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WHEN A NOVEL REIMAGINES A NATION

Patrice Nganang's Cameroon trilogy challenges the capacities of literary fiction with the turbulent complexities of his home country.

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Transcending genre distinctions has expanded Nganang's sense of a novel's reach. Illustration by Jonathan Djob Nkondo

Content

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The idea that novelists might partake in the project of nation-building by reimagining the past in order to create the possibility of a shared future dates back to at least Walter Scott. But some of the most artistically successful examples come from post-colonial Africa, where belief in the meaning of arbitrarily drawn borders can require an unusual stretch of the imagination. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ousmane Sembène, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—along with many others—have produced extraordinary works of fiction that strive to reconceive national bonds (in Kenya, Senegal, and Nigeria, respectively), rather than reify them. Few countries, however, provide a conceptual challenge to the imagination of both novelist and citizen equal to that of Cameroon.

For Patrice Nganang, whose "A Trail of Crab Tracks" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), translated from the French by Amy Baram Reid, is the concluding novel in an epic historical trilogy about Cameroon, reimagining a nation has required reimagining the novel. Each work in the trilogy—its previous volumes are "Mount Pleasant" (2011) and "When the Plums Are Ripe" (2013)—takes aim at the intricacies of history through an equally intricate narrative approach: the novels range back and forth across time, weaving real-world figures amid fictional characters, and shifting rapidly among different voices, registers, and languages. Cameroon, like all its neighbors—countries whose boundaries were scrawled on the map by colonial powers—encompasses enormous cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity; its inhabitants speak more than two hundred regional languages. Yet the country, with its jarring colonial history, has a further claim to complexity. Colonized by the Germans during the Scramble for Africa, in the eighteen-eighties, Cameroon saw its territory split after the First World War, with a smaller section under British control and the rest under French control. The two parts achieved independence separately, following an anti-colonial uprising that largely targeted the French. They voted to unite in 1961, though under somewhat rigged conditions: the Anglophone portion of the country, itself divided between a southern and a northern region, was given the choice of uniting with either Francophone Cameroon or Nigeria, formerly under British control;

independence on its own was not an option. The north, mainly Muslim, joined Nigeria; the south, mainly Christian, joined Cameroon.

This all occurred within a period of eighty years—a single lifetime—with repercussions that are still being sorted out. Today, French and English are the two national languages of a country that has been ruled by the same autocrat, President Paul Biya, for some forty years. Inevitably, then, Nganang's national narratives are sustained by both ardor and alienation. And they grapple not just with the exigencies of culture and politics but with a question of literary form, which is also a question of scale: Is the novel big enough?

It probably matters that Nganang isn't just a novelist; he's also a poet, a literary theorist, a professor (of literary and cultural theory, at Stony Brook), an essayist, and a political activist. The son of a librarian, he was born in Cameroon's capital, Yaoundé, in 1970, and went to college there, before receiving a doctorate in German studies from Goethe University, in Frankfurt. Nganang's goal is, as he says, "to transform the city of my birth, Yaoundé, into a library . . . to create a sense of that city in letters." But libraries aren't defined by their geographical boundaries, and neither is Nganang's Yaoundé. As the novels in his trilogy make clear, having a sense of Yaoundé requires a sense of Cameroon; a sense of Cameroon requires a sense of colonial Africa; a sense of colonial Africa requires a sense of the powers that colonized it, and so on, onward and outward in both space and time.

And so, where "Mount Pleasant" begins in French Cameroon in the early nineteen-thirties, and where "When the Plums Are Ripe" depicts the region during the Second World War, "A Trail of Crab Tracks" begins on a wintry day in twenty-first-century New Jersey. An elderly man, Nithap, plays in the snow with his granddaughter, while his son, Tanou, attempts the treacherous commute to his job as a professor. The simplest way to describe the plot of "A Trail of Crab Tracks" would be to say that it's about Tanou's attempts to come to terms with his

father's history, a history entwined with the birth of the Cameroonian state. But this hardly begins to capture the sweep of Nganang's novelistic ambitions. It may help to note that Nithap's relationship with the real-life political revolutionary and independence leader Ernest Ouandié is a significant plot point; that much of the novel takes place in flashback, in the wake of a mass disaster at a Civil War reenactment event in Fredericksburg, Virginia; and that the gripping final portion is essentially the story of a father and a son who bond over the shared experience of having conducted extremely hot, troubled, and life-changing extramarital affairs.

You cannot write a novel about nationhood without asking questions about what, exactly, constitutes a nation, and an especially fascinating aspect of "A Trail of Crab Tracks" is the way it investigates how evolving technologies of communication, including social media, have altered the landscape of Cameroon's political imagination. Émigrés have always exerted influence over their homelands, of course, but Nganang takes pains to delineate how these connections are maintained. "You know I keep up on everything that's happening there," Tanou tells his young cousin, Bagam, who is a student at the University of Yaoundé. "Twenty-four hours a day." These constant updates are what allow him to smugly inform Bagam that "everything in Cameroon can't be awful," when Bagam complains about the conditions there. But Tanou admits there are gaps in his knowledge. "Your parents' health is a topic that just doesn't work over Skype," he frets, and he's right. Tanou learns that his mother has died when his phone buzzes to alert him that Bagam has posted about it, obliquely, on Facebook: "On that fateful day, Bagam had replaced his profile picture with a simple black square, which led to many questions posted in the comments and, after he added the words 'The Mater is no more,' to many RIPs."

His mother's death, after a hospital visit, reminds Tanou of a horrific video he's seen, of another Cameroonian clinic, in which a pregnant woman is kept so long in a waiting room that her sister delivers the baby via improvised C-section.

Nganang does an excellent job of capturing Tanou's displaced, technology-mediated grief, the pained mixture of closeness and distance which provides the impetus for the deep dive into history that forms the bulk of the novel. A sense of remove produces a hunger for narrative:

Because he was the first to learn of his mama's death, because he had learned at almost the very moment that her soul passed, Tanou didn't have a chance to blame himself for not being there at the crucial moments that led up to this crisis. . . . Her loss had spawned in him a drive, an almost tyrannical need to know everything, to have what had happened in those final moments described down to the smallest detail.

The Internet has, in a way, thrown open the borders of the nation, giving its émigrés and exiles a minute-by-minute view of the place they have left behind. Yet the question is whether they can intervene to affect the country's course, or whether they are doomed to numbly consume the information flooding in. A core argument of the novel is that geography ought not to be the limiting factor in citizenship, a claim that isn't new but has a fresh immediacy in the digital age. It recalls, too, an epigraph from "When the Plums Are Ripe," in which Nganang slyly offers "one clarification: The whole world is my country, Cameroon my subject, and Yaoundé my field of definition."

In "On Writing and Book Culture," a 2009 essay published in *Présence Africaine*, Nganang writes about how he always imagined that one day his books would sit on the shelves in his father's library, an ostensibly straightforward goal complicated by the fact that his father was, for many years, the librarian for the Cameroonian Ministry of Internal Affairs—that is, for the oppressive Cameroonian state. Nganang's essay describes the way his formative understanding of his father's library—which contained newspapers, pamphlets, and scholarly dissertations, as well as novels and poetry—led him to be skeptical of genre distinctions that would cordon off "literature" from other kinds of text. He would define literature in the broadest of terms, as "a combination of letters," and a writer as simply someone who puts those letters down on a page. "This lack

of discrimination between texts makes me see the platform of a writer as being extremely potent, for it certainly makes me see no distinction between writing a novel and writing an interventionist essay,” he wrote. Nor would he distinguish between “writing a poem and using the Internet to build a network of writers, to defend the constitution of Cameroon.” This literary philosophy is evident in “A Trail of Crab Tracks,” which includes long passages on Cameroonian history, geography, and linguistics, and contains many footnotes that point outward, beyond the text, to cite other fictional and nonfictional sources, including the occasional Internet link.

In one way, then, the blurring of genre distinctions fuelled Nghanang’s novelistic ambitions, expanding his conception of what a fiction writer might hope to achieve. But the essay also includes an anecdote, poignant and profound, that pushes against a simplistic idea of the writer’s relationship to power:

I could never stop dreaming that one day the dictator’s minister would come down the few steps that separated him from my father’s library, and take one book to read, the book of the librarian’s son . . . and what . . . ? Be shaken to death by shame? O, this is just a dream, a writer’s dream, for my father retired the very year I published my first book, *elobi*. And, African dictators and their surrogates don’t read!

To speculate about the effect that a novel might have on the world is to daydream about a daydream. Such dreams nurture the hubris required to write fiction, but when the dream is over you are left with the reality that novel-reading is optional, and most people will choose not to do it, especially if they suspect that the novel’s agenda is to make them die of shame. Changing someone’s mind through the mechanism of novel-reading (which takes hours!) is both an intimate and a hostile act. Why would any reader consent to it?

The image of a novel on the shelf of a state library invites us to use a different scale to measure its size—one that compares it not only with other novels but with other things a minister might read, including newspaper opinion pieces,

Facebook posts, Wikipedia articles, and everything that comes up when you Google “Cameroon.” This scale, on which even the biggest novels begin to shrink, invites us to imagine yet another one, in which novel-writing is no longer separated from action but instead must be considered in the context of everything a human being might do to build a nation—up to and including either becoming a state minister or toppling one. Measured on that scale, the bigger a novel’s ambitions, the smaller it becomes in comparison with the thing it hopes to influence, like a rock thrown at an F-16.

Nganang’s trenchant awareness of the chasm between novelistic ambition and real-world effect imbues “A Trail of Crab Tracks” with a distinctly ironic cast. Throughout the novel, Nithap, who once played a role in fighting colonialism in Cameroon, continually punctures the pretensions of his son, Tanou, who has immigrated to the United States to teach Frantz Fanon and Michel Foucault to undergraduates. Tanou’s immense thirst for his father’s recognition and approval, his attempt to find common ground, is the emotional engine that powers the novel, and roots its intellectual concerns in an unfolding of character. Through this dynamic, the novel suggests that thematic questions of scale are also questions for the heirs of generational trauma, who must process the enormity of the suffering they’ve inherited, while also wrangling with aging parents likely to scoff at the idea that people with the time to sit around and process their feelings could have any significant problems at all. *Is anything about me big enough to matter?* That question is hardly reserved for children whose parents had to survive mass atrocities in order to raise them, but it reverberates at a different volume across such a vast generational divide. In Nganang’s novel, politics looms large over fiction, and fathers loom large over sons.

Tanou is an easy target—and the novel does make some stinging jokes at his expense—but his story holds its own, even as his father’s far more dramatic history of colonial tragedy unspools around it; ultimately, the two narratives fuse into one. “A Trail of Crab Tracks” becomes a singularly complex interrogation of

the relationship between thought and action, between writing and the world. Toward the end of the book, deep in a flashback, Ernest Ouandié has a conversation with a pastor who has devoted his life to re-creating a forgotten script for Cameroon, the Bagam alphabet. The revolution's mistake, the pastor says, "was believing that Cameroon already had a soul. But that's really what we need to create for this country. That's the only task for our era. Because without a soul, a country, like a body, is inert."

This echoes the old idea that writers can help shape the soul of a nation, but there's something about the phrasing that points to a deeper conundrum: what's a soul without a body? It, too, is inert, ephemeral, as substantial as air. The novel can do nothing except sit on the shelf and wait for the minister's hands to pick it up, for his eyes to move over the page. It's almost inconceivable that he would do so, and yet the novel can be written only in the hope—in the faith, really—that he might. In that sense, novel-writing is not so much an action as a kind of prayer.

Near the end of "A Trail of Crab Tracks," Tanou drops his father off at the airport for a flight home to Cameroon, and reflects, "JFK International Airport is not very comfortable to someone who has just watched his father disappear into the customs and immigration lines." In December of 2017, Nganang himself, leaving Cameroon after his final research trip there for the novel, got into a customs-and-immigration line at an airport, where he was taken into custody by police. He was held in detention for three weeks, and then put on a plane back to the United States, but only after officials seized his Cameroonian passport, hoping to usher him into permanent exile.

Part of what Nganang was researching on that trip was the so-called Anglophone Crisis: what had begun, the year before, with demonstrations, viciously suppressed, had grown into a bloody conflict in which the government sent its soldiers to attack English-speaking protesters. Nganang, an outspoken critic of the government, was accused of such offenses as inciting violence and insulting

the country's armed forces in a Facebook post; his supporters pointed out that he was more likely jailed as the result of an article he had published in the news magazine *Jeune Afrique* which was critical of the Cameroonian President's treatment of the Anglophone minority. Either way, the arrest was unfortunate proof that African dictators, or their surrogates, do read on occasion.

Shortly after he was freed, Nganang released a statement titled "In Defense of the Anglophones," and subtitled "Declaration made to the Criminal Court in Yaoundé." Addressing the judge in charge of determining his sentence, he denounces the state for pressing "charges against me for what is clearly fictional." In particular, he says,

I stand before you accused of . . . things that are clearly linked to writing, by which I mean the use of the alphabet to make meaning, for in the end, I used nothing more than twenty-six letters to write the contested text. Nothing more. So, I will prove to you in my statement that those twenty-six letters, such as I employed them, cannot in any way constitute a threat to the Head of State.

Insisting, in one moment, that he has been arrested for something "fictional," and in the next that he has been detained for writing the truth, Nganang moves hypnotically between different conceptions of language, until the contested text is drained of any stable meaning whatsoever. The statement is an astonishing performance, layering irony upon irony, and deploying the techniques of literary theory to make a case for the importance of language while simultaneously unravelling it. When Ngugi invoked "the barrel of a pen," more than a generation ago, the idea of writing as national resistance still seemed straightforward; for Nganang, it is, like prayer, at once absurd and necessary.

The Anglophone Crisis is not about language, but it's mediated through language, and the weight of history and culture that all languages carry. "One day we will be Anglophones," Nganang asserts in his declaration to the court. "All of us." Yet one of the realities of power is that to speak to the state you have to

address it in its own language. The declaration, as posted online, was translated from French into English by Amy Baram Reid. Such are the contradictions upon which “A Trail of Crab Tracks” subsists. Here is a novel written in French, the language of power in Cameroon, and translated into English, the language of power across the globe; a novel that also includes an array of regional tongues and a script, nearly lost, that its author evidently hopes to revive. These last are languages that, in this particular historical moment, can lay claim to no power except that of letters combined to make meaning. But on what scale should such power be measured? Is it everything, or nothing at all? ♦

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