectives of the political program.



Conceptualizing politics as the work of death, Mbembe disengages himself from Foucauldian thought and positions his argument by periscoping sovereign power as principally geared toward the generalized “instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (2019: 68). In this context, argues Mbembe, being a “subject,” or shall we say an ordinary citizen, makes one directly vulnerable to the extremities of sovereign power, which defines itself in terms of having “the right to kill” (2019: 70). Mbembe’s preoccupation with sovereign power is understood in terms of a superior authority that has various instruments of power with which to annihilate the vulnerable.

In postcolonial African societies, resource extraction has been punctuated by slow and spectacular violence, a war machine that makes necropolitics a fertile concept in the theorization of these trends. In Africa, more than elsewhere, the death of citizens constitutes an endless cycle; it is a place of war and disorder where internal and external figures of the political stand side by side or alternate with each other— “the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of civilization” (Mbembe 2019: 77). This autocratic display of power, *to make die or let live*, is not limited to the regular activities of the army, but is also employed by “militias, private armies of the regional lords, and private security firms” (Mbembe 2019: 84). In short, Mbembe’s argument is that contemporary society is very gruesome, prioritizing capitalist and hegemonic interests to engender death in multifaceted ways, which makes the “notion of biopower insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe 2019: 92).

Mbembe’s argument, particularly his illustration of the realities of colonialism and enslavement, highlights the interconnectedness between sovereign power and capitalism in formerly colonized states. In this light, Gomes states:

...capitalism sought to insert the vulnerable body into the machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it... it is noteworthy that the result should consist in individuals capable of producing goods. From the moment the goods become expendable according to the capitalist logic of production—since the system has found its own new means for survival—power relations have changed. Mbembe denominates this period as thanatopolitics or necropolitics. (2021: 261)

In the context of the statement above, there is a clear link between productivity, resource extraction, and the utilization of local labor to feed the industrial Western machine in so cruel a fashion that the life of the local laborer is worth far less than the goods and services rendered. The perennial question of laborers’ physical elimination when their productive capacity wanes drives home the reality of necropolitics. A good example is the case of South



African mine workers. Mbembe's thought can clearly be appropriated to the current ecological debate, as it locates links between capitalism, extractive violence, and the emergence of a recurrent climate of death. Mbembe himself notes that the issue of resource extraction and violence within postcolonial societies are direct vectors of death:

To fuel the extraction and export of natural resources located in the territories they control, war machines forge direct connection with transitional networks... The controlled inflow and fixing of money movements around zones in which specific resources are extracted has made possible the formation of enclave economies. The concentration of activities connected with the extraction of valuable resources around these enclaves has, in return, turned the enclaves into privileged spaces of war and death. (2019: 85-6)

The position above in many ways captures the correlation between violence and death as orchestrated by sovereign power over natural resources. DeBoom amplifies this line of thought in her study, adumbrating the idea that in the context of resource extraction, some subjects are rendered disposable because they "might otherwise endanger the sovereign subject or authority" (2021: 903). This is made particularly clear when, with hindsight, one observes that despite international outcry, lives like that of Ken Saro-Wiwa (the Ogoni leader and environmental activist) are viewed as worth far less than the petroleum products that were/are extracted from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. If Africa's rich natural resources are vastly exploited with the accompaniment of slow or direct violence and death inflicted upon both human and non-human life, conceptualizing necropolitics together with ecological decline becomes a very apt approach.

The question of death is not only visible in direct quantifiable terms. Countless uncounted bodies find themselves within the context of "death-worlds," or living in conditions that confer on them the status of the "living dead" (Mbembe 2019: 92). The living dead in this context are those in the path of ecological disaster, brought about by pollution, or in the case of this article, by the depletion of forests and forest resources and the vulnerability to death that comes with it. How these ideas are versified and rendered urgent in the poetry of John Ngong Kum Ngong is where this paper will now position itself.

The 'Theatre of the Tree' and Ngong Kum Ngong's Poetic Imagination

The fourth section of Rob Nixon's book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) is titled "Slow Violence, Gender and the Environmentalism of the Poor." In this section, Nixon departs from previous discussions about the toxic nature of oil politics in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and focuses on the politics of trees, deforestation, and its attritional violence. He illustrates this using the example of Wangarĩ Maathai's Green Belt



Movement in Kenya, a movement that serves as “an animating instance of environmental activism among poor countries who have mobilized against slow violence, in this case, the gradual violence of deforestation and soil erosion” (2011: 128). In this sense, Nixon positions deforestation as a form of slow violence against nature and the rural poor. This form of violence is attritional, lacking in spectacle but complete with injurious effects such as soil erosion, landslides, poor yields, and shortage in water supply. In situating this attritional form of violence, Nixon focuses on the case of the rural poor for whom Wangari Maathai fought all her life:

...the desert's steady seizure of once-viable fertile land also stems from local forms of slow violence—deforestation and the denuding of vegetation—and it was at these junctures that the Green Belt women found a way to exert their collective agency. As the drivers of the nation's subsistence agriculture, women inhabited most directly the fall out of an environmental violence that is slow in immediate drama but high in long term consequences. (2011: 131)

Nixon illustrates that the effects of deforestation are not always noticeable but constitute a veritable force in the debate around resource war and extractive violence—in this case commercial logging—which I here implicate in the ever-expanding conception of necropolitics and ecological decline. It is to Nixon that I owe the phrase “the theatre of the tree.” He himself is drawing on the playwright Bertolt Brecht who, while in exile in 1939, lamented that to talk about trees (deforestation, that is) was almost equivalent to committing a crime. Brecht's words were described in a poem titled “To Posterity” [*An die Nachgeborenen*]. Nixon places these words in another context, arguing that tree planting and protecting forests have become theatrical events laced with political underpinnings. He writes:

To plant a tree is to work towards cultivating change in the fullest sense of the phrase. To plant a tree is an act of intergenerational optimism, a selfless act at once practical and utopian, an investment in communal future the planter will not see... the *theatre of the tree* has accrued a host of potent valences at different points in human history: both the planting and felling of trees have become highly charged political acts. (134-5, my emphasis)

This paper examines the “theatre of the tree” in the light of what Mbembe calls a “form of organization for death” (2019: 11). Though both forest stewardship and rampant deforestation comprise Nixon's understanding of the “theatre of the tree” as a politically charged arena throughout history, I here focus on the death-making effects of deforestation and ecological exploitation in line with Mbembe's necropolitical approach. Ngong Kum's poetry documents forms of deforestation to show its clear damage to the biotic and abiotic components of the land on both a short- and long-term basis. Nixon himself submits that



“soil erosion and deforestation are corrosive, compound threats that damage vital watersheds, exacerbate the silting and desiccation of rivers, erode topsoil, engender firewood and food shortages and ultimately contribute to malnutrition” (2011: 133).

Banking on the power of imagery in poetry to bring the message closer to home, I will enlist some of the poems in Ngong Kum Ngong’s forty-two poem collection *Blot on the Landscape* (2015), which explores the central theme of a blemished landscape, generally occasioned by the quest for money and power as related to resource extraction. The poems studied here can thus be grouped into 1) those that show violence associated with deforestation and 2) those that focus on urban settings as places of death, because, I argue, there is a correlation between depleting forest spaces and overcrowding in urban spaces. This paper argues that overcrowding and slum existence in the city is a form of necropolitics.

In the poem “Aberration,” for example, there is a rich array of images that implicate individuals that exploit and abuse nature. The first two stanzas read as follows:

In the filth of our thoughts
we master the maiming
and poisoning too
of every mind that thinks
above the heights we climb

Sometimes we do not hesitate
to kill everything that is green
to spread our filthy feelings on.
we cover long long distances
looking for forest to despoil
for our empires to flourish. (2015: 12)

The predominant image here is one of filth. The speaker indicts human beings for harboring filthy thoughts towards the environment more broadly and those who seek to protect it more specifically. In a capitalist age, the desire to exploit natural resources, like trees, supersedes any consideration for long-term environmental hazards. This mode of operation is what the speaker describes as “filth of our thoughts.” Environmental activists who stand in the path of those indiscriminately exploiting the forests are earmarked for “maiming” and “poisoning,” either by governments or the companies that exploit these resources. In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker asserts that every mind that appears to reason “above the heights we climb” is seen as subversive. Many environmental activists have been harshly targeted, and even eliminated, especially in developing countries. The case of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders eliminated by the Sani Abacha regime in



Nigeria in 1995 comes to mind. They were branded as subversive actors, their lone act of subversion simply being that they fought to protect the rights of the land against oil conglomerates. Similarly, Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, who fought against deforestation, was subjected to vicious attacks by the political establishment. Rob Nixon describes her experience in the following words: "The Moi regime vilified Maathai as an enemy of growth, development, and progress, all discourses the ruling cabal had used to mask its high-speed plunder" (2011: 134). The "plunder" Nixon is referring to is the massive exploitation and commercialization of forest resources under the regime of the then Kenyan President, Daniel Arap Moi. It is in this respect, in my view, that the speaker uses the image of "filth" to describe environmentally destructive and exploitative habits by governments and multinational companies and their targeting of those who raise fingers against these practices.

The second stanza makes the case against the destructive influence the neocolonial machinery visits on local forests, leaving lethal consequences behind. When the speaker says "we do not hesitate to kill everything that is green," it is a reference to the war humans have declared on the environment, particularly the forest. The denunciation of neoliberal capitalism and exploitative governmental forces on the forest is emphasized in the lines:

we cover long distances
looking for forests to despoil
for our empires to flourish. (2015: 12, my emphasis)

The empires in question are distant European cities that ship wood from Africa. The keywords here are "despoil" and "flourish." These serve to establish a contrast, indicating that while the local environment is rendered moribund, distant cities in Europe and America flourish due to resources extracted from tropical Africa. Arguing against this over-exploitation of the forest, Eunice Ngongkum suggests that "... unsustainable management practices affect the socioeconomic fabric, reducing the resilience of the environment and increasing its vulnerability to the adversities of climate change" (2014: 57). I go beyond this, reading deforestation's effects as a process of attritional violence that leaves death in its wake in a manner that is rather slow in the making. And because this violence lacks spectacle and the immediate attention of the media, the destruction and death are carried out with impunity, without immediately jolting the people to mass protests as would be the case if the violence was spectacular.

In making the case against neocolonial exploitation of indigenous forests, the first two stanzas of the poem above leave open the possibility of implicating the elite class of local politicians who have riddled the forest sector with corrupt practices in Cameroon. Senior Scientist at the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Paulo Omar Cerruti, has



admitted that “illegal logging increases poverty by reducing forest resources available to the poor” (2006: 1). As a point of departure, then, the first two stanzas of the poem above indict the looters of forest resources in postcolonial African tropical spaces to embellish their metropolitan centers while the poor of the Earth are ruined.

In the title poem of the collection, “Blot on the Landscape,” the “blot” metaphor (which is a mark of necro-ecological destruction that punctuates the entire collection) is made particularly visible. The speaker goes back in time to paint a picture of a pristine past when “our fathers were straight forward / and kept our environment clean” (2015: 15). In the introduction to their book, *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011), Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley emphasize the spiritual dimension of the environment when they write that in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, “the villagers move from the ancestral conception of belonging to the Christian God imported by colonialism” (2011: 7) to show that in the past there was communion between the land, the people, and the abstract spiritual presences which Iheka characterizes as the interconnectedness “between human and non-human forms” of the land (2017: 50). The opening lines of the poem above are cast in the same mold, showing the imbrication of human and the biotic/abiotic components of nature, particularly the forest that Ngongkum once again describes as constitutive of African “history, culture, and imaginative understanding” (2017: 59). But the forest is today a victim of a power play, under pressure from timber extraction and thereby constituting one dimension of necropolitics as connected to ecological decline. The third stanza emphasizes the looting and depletion of the forest:

today their songs are still wholesome
ringing in my ears like new bells.
Their love still surges in my veins
raging against highland gods
shipping our cocoa and timber
the treasure of our land for free
our forefathers were straightforward
why can we not be like them? (2015: 15, my emphasis)

The first three lines of the stanza quoted above show that the speaker is still in silent spiritual conversation with the ancestors out of love for their wisdom in keeping nature whole. But a different god has placed a wedge between the people and the ancestors; this god is money, personified as “highland gods.” The elite class is responsible for “shipping our cocoa and timber / the treasure of our land for free.” Those deciding the fate of Cameroon’s forests and the deals with multinational companies are often highly placed in Cameroon’s political machinery. The word “free” is not to suggest that these valuable timber resources are literally shipped for free; it implies that despite their commercial value, the net losses to the people and their environment is considerable. It is a slow



attritional work of death when all that which makes life complete is carted away. Hunger, resulting from poor yields and soil degradation, will follow. The rhetorical question that runs through the poem is embedded in the following lines: “our ancestors were straightforward / why can we not behave like them?”

While the plural “we” speaks of the collective wish to replicate the ancestral way of life, it must be read that those who have generally brought this havoc upon the people are the elite class in collusion with neocolonial centers of power. The speaker writes in the following words about these people:

you are blot on the landscape
dead wood on the grip of a bull
determined to have a breakthrough
in and out of the arena. (2015: 16)

The rhetorical prowess of the poet is seen in his use of the blot image to represent the people who have brought death upon locals. Gitz and Ballessen, in their study of tropical forests in the Congo Basin and Cameroon in particular, have argued that “each year, an estimated 13 million hectares of tropical forests are destroyed, leading 14000-40000 species to extinction and emitting 2.1 Gt of carbon, that is 17% of total anthropogenic emissions of gases” (2008: 2). These statistics are even more troubling when limited to Cameroon. The scholars contend that of the estimated 17 million hectares of tropical forests that Cameroon possesses in the Southern part of the country, which is “about one tenth of the remaining rainforests of the Congo Basin” (2008: 2), there is a real risk of over-logging as “Cameroon has the highest percentage of logged forest of any African nation with substantial rainforest” (2008: 2). Further, to export the logged trees, “roads are cut through the forest, leading to further damages and opening an easy access to poachers, hunters and eventually shifting cultivators” (2008: 4). These figures indicate the work of violence that is lacking in spectacle. However, the consequence of carbon emissions and massive biodiversity loss leave communities that depend on the forest in a position of total lack that predisposes them to death.

To return to the poetry under study, the necropolitical metaphors are veiled rather than obviously stated, as is the case, for example, with the poetry of the Niger Delta. A poem like “Blot on the Landscape,” examined above, is very similar in syntactic and thematic coloring to the Ngong poem “Paradise Lost,” which echoes the title of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The poem opens with an almost pristine portrait of the past, genteel in comparison to the Biblical Book of Genesis. The speaker says:

This place was our paradise
ever green, ever so green



teeming with bees and beetles
in conversation with ants
running up and down plum trees
glad to be free in nature. (2015: 32)

In analyzing these opening lines, one must bear in mind that the African past was not a pure pastoral ideal in ecological nor in cultural spheres. As Iheka reminds us, Africans also engaged in practices that seemed “devoid of ecological considerations” (2018: 8). The opening lines of this poem foreshadow the death that will be waged on nature. The repetition of “green” demonstrates the speaker’s attachment to more-than-human life in the poem. Insects like “bees,” “beetles,” and “ants” all make the plum tree their home. However, the green imagery, including trees (which implies the vitality of nature), is cut short when the “parasites” arrive, as the speaker states in the third stanza of the poem:

the trees in the countryside
ever green, ever so green
grew together with wild pigs
fending freely in the wild
*till the parasites turned up
to kill them to fill their chests.
All the animals are dead
and the trees are felled daily.* (2015: 32, my emphasis)

The parasites in the lines above are a reference to the agents of capitalism that have commercialized every aspect of nature, particularly trees. When these “parasites” arrive, they wreak havoc on the environment, declaring death on it. Having previously noted the imbrication of man and nature, it is implied that the death of trees, which are “felled daily,” also inflicts death on other species, including humans. It is common knowledge that forests are the lungs of the earth and support non-human others: the felling of trees therefore spells death for these other life forms, which is why we learn in the lines above that “all the animals are dead.”

In the concluding stanza of the poem, metaphors of blood—and therefore death—are made visible through succinct parallels with wealth. This is the case when the speaker says:

Remember dear countrymen
gripped by the fever of wealth
This place was our paradise
ever green, ever so green
till the lewd leeches appeared
and chose to live on our blood
to refill their treasures



*with dollars from our trees.
If we do not stop this trend
The desert will swallow us.* (2015: 33, my emphasis)

Rather than refer to the capitalist predators as “parasites,” the speaker switches to another metaphor, referring to them as “lewd leeches.” A leech lives on blood; its existence is parasitic and a threat to its host. These metaphorical leeches erode the life-essence of the people, which is to say their environment, abandoning them to the world of the *living dead* (Mbembe 2019: 92). The trees are shipped away to refill their “treasures,” leading to ecological decline in developing or “third world” ecological spaces.

To be sure, deforestation has become a prominent issue in recent Cameroon Anglophone literature, with Eunice Ngongkum taking up the issue at length. Commenting on Matthew Takwi’s poetry from an ecological perspective, she remarks that, “deciding the fate of forests by government officials without engaging those whose livelihoods are linked to and dependent on it, is a reality of post-independence Cameroon” (2017: 66). Contemplating the “theater of the tree,” Nixon reminds us that “since the early 1970s, a strong but varied transnational tradition of civil disobedience has gathered force around the fate of the forest” (2011: 135). In this case, Ngong Kum Ngong, through the medium of his poetry, acts as a foot soldier against deforestation, documenting its far-reaching effects on the various life forms that make up the environment, human and non-human, biotic and abiotic.

This section has argued that the “theatre of the tree” is in part constituted by a form of slow attritional violence that is manifested through the felling of trees and thereby exposes the rural poor to biodiversity depletion, food and water shortages, soil erosion, and landslides. In contemplating death for humans, this section embraces the view that other-than-human life forms in the environment are similarly exposed to necropolitical violence. Deforestation and urbanization are closely related. Trees are either brought down because of expanding urban centers or for commercial logging. As a consequence of depleting rural forests, those who depend on the forests for their livelihood flock to cities where slum existence becomes the new way of life. Thus, the second section of this essay examines urban space, focusing on what I characterize as the *necrocity*.

Section Two: *Blot on the Landscape and the Necrocity*

Debates in ecocriticism suggest that the built environment ought to be a subject of interest. Historian Christopher Schliephake has suggested that “urbanization has to be seen as one of the central arenas in which environmental issues of the 21st century, the first truly urban century in the history of humankind, will be played out” (2015: 205). Schliephake



issues a warning that cities are likely to expand as the 21st century wears on and those who will be put directly in harm's way as a result of urbanization are the poor.

This subject has preoccupied some scholars of late. For example, Ngongkum and Toah Nsah have examined urbanization discourses in Cameroon. The closest that Ngongkum comes to examining the city as a place of death for the urban poor is in her analysis of John Ngong Kum's "Death Waits in the Wings," where she writes that the image of destruction and death in the poem "reverberates with Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence animated by a crisis of the environment and stark inequalities between humans" (2017: 131). Further, one may ask whether it is incidental or a deliberate ploy by the mechanisms of power to subject the multitudes to varying forms of death where disease, poor housing, lack of potable water, and overcrowding take a toll on these urban poor. George Orwell, in another context, was insightful when he wrote about the working-class "Proles" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as the people for whom the governmental Party in power made death routine in order to perpetuate the Party's invincibility.

Relevantly, Nsah has examined "the ecopolitics of water pollution and disorderly urbanization in Congo Basin plays." In a study that embraces plays from Cameroon and Congo Brazzaville, Nsah questions the government's role in urban sprawl and aspects of water provisioning in urban spaces. In his view, disorderly urbanization and urban sprawl are "manifestations of bad governance and one of the leading causes of deforestation" (2022: 316). The scholar persistently indicts the governments of Cameroon and Congo Brazzaville for their neglect of the urban poor. In a way, Nsah's logic aligns with Mbembe's view that sovereign actions are often calculated strategies that work towards the commodification and disposability of bodies. Frantz Fanon prefigures this when he writes about the settler/native relationship as a relationship of power, where poor areas of residence are defined by squalor:

[The poor] are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other and their huts are built on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. (1963: 78)

Though Fanon largely wrote to expose colonial dynamics during the settler domination of native peoples, his descriptions of urban poverty continue to apply today to urban spaces shaped by deliberate governmental strategies that subject the multitudes to what Mbembe calls "death-worlds" (2019: 92). Writing in another context, Rishi Jha has examined the necropolitics of deadly settlements for the urban poor in Mumbai, India. In an article in *Political Geography*, Jha undertakes an ethnographic study of Mumbai's urban housing in a bid to "theorize state powers in unleashing life-threatening housing circumstances" (2023:



1). He draws extensively on Mbembe's necropolitics and Agamben's concept of "bare life" (1995), positioning Mumbai's slum dwellers as enduring death-in-life. Describing these houses as necro-settlements, Jha writes:

Mumbai's slums are spaces of exception, where legal rights of urban citizenship do not apply and where the state restricts the capacities of the poor to determine their own well-being. Postcolonial slum governance has included a mix of violent, regulatory and disciplinary intervention: slum consensus, photo passes, cut off dates for eligibility for basic services exclusively for slums, clearances and limited government schemes. (2023: 4)

From this quotation, one can observe that "necro-settlements" are places of death, where the poor do not have a voice of their own; they are subjected to a claustrophobic existence and brutal forms of government intervention like police brutality, arbitrary arrests, and human rights abuses.

Another urban geographer, Clarkson Mvo Wanie, has done an appraisal of slum existence in Cameroon urban spaces. He argues that according to data and statistics, slums are increasing in Cameroon. He accuses the government of Cameroon of a lack of political will when it comes to ameliorating the lives of these urban poor. In his words, "the slum inhabitants have to constantly deal with issues such as lack of access to the most basic human requirements: water sanitation, health, electricity, waste disposal facilities, pollution and housing shortages" (2019: 789). These conditions are nothing short of death-in-waiting, a necropolitical portrait of the living dead. It is in this context that the second part of this essay examines Ngong Kum's poetry as sensitive to the nuances of the urban ecological space. The image of a sick city that symbolizes death, particularly for those in slums, is visible in poems like "Death Waits in the Wings," "Breathing with Difficulty," and "A Stroll with My Me."

In "Death Waits in the Wings," the poet presents five uneven stanzas full of images of a decaying city with death staring the locals in the face. The first stanza provokes the sense of smell, indicating that the "smell of urine / needles your nostrils" as you move through "dung coloured huts." These lines are very telling; first, they indicate that there are no public facilities like toilets and trashcans for waste disposal, second, they point to shantytowns/ghettos, which the speaker describes as "dung coloured huts." The stench and decaying images are carried throughout the second stanza of the poem:

The sick city wakes
with mist in her eyes.
somewhere a brown mouse shrieks
and scares a cockroach



about to breakfast
on human faeces. (2015: 5)

The city is here personified as a sick place. The mist symbolizes the drudgery that characterizes the lives of the urban poor who live in death-prone conditions. To say that the city wakes with “mist” in the eyes paints a picture of the blemished visage of the city that represents the suffering of the people it harbors. Furthermore, the image of the cockroach about to “breakfast / on human faeces” is synonymous with Ayi Kwei Armah’s metaphor of “shit,” and recalls Bate Besong’s stench imagery. These two authors employed this imagery in their denunciation of socio-political corruption in Ghana and Cameroon respectively.

Poor sewage disposal, presented by way of repulsive imagery, is again echoed in the fourth stanza when the speaker talks of cans “teeming with maggots / the liquid putrescence streaming down your backyard / soaks into the cracked walls” (5). This is a typical picture of a slum where disorderly housing often means that the front view of the house of an individual is the backyard of another. The slum is the repository of disease and death as the last stanza of the poem indicates:

Blind death awaits in the wings
sure of seasoned supplies
where sewage churns out flies
The wrinkled face of Love
with fresh wounds in her heart
moans in our mud and muck. (2015: 6)

The flies emanating from the pipes are the harbingers of disease for those in slums. That is why death, perceived as a personified disembodied entity, is waiting ready to carry away its vulnerable victims in installments. In this regard, Eunice Ngongkum has praised the poet’s eye for details, describing the poem as one “built on the dominant environmental trope of the city as sick, ecocidal, monstrous and parasitical” (2017: 130).

The image of death associated with an unhealthy slum existence is also evoked in the poem “Breathing With Difficulty.” The impression created in the poem, particularly in the opening stanza, is that someone responsible for improving the lives of the urban poor has failed in their duty or has remained indifferent to it. This individual is described as the “spokesman of dirty dogs.” In painting the picture of this individual, the speaker says:

Breathing with difficulty
in the tight embrace of dung
the spokesman of dirty dogs



lies silent in his vomit
He believes the stench of death
and the worms in his nostrils
will have nothing but praise for
his bulldog guts and hunger
for the eyes of rotten bulls. (2015: 7)

The first line in the quotation above recasts the death-in-life theme that punctuates the poems studied here. The supervisory authority that is supposed to rescue the people by intervening to redress their slum environment fails in their duty. Wanie has written that “in Cameroon, slums continue to appear in cities and towns because of poor urban governance which fails to ensure effective and comprehensive city management strategy in order to prevent new slum neighborhoods from emerging in urban landscapes” (2019: 795). In the poem above, the speaker laments that “we live where refuse is wine / in the heart of the nation.” This hyperbolic portrait of consuming refuse in the heart of the nation—a reference to the capital city of Cameroon—is an indictment of the quality of life found in most urban spaces in Cameroon. Inhabiting these cities is an exercise of death-in-waiting in the necrocity, which I contend is connected to both human necropolitics and ecological decline.

The speaker draws a contrast between the life he lived before (in a rural setting) and the one that confronts him and the poor people in the city, on whose behalf he writes: “we are poor people from the hills / used to gulping taintless air.” The bad air resulting from bad drainage facilities and indifference to the conditions of the poor is the main thrust of the poem. The toxic nature of life in the city and the threat of death that comes with it is further expatiated in the last section of this paper.

“Toxic Space and Time” as a Weapon of Death

Continuing the conversation about slow and attritional violence in urban spaces as depicted in Ngong Kum’s poetry, this section draws inspiration from Thom Davies’s study on the crippling nature of pollution in some urban settlements in the United States, which takes a great but gradual toll on the human body. Davies writes about pollution around an industrial settlement in Louisiana in the following words:

...time is an important factor that determines the level of bodily damage that a toxic substance can enact... the duration of exposure to toxic material, along with its concentration, can determine with clinical accuracy the dose response. (2018: 2)

Davies’s observation resonates with Nixon’s work, namely that the violence visited on the poor is often without much spectacle but takes its slow toll on them in the form of disease



and death. Davies, a geographer, is led to the conclusion that “slow violence, then, can be read as a form of late modern necropolitics, where communities are exposed to the power of death-in-life” (2018: 4). The conditions captured by this quotation are reflected in Ngong Kum’s poetry, which documents the realities of slum existence in urban spaces. In the poem “A Stroll With My Me,” the speaker presents two contending forces in him as he walks through a neighborhood full of “oozing mucus,” with flies streaming all over the place. The flies think he is “intruding” on their space. The flies are feeding on decaying tissues; this becomes clearest in the third stanza of the poem when the speaker states:

The flies returned to their bouquet
chatting, bewildered by my flight,
I sit down on a worn out slap
To let my aching me vomit
The plateful of putrefaction
I pressurized him to swallow. (2015: 9)

The “I” and “me” in this poem refer to the conflicting feelings in the speaker; one version of the speaker tries to endure the slum, the other revolts against it. The speaker struggles at one point to suppress the feeling of nausea but ends up throwing up. The last stanza of the poem brings home the idea of slums as breeding grounds for disease and death, a creeping form of slow violence:

Evening creeps in quietly
in a purple evening gown.
My me upset wants to leave.
I take a different route back home,
a breeding ground for cholera
in the marrow of the city. (2015: 9, my emphasis)

These lines insist that disease has infested the neighborhood that the speaker traverses, with a particular focus on the “marrow of the city.” This metaphor emphasizes a sad reality that the “city” has become home to swamp dwellers. Slums have proliferated and diseases are common. Cholera outbreaks, as previously explained, often emanate from such neighborhoods due to poor sanitation.

Similarly, the poem “Tall But Bare” presents a bleak picture of a stinking and toxic city where death looms large. It is cast in the form of an autobiography and follows the ordeals of an individual growing up in a slum, including a mother who exhausts her energy balancing work and child rearing. The first two stanzas project an offensive smell resulting from toxic air, which penetrates life lived in the slums:



The slim slippery streets
strewn with rotting garbage
stream with rotten apples
bent on blowing two bits
those who stand up to them
or break into their zone.

The foul smell reminds me
how my mum trod the streets
cleaning dustbins and rot,
stinking of beer and slime
near whitewashed waveless tombs.
she dumped me here one day
bored with her dish of pain. (2015: 10)

The first stanza uses the power of sensory imagery to depict a neighborhood that is not only decaying but crime-infested. The idea of crime is partly suggested by the line that challenges anyone to “break into their zone.” Slum neighborhoods are often full of gangs and marauding youth partly provoked by poverty, unemployment, and neglect. Writing about this elsewhere, particularly in Kenya, Kenealo Adoki observes that “poverty squalor and slums are inner-city enquiries that influence the society and its environment” (2020: 86). Inner city decay and the ordeal of the mother is illustrated in the second stanza, when the speaker talks about their mum cleaning “dust bins and rot” amidst the “stinking of beer and slime.” Besides the repulsive smell are “whitewashed tombs,” illustrating that death and life sit side by side in this neighborhood.

The precarity of life in the inner city is evoked through the overpowering image of pollution in the poem: “chemicals from factories / and frequent oil spillage / have rent our blue blanket,” the speaker says. Thick smoke from breweries exposes citizens to illnesses like bronchitis and cancer-inducing pathogens. Waste from manufacturing plants puts slum dwellers on the path of death. The speaker’s lamentation translates to an elegy on human suffering in urban spaces. The lines quoted above reflect Davies’s words that “time and space” are forces not often measured when reflecting on the reality of the poor. It is only a matter of time before the “thick smoke from breweries” and the “frequent oil spillage” travel through space and start seeping into human bodies.

In 2001, Michael Bennett wrote that ecocriticism limited itself to pastoral and pristine nature studies, ignoring urban spaces. In his words:

But even as the community of ecocritics grows from hamlet into bustling metropolis, the movement itself has been slow to survey urban environments. Ecocriticism has



instead developed in tandem with growing academic interest in nature writing, American pastoralism and literary ecology. (2001: 31)

It is true that Bennett is writing here within the context of the Anglo-American tradition and not in the context of postcolonial ecocriticism. However, more than twenty years later, as Astrid Bracke has said, “most scholars in the field will agree that ecocriticism has long broadened beyond its original concern with wilderness and nonfiction nature writing to incorporate a wider variety of environments and texts” (2013: 7). One of these “environments” is the urban space, often associated with trauma and death as exhibited by poets like Ngong Kum Ngong and critics like Egya and Iheka. But urban environments, it should be said, are not exclusively zones of death, despite the ongoing focus in postcolonial ecocriticism on environmental justice to redress lethal harms in urban spaces (Adamson 2010: 11).

This article has worked to establish a relationship between Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” and Mbembe’s necropolitics to make the case that timber extraction in Cameroon is an exercise in ecological necropolitics because it constitutes an aspect of anthropogenic climate change, which, while lacking in spectacle, results in the deaths of those in or near extraction sites. To this end, this paper sees the “theatre of the tree” as an apt metaphor through which to analyze John Ngong Kum Ngong’s poetry collection *Blot on the Landscape*, as the latter explores the highly political and politicized nature of deforestation. I have argued that forest exploitation in Cameroon predominantly takes the form of slow, attritional violence, resulting in depletion, soil erosion, low yields, water scarcity, and death. Rather than merely discussing human imbrication in nature, as Iheka has done previously, I have demonstrated that forest depletion—and African extractive industries writ-large—reveal the ways environmental destruction and necropolitics intersect. I have also attempted to establish a nexus between deforestation, urbanization, and slum existence by illustrating how the deterioration of biodiverse ecosystems has downstream effects that enhance the precarity of already vulnerable human and non-human populations. It is in this light that the second section of the paper examined slum life as connected to slow ecological violence, particularly in the context of pollution, disease, and death. In drawing a relationship between extractive forest violence and overcrowded cities which are equally areas of violence, disease, and death, I hope to have exhibited the deep connection between necropolitics and ecological decline.



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