

Abstract of PhD Dissertation - Kenneth Toah Nsah

Title of Dissertation:

Can Literature Save the Congo Basin? Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Environmental Literary Activism

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This dissertation—entitled “Can Literature Save the Congo Basin? Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Environmental Literary Activism”—approaches literature from its functional/utilitarian dimension and argues that literary texts have the potential to contribute towards environmental protection and climate change mitigation in the Congo Basin (which is the second largest tropical rainforest in the world after the Amazon Basin). The dissertation contends that, in addition to relevant political, scientific and technological solutions and innovations, literature is important in addressing climate and ecological concerns in the Congo Basin and elsewhere, particularly because of literature’s capacity to deal with complexity, to spotlight various forms of injustice, to raise ecological awareness, to educate various audiences (readers), and to influence behavioral transformations that align with sustainability, both at the political and individual everyday levels.

Broadly situated within the environmental humanities (EH), the dissertation principally draws on postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental literary activism to analyze a selection of literary texts—mainly plays and novels, and occasionally some poems— written in English and French by ten writers from five of the six core countries of the Congo Basin. These countries include Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC or Congo-Kinshasa), and Gabon. The ten authors under study are Assitou Ndinga (Congo-Brazzaville), Athanasius Nsambu Nsahlai (Cameroon), Ekpe Inyang (Cameroon), Étienne Goyémidé (CAR), Gaston-Paul Effa (Cameroon), Henri Djombo (Congo-Brazzaville), In Koli Jean Bofane (DRC), Nadia Origo (Gabon), Osée Colins Koagne (Cameroon), and Patrice Nganang (Cameroon).

The dissertation examines the selected literary texts in view of their usefulness in climate change and environmental or ecological debates, policies and practice in the Congo Basin. Accordingly, it argues that this literature—both the literary texts and their ecocritical analysis—have a crucial role to play in saving the Congo Basin from biodiversity loss, climate change, and ecological breakdown.

The dissertation is divided into two main parts: an extended introduction (Chapters One and Two) and five academic articles (Chapters Three to Seven). Part One presents the overarching argument of the dissertation, summarizes the dissertation, introduces the Congo Basin and the selected writers, and discusses the theoretical and contextual considerations that inform the textual analysis, notably postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental literary activism, the functional aesthetics of African literatures, theatre for development in Africa and environmental drama/theatre. This part coins the expression “background-informed literary activism” by suggesting that the educational and/or professional backgrounds of writers such as Inyang, Koagne, Djombo, Ndinga, Nsahlai and Origo who either studied ecology-related subjects and/or work within the environmental sector in various capacities partly inspire their literary activism for environmental concerns in the Congo Basin.

Part Two engages with the representation of various environmental or ecological concerns in the texts through close readings, thereby navigating between aesthetic and thematic dimensions of the texts, on the one hand, and real-life Congo Basin ecological concerns, on the other hand. In this regard, the dissertation examines the causes and consequences of deforestation on both humans and nature. It argues that some Congo Basin writers had predicted the emergence of global youth climate activism and it discusses human-animal entangled relations through companion species like dogs, horses, and unusually buffaloes through co-domestication.

It also examines the ecopolitics of freshwater pollution and disorderly urbanization as well as how bad governance causes these problems and their attendant consequences on the rights and health of both humans and nature. Finally, it contends that literature can help to unravel wrong assumptions and myths such as the colonial idea of an Edenic Africa that underpins fortress conservation in the Congo Basin, thereby perpetuating green colonialism/imperialism and neoliberal capitalism, undermining indigenous knowledge systems, and provoking various forms of environmental injustice.

The central contribution of the dissertation lays in its discussion of the role that literature, and postcolonial ecocritical scholarship, can play in saving the Congo Basin which is one of the most important geostrategic and biodiversity hotspots on Earth today.

In addition, the dissertation contributes to the field of postcolonial ecocriticism, notably by straddling national and linguistic borders—including English and French—and reading both internationally known and less known and understudied authors side by side. This is significant given that a lot of recent ecocritical scholarship about or from Africa is Anglophone-centric whereas Francophone African ecocriticism is sparse and there is very little or no cross-pollination between the Anglophone and Francophone spheres.

The dissertation also significantly engages with plays as means to counter the centrism of poetry and prose in much of previous ecocritical scholarship. Furthermore, the dissertation contributes in taking African postcolonial ecocriticism beyond its previous focus on the late Nigerian ecological martyr Ken Saro-Wiwa and his native oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the late Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Prize for Peace laureate Wangari Maathai, and South African fiction—especially Zake Mda’s writing. This dissertation does so by foregrounding the biodiversity-rich Congo Basin and its environmental writers.

The dissertation also invents and expands some key theoretical notions in ecocriticism such as Rob Nixon's concepts of "writer-activists" and "slow violence" as well as Marie Chantale Mofin Noussi's idea of "eco-ubuntu." For instance, the dissertation draws on Nixon to elaborate the concepts of "background-informed literary activism" and what it has named as "simultaneous violence." Following Sule Egya (2020), it also develops a concept known as the "aesthetics of urgency" in order to characterize the overly didactic style of some of the explicit environmental writers under study as a response to the urgent interconnected climate and ecological crises currently threatening the Earth.

Overall, the dissertation argues that literature can contribute its own quota, in synergy with other academic disciplines and efforts (political, scientific and technological), in preserving the Congo Basin by ensuring its sustainability, conserving its biodiversity, mitigating climate change therein, and promoting environmental justice for both humans and nature in the basin and well beyond.