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From Deforestation to Awareness. Literature Opening onto a "Canopy of Hope"[1]

Abstract: Deforestation is one of the main ecological tragedies of our times and the need to turn ourselves into custodians of the forest is one the most pressing challenges facing the world today. The felling of trees, the conversion of forests to agricultural land and commercial logging have all resulted into reduction in biodiversity, erosion and soil depletion as well as destruction of human and non-human habitats. This article intends to show how texts are action and dissemination of action. It is founded on the belief that texts can help to change wastelands into regenerated nature because they are endowed with the greatest leverage when they exemplify the necessary interrelation between human beings and the non-human world. Wangari Maathai's autobiography in particular will appear as an instance of the deep role writing may have in the way to awareness and it will try and demonstrate how texts can trigger off, sustain, and prolong concrete action.

Keywords: *colonization, deforestation, ecology, environmental literature, oil-palms, Wangari Maathai*

The desert marches towards the sea
With camel-loads of broken skulls,
Roasting *iroko* trees for lunch
The mahogany for early dinner
Dandelions roar beneath its feet.
The elephant grass has lost its tusks
To the famished poacher from sandy regions

The desert marches towards the sea

Alas, the boundless rainforest of my youth
Has shrunk to a frightened eyebrow
On the forehead of the coast
Koko gba kokodi
(Niyi Osundare, *Hole in the Sky*)

The "boundless rainforest of [my] youth/Has shrunk to a frightened eyebrow," the poet says; but the painting of the planet's devastation made by Niyi Osundare may change revolt into a cry of hope if the awareness activated by his depiction of man's exploitation of Africa's resources opens on the determination to change those new wastelands into "boundless forests" again.[2]

[1] "Canopy of Hope" is the title of the epilogue of Wangari Maathai's autobiography, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006). All further references are to this edition, quoted as *UM* in the text.

[2] Niyi Osundare, "Hole in the Sky", Choreo-poem, *World Literature Today* (May-August 2014), http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2014/may-august/two-poems-niyi-osundare, accessed 17 July 2015.

Texts are action and seeds refilling the wounded world with life. Literature can help the world to change wastelands into regenerated nature by showing the necessary interrelation between human beings and the non-human world.

A select survey of texts revealing the authors' will to highlight the damage caused by deforestation and their involvement in the preservation of the planet reminds us that deforestation is not something new. As an example, Wangari Maathai's autobiography shows the link between action and writing and the deep role writing plays in striking people to awareness.

From a Garden of Eden to a Wasteland: Deforestation in History

From those who "break the jungle's back"[3] to the "unbowed" woman who changed a desertified area into a new forest, the history of mankind is a story of exploitation, spoliation and reforestation. The innumerable forests covering the land in Prehistory gradually disappeared for economic reasons, particularly from the 19th century onwards. From Shakespeare's days to our era, deforestation is denounced in texts revealing the healing power of literature.

Once upon a time there were forests all over the world. "Botanical garden, paradise".[4] Trees create Paradise as Michel Serres says about a part of France: "Creuse displays a paradise of isolated trees.... Paradise: the place where reality meets rationality; where life reaches the Being's perfection".[5]

This earthly paradise is photographed or filmed by artists such as Sebastião Salgado,[6] Yann Artus-Bertrand or Art Wolfe, who show us the beauty of the world and its scars to convince us of the emergency of its preservation. Wade Davis, in his introduction to Art Wolfe's "hymn to the earth," evokes the impact a photograph may have on the change of people's way of thinking. It was an "earthrise" photographed on Christmas eve 1968 by Bill Anders, one of the American astronauts of Apollo 8, condensing "all the imagination and conscience of mankind".[7] This underlines the role art may have on our conscience. Sometimes artists show the beauty of the earth to make us realise the absolute necessity of preserving our human and non-human family. Sometimes they expose the damage done to our earth, either by using terrible images of reality or by using caricature to strike our minds.

Thus a satirical drawing, made by Haida artist Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, displaying "the monster of gluttony" stealing the resources of First Nations in British Columbia, might serve as a summary of the situation.[8] In this caricature, the character is presented as swallowing forests; his tail ends with a plug that is going to be connected to a factory. He stands not only for the logging companies ignoring Aboriginal rights but also for all the countries that destroyed forests.

[3] Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and the Jewel* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1971 [1969]), 23.

[4] Michel Serres, *Biogée* (Paris: Editions Le Pommier, 2013), 106 (translation mine).

[5] Ibid., 107 (translation mine).

[6] Sebastião Salgado, *La main de l'homme* (Paris: Editions de La Martinière, 1993). Also see Wim Wenders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado's film *Le sel de la terre, un voyage avec Sebastião Salgado*, DVD Francetv distribution, 2014.

[7] Wade Davis in Art Wolfe, *Earth is my Witness* (S Rafael, CA: Earth Aware Editions, 2014). French edition: *Hymne à la terre* (National Geographic France, 2015), 18.

[8] Http://www.firstnations.de/development.htm, accessed 14 December 2015.

In Shakespeare's days already, the forests of England were dangerously shrinking:

> Ancient woodlands and forests had been shrinking throughout the middle ages. By Henry VIII's time the pace began to accelerate. Worried about timber supplies for shipbuilding, the government took the first steps – largely ineffective – to manage depletions. Climactic and demographic pressures aggravated over-exploitation, and by the 1590s caused a fuel crisis in south-east England and the country's first major environmental controversy. Similar to the threat of warming global temperatures today, the stresses on southern English woodland – at that time the country's most essential but finite natural resource – reached an ecological turning point.[9]

[9] J.U. Nef, "The Timber Crisis", *The Rise of British Industry*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1932), i, 156-164; in Randall Martin, *Shakespeare and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2015), 2, 173.

Shakespeare's allusion to a "sea-coal fire" in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1.4.7-8) or in *Henry IV* Part 2 (2.1.85-87), concerns wood shortage and the solution that had been found to replace wood. Some statesmen tried to remedy the serious problem of wood shortage. In France, Colbert inspired the first forest policy based on concerns about forest protection in 1669. In the 19th century, some writers drew people's attention on the ecological consequences of human action, such as George Perkins Marsh, in *Man and Nature. Or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864). In France, Elisée Reclus evoked the relationship between man and the environment, mentioning the damage caused by human action on forests:

> Our forests' giants become scarcer and scarcer and when they fall, they are not replaced. In the United States and in Canada, most of the high trees that astonished the first settlers have been felled, and still recently the Californian settlers fell the gigantic sequoias that were 120, 130 or 140 metres high to saw them up into boards. That may be an irreparable loss....
> The expansion of agricultural lands, the needs of sailing and industry also reduce the number of trees.[10]

[10] Elysée Reclus, *De l'action humaine sur la géographie physique*, "L'homme et la nature", in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 15 décembre1864, 766 (translation mine), https://www.bibnum.education.fr/sites/.../Reclus-analyse-vf.pdf, accessed 4 December 2014.

In 19th century Canada, parts of forests were replaced by cities built with their very wood. Rudy Wiebe's novel, *A Discovery of Strangers*, starts with a chapter in which the animals discover the strangers through the sound of tree felling. They hear "bits of shriek and hammer," "the trees ... scream and smash" and "creatures that looked like humans standing motionless here and there, abruptly pointing and shrieking, pounding! Pounding!" That "brutal hiss and clangour" is the sound of the white settlers felling trees.[11] The novel, the gist of which is an exploration in Northern Canada, opens onto the non-human point of view. The lexical fields of sound, violence and suffering, the rhythm and sonorities of the military words "pointing" and "pounding" suggest the aggression on trees. The shrieks are both the human shrieks of violence and the

[11] Rudy Wiebe, *A Discovery of Strangers* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1995 [1994]), 1-2.

shrieks of suffering of the trees felled. This aggression on the land also appears in Australia where "forests were devastated in a few years".[12] In his novel, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, Richard Flanagan alludes to the felling of trees in terms of massacre: "occasional gum trees stood as if brooding survivors of some terrible massacre,"[13] associating the massacres of Aboriginal peoples with that of trees:

> The torments inflicted on human beings echo the damage caused to the natural environment by the colonial enterprise. The sufferings and broken lives of immigrants, and the even worse lot of the convicts, the decimation of Aboriginal people, of animals, parallel the devastation of nature symbolised by felled trees....[14]

These fictional texts speak about the sad reality of beautiful areas changed into wastelands. As Pierre Rabhi writes, "if we insist with the absolute dogma of growing, all mankind is condemned to an economic, social and ecological chaos".[15]

Wole Soyinka poetically evokes the problem: "in the past decade or two, trees have attained apocalyptic dimensions – sitting in judgment over humanity – will the proceeding end in a reprieve, or a death sentence on the planet itself?" he writes.[16] While native forests drastically recede, plantations of oil-palms are disastrous for the environment:

> The oil palm tree is actually native to west and central Africa. A century ago, British siblings William and James Lever, whose company would become Unilever, ran a 17-million-acre palm concession in what was then the Belgian Congo. But it's only in the past few years that the crop has begun to transform the landscape of this continent.... The crop takes a dramatic toll on the environment. In 2007 the United Nations Environment Programme reported that oil palm plantations were the leading cause of deforestation in both Malaysia and Indonesia, removing a vital carbon sink and devastating the native habitat of orangutans and endangered Sumatran tigers and rhinos. The trees thrive at latitudes of roughly five degrees to the north and south of the equator, and in Africa that swath of earth runs thick with natural forest. The Guinean Forests, which stretch from Sierra Leone to Nigeria and once covered all of Liberia, have been identified as one of the 25 most important biodiversity hot spots on the planet, and what happened in Asia is a harbinger of what may happen here. As with any industrial-scale agricultural endeavor, the plantings have far-reaching impacts on both water supply and water quality and, given the pesticides and other agrochemicals involved in growing oil palm, on the soil itself.[17]

In Malaysia, where Swiss ecologist Bruno Manser spent several years with the Penang in the 1980s, defending their community and the rainforest before

[12] Colette Selles, "Australian Mountains – Myth and Reality, Devastation and Regeneration", in Françoise Besson, ed., *Mountains Figured and Disfigured in the English-Speaking World* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 628.

[13] Richard Flanagan, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1997), 20.

[14] Selles, "Australian Mountains", 627-628.

[15] Pierre Rabhi, *La part du colibri* (Clermont-Ferrand: Editions de l'Aube, 2014), 48 (translation mine).

[16] Soyinka, "Parables from Wangari Maathai's Trees", presented at the Storymoja Literary Festival in Nairobi, Kenya- September, 2014, http://www.africanstudies.org/blog/121-october-2014/418-parables-from-wangari-maathai-s-trees-by-wole-soyinka, accessed 14 December 2015.

[17] Jocelyn C. Zuckerman, "Africa's Vanishing Forests", http://archive.onearth.org/articls/2013/12/palm-oil-land-grab-africa, accessed 14 December 2015.

his probable death in the 2000s, deforestation was drastic; incidentally between 2000 and 2013, Malaysia had the highest rate of forest loss in the world.[18]

But in that general devastation, voices rise to fight against the destruction of nature; through either texts or actions, they show that nature may still be healed and that our survival depends on nature's life.

Wole Soyinka often refers to deforestation in his work and in an homage to Wangari Maathai's action, he writes:

> Land speculators – even when disguised as government – are of course a breed apart. When they see a tree, they see an obstacle – to be eliminated by the most efficient agency – the bulldozer. On the other side of the divide are the fanatics who have to be restrained as they watch the bulldozer ripping through a green belt without a thought for the void that is brutally opened up in a landscape that has become an integral part of what we are – or, if you prefer – a landscape of which we have become an integral part, through which we sense ourselves as breathing objects and thus, a meaningful part of a humbling network of Nature actualities.[19]

Trees indeed have often been obstacles to the so-called development in Africa, Asia or America, particularly in Brazil, where huge parts of the Amazonian forest have been erased to be replaced by pastures for the cattle of big land-owners, thus bringing misery to small peasants gathering in *favellas* or Indian tribes continuously pushed away. Soyinka goes on:

> The tree still stands as a primordial presence, but now it has also become an eloquent critique of ill-conceived and often, ill-fated social engineering experiments that involve human uprooting, are based on the text-books of ideologues who fail to relate social theories to the precipitates of accumulated history, human psychology, a reality so simply but profoundly captured in Jeremy Cronym's lines to which I often make recourse, even to the point of seeming addiction:
> *To live close to every tree you had ever planted*
> *Our century has been the great destructor of that,*
> *The small and continuous community, lived in solidarity*
> *With seasons, its life eked out around*
> *Your fore-mothers' and -fathers' burial-ground.*[20]

He quotes Wangari Maathai: "The future of the planet concerns all of us, and we should do what we can to protect it. As I told the foresters, and the women, you don't need a diploma to plant a tree".[21] This simple agricultural gesture is relayed by two Nobel Prize winners' texts.

[18] Https://news.mongabay.com/2013/11/malaysia-has-the-worlds-highest-deforestation-rate-reveals-google-forest-map/, accessed 14 December 2015.

[19] Soyinka, "Parables".

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

From " Vanishing Forests" to "Seeds of Change"

Two film titles encapsulate the present ecological situation. *Our Vanishing Forests*[22] is a film narrated by Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday; it concerns the history and policies of the United States' Forest Service; *Seeds of Change* – which is also the title of a chapter in Wangari Maathai's autobiography –, is a film about the cleaning up of the Yangtze River in China, devastated by erosion due to deforestation.[23] The former exposes the preservation policy abandoned, thus provoking disaster since the U.S. Forest Service, "once the steward of wilderness, has abandoned its conservation ethic and now favours the interests of the timber industry;"[24] the latter opens new ways for hope. Those two ways of leading people to awareness are meant to show the threat hanging over the earth and the necessity to fight and change our behaviour, which many writers, since Thoreau's *Walden*, have suggested.

In *Travels in Alaska*, John Muir, one of the first initiators of environmentalism, evokes mines, logging and the construction of the Northern Pacific Railway, which transformed the landscape and destroyed natural territories. The Scottish-American man, soon to become one of the first advocates for the preservation of the wilderness in the USA, the founder of the Sierra Club, starts his travel book by referring to exploitation.[25] In this introductory passage, he reminds us that nature is often regarded as an element to be used. For instance, the river has been named with the mineral that is going to be "advantageous" for this population ("Carbon River"). The "railroad hopes [of the Sound region], its unrivalled timber resources, and its far-reaching geographical relations" are placed on an equal level and nature as such is absent. Only man is taken into account. John Muir softly leads his readers to have their own point of view on the issue of exploitation, to understand that there is a twofold perception of nature: on the one hand, the useful conception linked with the development of towns and the construction of means of communication to shorten distances; on the other hand, a vision led by an ecological point of view stressing the connection between nature and all its inhabitants including man who is one of them, but not the only one.

For Jacques Brosse, who also analyses the problem of deforestation, the fear of the unknown hidden in the mysteries of the forest that appears in novels or films is far from being a mere figment of the imagination but reveals an age-old fear. Even in the 21st century the economic motives engendering the destruction of the Amazonian forest meet a desire to reject the Other:

> The terror that can be caused by the sudden apparition of Amazonian Indians, the last true "wild men" since they live on the forest in which they are nearly invisible, merging with the trees and creepers out of which they suddenly emerge, thus frightening travellers, keeps on haunting people's minds, which

[22] *Our Vanishing Forests*, film Directed by Arlen Slobodow, produced by Public Interest Video Network.

[23] *Seeds of Change*, film by Lisa Miller, Ava Karvonen, Scot Morison, Francis Damberger, Films for the Humanities & Sciences (Firm). Hamilton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 2009. "Seeds of Change: The ECO Story", http://www.worldcat.org/title/seeds-of-change-the-eco-story/oclc/503076994, accessed 14 December 2015.

[24] Http://www.bullfrogfilms.com/catalog/vf.html, accessed 14 December 2015.

[25] John Muir, *Travels in Alaska* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002 [1915]), 9.

> is shown by the film *La Forêt d'émeraude* (1985). More than cynical motivations, it is fear that generated the systematic destruction of Indians in Brazil, one of the shames of our time. That fear of the unknown is also at the origin of the half-achieved project of the trans-Amazonian highway, which goes with a clearing whose pointlessness has been demonstrated by biologists.[26]

[26] Jacques Brosse, *Mythologie des arbres* (Paris: Payot, 1993 [1989]), 258-259 (translation mine).

Kev Reynolds, an English mountaineer and writer, remembers a place in the Pyrenees which, when he first visited it, was a real Garden of Eden. Less than two years later, the "sanctuary" had been changed into a wasteland:

> Dusk was drawing on by the time we turned the bend into the upper **sanctuary**, and we were still on the bulldozed track that had not been there 18 months before.… A concrete ford had been created through the river, and where vehicles had used it their skidding tyres had ripped the vegetation on both banks. A **once-sacred** meadowland was **scarred** with dry mud and the imprints of wheels, not animals. Dwarf rhododendrons had been **desecrated**, and rainbow swirls of oil coloured puddles in the track.
> … Wine bottles had been smashed against a rock. Toilet paper fluttered from the branches of a pine tree, and tin cans were rusting in the stream.
> 'Urban motorised man,' wrote Fernando Barrientos Fernandez, 'has no responsible conservationist regard for nature.'[27]

[27] Kev Reynolds, *A Walk in the Clouds: Fifty Years Among the Mountains* (Cumbria: Cicerone, 2013), 21-22 (emphasis mine).

The "once-sacred meadowland" is now "scarred" and this near anagram – or rather a lexical chaos where letters have been turned upside down like the landscape – sums up the situation and the message: nature is irremediably wounded by "urban motorised man". The graphic words used by the mountaineer urge the reader to revolt, to realise the destruction of mountain areas, their "beauty," "innocence," "sacredness," life, by the construction of roads meant to bring more tourists. A similar wasteland is depicted in Native American poet Joy Harjo's poem "A Map to the Next World":

> Monsters are born
> there of nuclear anger.
> Trees of ashes wave good-bye to good-bye and the map appears to disappear.
> We no longer know the names of the birds here, how to speak to them by their personal names.
> Once we knew everything in this lush promise.
> What I am telling you is real and is printed in a warning on the map. Our forgetfulness stalks us, walks the earth behind us, leaving a trail of paper diapers, needles, and wasted blood.[28]

[28] Joy Harjo, "A Map to the Next World", in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000), 19.

The impossibility to "speak to [the birds] by their personal names" suggests the distance taken with nature by human beings in the modern world. That distance perhaps comes from our inability to read nature's writing and to listen

to nature's voice, like Wangari Maathai listening to birds. The awareness that everything is linked and that the sacred is first the consciousness of life in everything opens the way to ecological conscience. But our economic world, by losing the capacity to wonder at nature, has also forgotten its language. Exactly as peoples have always been destroyed for economic or political reasons because dominating powers rejected their languages, the latter similarly refuse to hear the language of the non-human. Writers suggest that the main way to ecological awareness dwells on communication, particularly between the human and the non-human. David Abram tells the story of a Peruvian doctor, Manuel Cordova-Rios,[29] who was captured in 1907 when he was only fifteen, by Amahuaca Indians living in the Amazonian rain forest. The language of the tribe was understandable to the young boy once he had been steeped in the forest's and people's life. It is the rain forest that gave him the key to the understanding of a language unknown to him: "the tribe's language, which remained largely meaningless to Cordova-Rios for six months or more, became understandable to his ears only as his senses became attuned to the subtleties of the rainforest ecology in which the culture was embedded".[30] A key to the understanding of a people dwells on the understanding of their physical environment and the consciousness of the relationship between the human and the non-human. This is also expressed by Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*:

> It is a century now since Darwin gave us the first glimpse of the origin of species. We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise.[31]

For Aldo Leopold, "that land is a community is the basic concept of ecology ... but that lands is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics".[32] The scientific perception of the land (Darwin's) must never be dissociated from the ethical and affective one. Darwin himself closed *On the Origin of Species* on the notion of "wonder".[33] These texts suggest that the union between knowledge, ethics and wonder is essential to save the planet. All forms of representations of nature and of the relationship of man with nature may be the seeds that will allow forests to grow again on the earth and to make wastelands recede in their turn.

Literature leading to awareness

Rick Bass's *The Book of Yaak*, which he describes as "a sourcebook, a handbook, a weapon of the heart" was planned to save a valley from

[29] See Frank Bruce Lamb, *Wizard of the Upper Amazon: The Story of Manuel Cordova-Rios* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971).

[30] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Random House, 1997 [1996]), 141.

[31] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation on Round River* [1953] (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 116-117.

[32] Ibid., ixi.

[33] "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved", Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2006 [1859]), 307.

destruction.[34] "I don't know if a book can help protect a valley, and the people who live in that valley";[35] it is a shout of anger at the deforestation of the valley of Yaak, a soft weapon meant not to destroy anyone but to save everybody. Depicting the beauty of the place, "the music and harmony of large and small things" in "this land that congress forgot," Bass provides us with statistics.[36] After poetically depicting the beauty of the valley and the interrelation between all its inhabitants, he gives dry numbers and facts:

> Despite the influx of cheap Canadian timber – the results of the **obscene forest liquidation** going in up there, which rivals Brazil's deforestation rates – the timber companies working on public lands in the West continue to post record quarterly **profits** for their stockholder. By the end of 1994, despite a drop in timber prices, Plum Creek posted a record **profit** of $112 million; Georgia Pacific, based in Newt Gingrich's home state, had a 1,000 percent increase in **profit**...[37]

The notion of "Profit," hammered into the text, replaces "the spirit of [the] place," previously mentioned when the seasonal migrations are described by the writer and anthropologist Richard Nelson "as a pulse, a tracing, 'a luminous sheath' of passages".[38] Rick Bass's book is a fight to save the valley by showing its beauty and life, the interrelation between all species and the damage made on its forests by man for profit. Yet if Bass's book starts with a "shiver," it ends on a glimmer of hope, "the hope of fallen rotting trees",[39] trees dying naturally to make the forest live on.

Likewise, Niyi Osundare, in a wonderful hymn to the forest, exposes the wounds inflicted on trees, hence on earth:

> A forest of a million trees, this,
> A forest of milling trees
> Wounded, though, by time's' axe
> And the greedy edges of *agbegilodo*'s** matchet
> ...
>
> ** timber lorry.[40]

The poet conveys the repeated exploitation of timber ("time's axe") through anaphora ("A forest of") followed by two alliterative words whose partial homophony ("million" /"milling") echoes the shift from the luxuriance of wooded land to the ultimate destination of the trees once they have been hewn by sharp instruments ("axe" and "matchet") becoming the weapons wounding the forest. Men's greed is then transposed onto the very instrument of transport; the Yoruba word for timber lorry used here for its sounding and also for the ubiquity of the lorry on Southern Nigerian roads,[41] introduces a clash between

[34] Rick Bass, *The Book of Yaak* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), xiii.

[35] Ibid., xiii.

[36] Ibid., 67.

[37] Ibid., 88 (emphasis mine).

[38] Ibid., 64.

[39] Ibid., 187.

[40] Niyi Osundare, "Forest Echoes", in *The Eye of the Earth* (Ibadan: Heinemann educational Books, 2000 [1986]), 5.

[41] I am indebted to Christiane Fioupou for her illuminating analyses and translations of Nigerian poetry and I would like to thank her particularly for her help in the comment on Niyi Osundare's poem and her close reading of this article.

the music of Yoruba language and the sharpness of the "greedy edges of ... matchet" that the Yoruba word cuts into two parts. In another poem, "Eyeful Glances," the "flame tree" and the "tinder season" give way to "a desperate match" that "stabs the night/in the gloomy alleys/of NEPA's* (*National Electric Power Authority) darkdom".[42] Tinder is no longer a useful element of everyday life, but a sign of the destruction of their homes, of their lives: "Our farms are tinder".[43] The electricity company that is supposed to bring light brings gloom. Wole Soyinka, in the play *The Lion and the Jewel*, dramatises deforestation in a flashback representing the construction of the railway:

> Well, the workers came, in fact
> It was the prisoners who were brought to do
> The hardest part…to break the jungle's back...
> [*Enter the prisoners, guarded by two warders.... They begin felling, matchet swinging, log dragging, all to the rhythm of the work gang's metal percussion (rod on gong or rude triangle, etc.). The two performers are also the song leaders and the others fill the chorus. 'N'ijo itoro', 'Amuda el'ebe l'aiya', 'Gbe je on'ipa' etc.]*

The felling of the trees to the sound of percussions distorts African music muffling the sound of the death of trees. Mime songs, play within the play are theatrical ways of exposing the damage of colonisation on African forests in colonial and present time. The writer makes the jungle a body – "to break the jungle's back" – like another Nigerian writer, Niyi Osundare, who also uses a body metaphor to denounce the destruction of Nigerian forests; both writers reunite the human and non-human:

> Alas, the boundless rainforest of my youth
> Has shrunk to a frightened eyebrow
> On the forehead of the coast
> *Koko gba kokodi*. ("Hole in the Sky")

Both of them end the allusion to deforestation with Yoruba words as if the Yoruba poetic language was a way of recreating the environment of the destroyed forest.

In Kenya, Wangari Maathai, in her autobiography *Unbowed: A Memoir*, proposed a response to deforestation in Africa by the plantation of thousands of trees, an action giving reality to Jean Giono's tale *L'Homme qui plantait des arbres*.[44] In the same country, a few decades earlier, a woman coloniser, Karen Blixen, who had contributed to deforestation, gave her testimony in *Out of Africa*: "If I had had the capital, I thought, I would have given up coffee, have cut down the coffee-trees, and have planted forest trees on my land".[45] Thus admitting her economic motivation, she adds that she "would have had then ... a

[42] Ibid., 24-25.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Jean Giono, *L'homme sui plantait des arbres* (Paris: Gallimard Jeunesse, 2010 [1953]). Wangari Maathai wrote a foreword for the 2005 English edition *The Man who Planted Trees*.

[45] Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen), *Out of Africa* (London: Penguin Books, 1954 [1937]), 277. All further references are to this edition, quoted as *OA* in the text.

good market for both timber and firewood" (*OA*, 277). But the reader feels that her point of view evolves when, just after speaking about trees as an element of trade, she reveals her own pangs of remorse concerning deforestation:

> It is a noble occupation to plant trees, you think of it many years after with content. There had been big stretches of native forest on the farm in the old days, but it had been sold to the Indians for cutting down before I took over the farm; it was a sad thing. I myself in the hard years had had to cut down the wood on my land round the factory for the steam-engine, and this forest, with the tall stems and the live green shadows in it, had haunted me. I have not felt more sorry for anything I have done in my life, than for cutting it down. (*OA*, 277)

All these stages – her cutting down Native trees, planting coffee-trees, realising the damage caused by such a change on the land, her decision to plant new trees led her to the ultimate decision to create a new forest. Yet troubles with the coffee plantation prevented her from achieving her plans. The way she evokes the Natives as they tried to help her stay on the land shows how conscious she was of their superiority and at the same time she is the patronizing colonial woman who still considers herself as the leader: "A flock of sheep may be feeling the same towards the herdboy, they will have infinitely better knowledge of the country and the weather than he, and still will be walking after him, if needs be, straight into the abyss" (*OA* , 285). However colonial and derogatory the animal comparison might sound, at least it shows she was torn between her colonial vision and her awareness of the damage she and the other settlers caused to Africa and African people. Her perception is akin to the conscience Natives have of the close link uniting men, animals and the land. With Wangari Maathai things are different and yet one can remember that Karen Blixen's hope was to plant a Native forest to recreate "a singing wood," thus foreshadowing the bird singing at dusk about which young Wangari Maathai asked her mother what it was saying (*UM*, 44). This face to face between two women, a Native Kikuyu and a coloniser, between two autobiographies, reveals that people with radically opposed motivations may meet once they have realised the link between them and the non-human world, in this case, the trees and the forests, on which so much depends. In the same vein, Gary Snyder writes: "Not so long ago the forests were our depth, a sun-dappled underworld, an inexhaustible timeless source. Now they are vanishing. We are all endangered yokels",[46] and his association of men with a bird – the yokel, besides being a rustic, is here a green woodpecker, as is said in a footnote – stresses our dependence on the non-human world; by underlining our fragility he stresses the force of life that the non-human represents. This is emphasised by Wangari Maathai's autobiography.

[46] Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010 [1990]), 153.

Wangari Maathai and the "Canopy of Hope"

In 2004, Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace for her commitment and her work concerning reforestation with hundreds of Kenyan women. She came to symbolise the strength of collective action to help stop the progression of the planet's destruction.

Deforestation in Kenya started early as is suggested by geographer and geopolitician MacKinder's account of his ascent of Mt Kenya: "Evidently all Kikuyu [land] was once clad with forest, and in Meranga, with the clearing of the forest, the wild flowers of the glades have overspread the whole country. Some Bates or Wallace should make this land his home for a couple of years before it is spoilt by civilization".[47] The suggestion that European naturalists should study the land before it is too late reflects a patronising attitude and at the same time the author is conscious of the gradual destruction of this nature "spoilt" by what he calls "civilisation", that is the European presence. The "colonisation" of the area by wild flowers was the result of the "clearing of the forest" achieved by colonisers. The mountaineer's allusion is different from what is explored in Wangari Maathai's autobiography, a poetic summary of the connexion of all things and creatures in the world, the forest in the Kikuyu area being the key to demonstrate how text and action are complementary.

[47] Halford J. MacKinder, *The First Ascent of Mount Kenya* (Athens: Ohio U. P., 1991 [1990]), 153. H.W. Bates was a naturalist who published *A Naturalist on the River Amazon*, 1863; A.R. Walace published *Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*, 1853.

Her story is a story of action that illustrates how a small gesture can change the development of an area, a country, the planet. Like the tree-planting shepherd in Jean Giono's tale, who transformed a desert zone in Provence into a living forest, the reforestation of Kenya she achieved with Kenyan women is a way of proving that everything is possible when one can see the connexion between people, between people and the land, people and non-human creatures, people and nature.

If she was awarded the Nobel Prize because of her action, her autobiography, a beautiful literary text, enhances the strength of awareness and the link between all things, reminiscent of the Native American philosophy linking all things in a series of concentric circles. From the story of her childhood – her telling Kikuyu myths, the evocation of her father whose strength was that of mountain – to the awareness of our vulnerability through the vision of her father's cancer, she guides her readers from life to wastelands and then from wastelands to life again thanks to the involvement of Kenyan women.

In order to point to the connection between human beings, trees, animals, landscape, everyday life, tourism, she stresses the link between the purity of rivers and the presence of vegetation: "It rained frequently but the rivers were always clear and clean because the land and the riverbanks were covered by vegetation" (*UM*, 33). Vegetation is an important part in the chain of

preservation broken by industrialised imports transforming both traditional everyday life and the life of the world, as is seen through the impact of plastic bags:

> When I look at Nyeri today, I am reminded that when I was a child, people carried beautiful, colourful baskets of different sizes and types made from sisal and other natural fibers to and from the markets to transport goods. These baskets were parts of the local handicrafts industry. Today, these baskets are hardly used and instead are made for tourists. The people meanwhile use flimsy plastic bags to carry their goods. These plastic litter the parks and streets, blow into the trees and bushes, kill domestic animals (when they swallow them inadvertently) and provide breeding ground for mosquitoes. They leave the town so dirty it is almost impossible to find a place to sit and rest away from their plastic bags. (*UM*, 35)

"[B]eautiful, colourful baskets" made with natural materials are contrasted with the ugliness of the plastic bags invading the city, hanging from trees: the artificial foliage mingling with the natural one writes in the cityscape the story of nature's destruction. To the organic cycles in which every element protects another one as the vegetation preserves the purity of water and prevents natural catastrophes, she opposes the chain of damage generated by the Europeans when they replace native trees by commercial plantations such as for instance "the hitherto pristine Aberdare forest":

> The colonial government had decided to encroach into the forest and establish commercial plantations of non-native trees. I remember seeing huge bonfires as the natural forests went up in smoke. By the mid-1940s, the British had introduced many exotic tree species into Kenya. Pines were transplanted from the northern hemisphere, and eucalyptus and black wattle from the southern hemisphere. These trees grew fast and contributed to the development of the newly emerging timber and building industry.
>
> To popularize them, foresters gave many such seedlings to farmers free of charge. Farmers appreciated their commercial value and planted them enthusiastically at the expense of local species. However, these trees did damage, too. They eliminated local plants and animals, destroying the natural ecosystem that helped gather and retain rainwater. When rains fell, much of the water ran downstream. Over the subsequent decades, underground water levels decreased markedly and, eventually, rivers and streams either dried up or were greatly reduced. (*UM*, 39)

Wangari Maathai points out the link between the plantation of species that are not adapted to the ecosystem and the damage it causes. This is what happened wherever plantations of coffee or tea replaced native cultures. The threat hanging over some animal species is widely due to the destruction of forests: the population of gorillas in Rwanda, gibbons in Indonesia, orang-utans

in Sumatra and Borneo, jaguars in South and Central America, lemurs in Madagascar, tigers in Asia, to give but a few examples.

Wangari Maathai emphasises the relationship between the presence of trees and the abundance of life: "Ihithe [Wangari Maathai's birthplace] borders the Aberdare forest and our area had many wooded plots. As a result wildlife was abundant" (*UM*, 43). Wildlife is not seen in opposition with human life but placed on a par. Her mother's advice to speak to the leopard – "You and I are both leopards so why we disagree?" – is the assertion of a common belonging, the conscience of which is synonymous with survival. When applied to all species, this changes the mode of behaving towards one another. The author opposes the conversation with the jaguar to the villagers' yell to frighten elephants away, which prompts the Kenya Wildlife Service to kill them just to calm people: "This sad state of affairs is caused by a lack of understanding of animal behaviour, something my mother's generation seemed to grasp" (*UM*, 44). What might appear as a sad anecdote is in fact presented as art of a long chain starting with forests in which birds live; the bird "warning people" leads to education: "when children communicate with adults, they learn a lot as they grow" (*UM*, 44). It all amounts to communication: communication of children with adults, human beings with leopards, birds with humans: when that chain of communication is broken – for example when villagers use their voices to frighten elephants away, which is a distorted form of communication – life is destroyed: the bird sings to warn human beings of a danger. The men yell to assert their strength. It is a one-sense communication where no answer is possible.

Through pages devoted to a fig tree, Wangari Maathai captures poetically and philosophically how those who listen to and respect nature preserve the ecosystem, hence the life of the earth. Wood gathering takes her to the forest, to birds, to fertility, mystery and then spirituality – "that's a tree of God" (*UM*, 45) – thus revealing through a fig tree that nothing is separated:

> I later learned that there was a connection between the fig tree's root system and the underground water reservoirs. The roots burrowed deep into the ground, breaking through the rocks beneath the surface soil and diving into the underground water table. The water travelled up along the root until it hit a depression or weak place in the ground, and gushed out as a spring. Indeed wherever these trees stood, there were likely to be streams. The reverence the community had for the fig tree helped preserve the stream and the tadpoles that so captivated me. The trees also held the soil together, reducing erosion and land slides. In such ways, without conscious or deliberate effort, these cultural or spiritual practices contributed to the conservation of biodiversity. (*UM*, 46)

One tree is enough to feed people, to bring water, to prevent landslides; the preservation of that tree allows "the conservation of biodiversity" and reveals the healing union between the human and the non-human.

Wangari Maathai's education in Kenya, what her parents and people had taught her about the land and the link between all things and creatures, her education in the United States of America to become a biologist, the conference she attended in 1975 – the first United Nation Conference on Women, gathering 135 governments and 4,000 women from all over the world –, all these factors converged to prompt her to action, planting thousands of trees to improve Kenyan life. "For me, a biologist who had grown up in a rural area where our daily lives depended on the health of the environment, the issues raised at the Liaison Centre[48] were not completely strange" (*UM*, 120). By hearing these women "talk about water, energy and nutrition," she "could see that everything they lacked depended on the environment": "The connection between the symptoms of environmental degradation and their causes – deforestation, devegetation, unsustainable agriculture, and soil loss – were self-evident.... We had to get to the root causes of those problems" (*UM*, 125). This was a plea for solutions:

> This is, I believe, a result of my education as well as my time in America: to think of what can be done rather than worrying about what cannot. I didn't sit down and ask myself, "Now, let me see, what shall I do?" It just came to me "Why not plant trees?" The trees would provide a supply of wood that would enable women to cook nutritious foods. They would also have wood for fencing, and fodder for cattle and goats. The trees would offer shade for humans and animals, protect watershed and bind the soil, and, if they were fruit trees, provide food. They would also heal the land by bringing back birds and small animals and regenerate the vitality of the earth.
> This is how the Green Belt Movement began (*UM*, 124-125).

She brought to reality the dream of Karen Blixen, a woman colonial in love with Kenya. If the experiences of the two women are radically opposed, their autobiographies point in the same direction. By explaining the genesis of the Green Belt Movement, Wangari Maathai does not just tell the story of her life. She opens way for communal action. Planting trees – as Jean Giono's solitary shepherd in Provence had fictitiously done and as hundreds of women in Kenya really did – changed the landscape, brought back non-human and human life to a formerly deserted place. By writing her autobiography she educated the whole world to the conscience of the relationship between all the elements composing the earth. Always explaining the world through relationships she ends her autobiography with the "linkage" between development and democracy by

[48] "The Environment Liaison Centre (now called the Environment Liaison Centre International)" (*UM*, 122).

using the metaphor of a traditional object, here the African stool: "a traditional African stool that has three legs and a basin to sit on":

> To me, the three legs represent the critical pillars of just and stable societies. The first leg stands for democratic space, where rights are respected, whether they are human rights, women's rights, children's rights, or environmental rights. The second represents sustainable and equitable management of resources. And the third stands for cultures of peace that are deliberately cultivated within communities and nations. The basin, or seat, represents society and its prospect for development. Unless all three legs are in place, supporting the seat, no society can thrive. Neither can its citizens develop their skills and creativity. (*UM*, 294)

The African stool is the sign of her taking root in the African soil. It also suggests that any political idea must be anchored in the soil, solidly placed and as stable as the stool with its three legs.

Wangari Maathai's text is not only the story of a life but it is also an invitation to go on fighting. It gives reality to other literary texts warning us against deforestation. Her autobiography ends with an injunction to fight, which is also a cry of hope:

> Those of us who witness the degraded state of the environment and the suffering that comes with it cannot afford to be complacent. We continue to be restless. If we really carry the burden, we are driven to action. We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk! (*UM*, 295)

Her action was prolonged by her texts to make forests grow again. Her autobiography exemplifies environmental literature as defined by Scott Slovic speaking about "three I's: "Indigeneities, Intersections, Interventions".[49] Listening to local cultural traditions, she points out connections which she converts into action.

Texts, like pictures, drawings, films, are action; on all continents writers and artists warn the world. On all continents people heal the wounded planet. In Kenya, China, Malaysia, Brazil, everywhere in the world there are examples of actions changing wastelands into a renewed environment and replacing "the relentless deforestation"[50] by "a canopy of hope".

[49] "Three I's: 1. **Indigeneities**: Attunement to **local** cultural traditions, vocabularies, environmental conditions. 2. **Intersections**: Illuminating or pursuing **connections** of various kinds, sometimes healthy and sometimes destructive. 3. **Interventions**: **Acting** upon issues of particular salience or urgency to specific regions," Scott Slovic, "Green Trends in International Literary Studies: Many Voices, Similar Songs", 15 October 2010, http://astra.us/2010/Slovic--am--InternationalTrends.ASTRA.pdf, accessed 17 December 2015.

[50] Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild,* ix.