

# The Return of Bush Fallers: Anglophone Cameroon Fiction Responds to Clandestine Emigration<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Migration, especially emigration, has been a thematic concern in Anglophone Cameroon fiction even before the twenty-first century. Joseph Ngongwikuo's posthumously published novel, *The Taboo Promise* (2016), for instance, chronicles the life of a Cameroonian migrant called Kumato in the US as he struggles between respecting a vow made to his parents – before travelling to the United States on a scholarship – to never marry a white woman, and his passionate love affair with Susan, the beautiful white American. Set in the late 1970s, the story grapples with interracial love, tolerance, acceptance, and respect for customs and traditions. Kumato falls under the category of Cameroonian migrants who travelled to the West shortly after independence to pursue further studies; most of whom returned home after their studies to take up clerical jobs left behind by the departing colonial elites. This cream of Cameroonian intellectual migrants has come to be known as the *been-tos* or the *American wandas*, especially in sociological and anthropological studies (Atekmangoh 2017; Pelican 2014; Alpes 2014, 2012; Fleischer 2011; Nyamjoh 2001). Atekmangoh underscores a nuance between these two terms or categories of migrants: the fundamental common trait between them is that both *American wandas* and *been-tos* emigrated primarily for purposes of education. Nevertheless, while the *been-tos* “were excited to return home to take up the available vacant posts created as a result of independence, the America[n] wandas’ initial quest to return was thwarted by the economic crises that had set into the country from the late 1980s” (Atekmangoh 116). In other words, most *American wandas* never returned home due to economic hardships.

For some scholars, however, these terms have a blurry demarcation and thus are interchangeable. Pelican, drawing on Nyamjoh for example, apparently considers the two terms as indeed one and distinguishes instead between *American wandas*, or *been-tos* on the one hand, considered as “the first generation of Cameroonian immigrants to the United States, most of whom left as students but eventually decided to stay on and integrate into American society” and on the other hand *bush fallers*, who are mainly “associated with adventure and self-enrichment” (60-61). Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi Makuchi's short story “American Lottery,” published in the collection *Your Madness, Not Mine* (1999), also engages with the subject of emigration. However, her protagonist who has won the US Diversity

Visa Lottery and is so excited to travel to America is finally duped. His documents are intercepted by a middleman who demands a bribe before forwarding the documents for processing. A friend of the protagonist, whose family assembles hard-earned money for him to travel to America, is also duped. In the end he commits suicide. In this short story, the characters' emigration projects are abortive and it is difficult to speculate whether they could eventually return home if they had succeeded.

Interestingly, since the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, there has been a marked increase in the number of Anglophone Cameroonian fictional texts dealing with the subject of emigration; what is popularly known as “bush falling” and those who undertake it are called “bush fallers”. The verb expressing this phenomenon is to “fall bush.” In Francophone Cameroun, bush fallers are called *les mbenguistes* and the related verb is *aller à Mbengue*. Bush fallers, whether fictional or real, are those Cameroonians who travel, via different routes such as studies, employment and, sometimes, travelling on visitors' visas and refusing to return home after the visa expires, to industrialized countries of the Western world. Most but not all bush fallers emigrate primarily for economic reasons such as improving the quality of their lives or to search for higher standards of living. That notwithstanding, Cameroonians who travel abroad, study and return to work at home, and those who travel for the sake of curiosity, or to gain exposure to other cultures (including tourists), constitute notable exceptions to this claim. More generally, Pelican rightly traces the origins of the term “bush falling” to Cameroon Pidgin English and concludes that it implies “going to the bush to hunt, gather or harvest; i.e. one never returns from bush with empty hands” (60). It is worth noting that bush falling is sometimes referred to as “going or travelling for greener pastures,” an expression borrowed from the practice of transhumance in animal rearing. In this vein, John Nkengasong asserts that bush falling is “the disappearance of [Cameroonian] youths into Europe and America in search of greener pastures” (52).

Most often, some but not all bush fallers indulge in illegal practices either at the level of obtaining travel visas to their desired destinations and/or prolonging their stays in those destinations. Some use fake documents to apply for visas while others concoct lies to file for asylum once their short visas expire. Yet some others sneak into their destination countries without proper emigration documents; sometimes crossing the seas as are the cases with migrants who cross the Mediterranean into Europe. According to this article, such bush fallers are those considered as practicing clandestine or irregular emigration. It is important to note, however, that this study has no intention of blanket criminalizing or condemning African emigrants. I am aware of the complex and complicated nature of matters concerning migration and Africa, or the Global North generally. There is practical and scholarly evidence to the effect that the Global North substantially contributes to the rise of forced emigration in Africa; particularly by plundering African resources and causing political

instability in some parts of Africa. This in turns creates forms of desperation and limited opportunities, thereby compelling many migrants to leave the continent.<sup>2</sup> It must also be noted that not all bush fallers commit illegal or clandestine acts. That said, with the quest for wealth and better living standards as the main driving force among bush fallers, some of them (especially legal ones) tend to remain in their host countries, and only on occasion visit Cameroon. Some legal bush fallers even seek naturalization and live permanently in their host countries while others prefer to stay for a substantial period, gather enough wealth, and then return to re-settle in Cameroon.

The present article will examine bush falling in a selection of five Anglophone Cameroonian novels all published in the second decade of the twenty-first century, and all containing some fictional characters who surprisingly do return home or at least contemplate doing so. These novels are Charles Nfon's *Greener from a Distance* (2013), Priscilla Manjoh's *Snare* (2013), Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), Timothy Mbombo's *The Last Bush Faller* (2016), and Lucas Tasi's unpublished *Home is Best*.<sup>3</sup> I suggest that these stories are largely anti-bush falling in the way they approach questions of emigration.

It must be noted, however, that such anti-bush falling stories from Anglophone Cameroonian authors are not produced in isolation. In fact, these stories fit into the broader context of writing by many renowned African authors dealing with the experiences of migrants outside the African continent and especially those who do not achieve their aspirations through emigration. Some of their works also explore coping mechanisms adopted by African migrants in Europe and America. As a result, returnee experiences in Africa, and elsewhere, have led to a substantial body of existing research in literary or cultural studies and the social sciences in particular where migration is approached as a factual and quantitative human phenomenon. In the social sciences, scholarship abounds on migration, particularly return migration, and its impact on the economy, educational systems, and entrepreneurial ecosystems of many African countries. Such studies examine the economic fallouts of migration and related issues such as "brain drain" or "brain circulation" and talent development, to name but these (e.g. Sinatti 2019; Atekmangoh 2017; Toa-Kwapong 2016; Thomas 2008). In terms of literary and cultural studies, migration and migrant experiences, including those of returnees, are explored in a number of literary and cultural texts from countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, highlighting the complexities, ambiguities and anxieties about migration and the place of African migrants in globalization and cosmopolitanism, among other issues (see Oniwe 2017; Kaboré 2016; Cousins, Dodgson-Katiyo and Emenyonu 2016; Foster 2015; Borman 2014).<sup>4</sup>

Some notable examples of anglophone African novelists whose works engage with emigration include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,

Dinaw Mengestu, NoViolet Bulawayo, Taiye Selasi, while those from francophone Africa include Alain Mabanckou, Calixthe Beyala, Fatou Diome, and Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, among others.<sup>5</sup> While these African and Anglophone Cameroonian writers share a common interest in the plight (including deferred dreams) of African migrants abroad, and also explore issues such as hybridization and multiculturalism, those from Anglophone Cameroon under examination here are significantly different in that much of their writing is inspired by the rising migrant crisis which has witnessed an upsurge since 2010 (to which I return shortly). The latter group of writers also largely projects the act of returning to Cameroon/Africa as a desirable decision. Most importantly, the other African writers fall beyond the purview of the present article which prioritizes Anglophone Cameroonian literature mainly due to its minority status and the fact that it remains largely under-researched. For this reason, the other African writers as well as academic studies of their works do not warrant a detailed discussion here.

In the context of the current rising global migrant crisis, generally traced to the fall of Libya's Colonel Gaddafi in 2010 (Murphy 2015; Attir and Larémont 2016), this article will read the return of bush fallers in these selected novels as a contribution from their authors to the fight against clandestine and purposeless emigration. Although most of the fictional bush fallers in these texts do not emigrate using makeshift boats across oceans like those crossing from North Africa and Libya into Europe through the now famous Central Mediterranean route (Frontex n.d.), some of them bear similarities to the latter migrants in terms of the illegal practices that characterize their migrant trajectories. Moreover, the shadow of the global migrant crisis looms visibly large in some of these novels such as Manjoh's *Snare* where the Nigerian emigrant (bush faller) Ogochuku swims across a river for weeks from Russia to Germany, while other migrants trek from Denmark to Germany (6). In Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*, Neni's anxieties when her husband Jende reveals his plans to go back to Cameroon are telling:

When he had told her of his plan to return home, she had wondered why he was coming back when others were running out of Limbe, when many in his age group were fleeing to Bahrain and Qatar, or trekking and taking a succession of crowded buses to get from Cameroon to Libya so they could cross to Italy on leaky boats and arrive there with dreams of a happier life if the Mediterranean didn't swallow them alive. (323-24)

Using the stream of consciousness technique here, Mbue paints the gloomy picture of the ongoing migrant crisis around the Mediterranean and elsewhere, thereby explicitly situating her novel within that crisis. This sorrowful image of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, evoked by Mbue, echoes Nsah Mala's poem "Ocean Cemeteries" where the speaker bemoans the fate of "Wandering migrants from fruitful Africa/ Piled in ailing boats like sardine in tins/[Sailing] through unappeased ocean waters/In search of greener pastures and safety" in Europe.

Mbue's idea of the ocean swallowing some migrants suggests the many deaths recorded among migrants, which Mala's poetic persona also laments: "Then human bodies are littered in ocean waters/For fish and crocodiles to bury in ocean cemeteries" (82). Although the other three novels do not contain explicit references to this crisis, the period of their publication does parallel the crisis. Most of them were published on the eve of former US President Donald Trump's anti-migrant wall building rhetoric during his 2016 presidential campaign, or after his controversial Muslim majority country immigration bans (Executive Order 13769) implemented in January 2017, and his administration's attempts in 2017 to end the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals (DACA) programme which previously protected children whose parents immigrated illegally into the USA (Shear and Davis 2017).

It is worth noting that there is a growing interest in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa, especially through NGOs and multinational organisations such as the African Union (AU), in curbing emigration with its negative effects such as brain drain.<sup>6</sup> In this light, a number of civil society organisations and social entrepreneurial start-ups are emerging with a focus on bush falling. Among many examples in Cameroon, one can cite the following: "The Returnees Project" in Cameroon, founded by Miranda Oben, which showcases and promotes returned bush fallers who are creating jobs or investing in Cameroon. There is also a Facebook page named "Bushfallers" which profiles bush fallers and their travails abroad, and disseminates information aimed at discouraging clandestine bush falling among Cameroonians. The Cameroonian couple Wilfred and Lydia Ngwa run an NGO called "African Renaissance Ambassador Corp" with the mission of fighting massive emigration and brain drain in Africa (Ngwa and Ngwa 2006, 2007). Other migration-related NGOs in Cameroon include Solutions aux Migrations Irrégulières au Cameroun (SMIC) and L'Association des Rapatriés et de Lutte contre l'Émigration Clandestine du Cameroun (ARECC). We also have the government-run "Programme d'Aide au Retour et à l'Insertion des Jeunes de la Diaspora (PARIJEDI)." Related examples elsewhere in Africa include Advocacy Network Against Irregular Migration (ANAIM) founded by Sheku Bangura (a returned migrant) in Sierra Leone; SOS Immigration Clandestine in Côte d'Ivoire; La Jeunesse Émancipée in Côte d'Ivoire; Jeunesse Panafricaine pour la Reconversion des Mentalités (JPREM) in Côte d'Ivoire which runs a Facebook page called STOP A L'Immigration Clandestine; and Idia Renaissance founded by Roland Nwoha in Nigeria's Benin City to help among others the victims of human trafficking. Against this backdrop, this article will map out some of the prominent, returning bush faller characters; both those who actually return and those contemplating returning, arguing that their return represents an authorial move against clandestine emigration, against purposeless bush falling.

The following are the questions that will be addressed: can the selected novelists be considered literary activists who condemn clandestine bush falling? What literary strategies do these authors use in order to convey their anti-clandestine bush falling message? In answering these questions, my arguments will be informed by theories drawn from studies of literary activism. Baker defines literary activism as both explicit and implicit attempts to urge or effect “tangible political or social change” within or through literary texts (5). Drawing on Bloom’s description of cultural criticism, and despite his avowed preference for and defence of classical literary criticism, one would add that literary activism propounds the ability of literary texts to educate and to trigger or contribute to “societal improvement” (17). It therefore deals with literature which “assume[s] the work of social catharsis under the banners of the new multiculturalism,” emphasising the “moral and political values” of literature (Bloom 18, 40). Literary activism thus highlights possibilities through which literature can champion or influence social change in human societies. This article also draws on Fox (2012) and Cosgrave (2008) who argue that literary writing and scholarship can and should contribute to conversations shaping decisions and actions in the real world. Having established the basis of my argument that these novelists are, both directly and indirectly, discouraging clandestine and purposeless bush falling, I will now move to examine how they try to achieve this goal in their works of fiction.

### Paratextual Discouragement of Clandestine Bush Falling

To start off, bush falling is mainly portrayed negatively in these novels. But I must state here that the few successful bush fallers in these novels are discussed elsewhere, with a focus on the notion of cosmopolitanism. That said, even before entering into the content and narrative strategies of these novels, most of their titles if not all provide paratextual evidence of their authors’ positions vis-à-vis the theme of bush falling. In his discussion of the functionality of paratextual elements, Genette asserts that “the title has its functions” (269). In some instances, the functionality of the present titles can only be more meaningful when connected to certain aspects of the contents of the novels.

Mbue’s title *Behold the Dreamers*, for instance, evokes three important things associated with immigration in the USA. First, the title hints at the idea of the American Dream, America as a great nation. Mbue has confirmed this in an interview, stating that her title was inspired by Langston Hughes’ poem “Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed” (Mbue 2017 online interview). Moreover, the trope of the dream in her novel can be traced far beyond Hughes right to the founding of America, which was originally framed as a place which rewards hard-working people who have the dream to succeed. She thus foregrounds the aspirations of her characters (in a wider context of America as a land for dreamers) in addition to other issues

such as family, marriage, and class. Second, there is a reference to the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors or the DREAM Act introduced in the US Senate in 2009 with the aim of promoting the interests of minor children brought to the US by illegal immigrants. The introduction of this Senate Act led to the growth of the DREAMers, a network of young adult political activists acknowledging themselves as DREAMers, that is, those who would be protected by the Act, who push for the Act to become law and for the advancement of the rights of undocumented youth in the US (Nicholls 2013). Liomi, Jende and Neni's son in the novel, brought to the US by his parents on a visitor's visa which he overstays, can be considered a DREAMer. Building on the DREAM Act, former US President Barack Obama introduced the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals (DACA) during his administration, but, as pointed out above, his successor President Trump announced his intention in 2017 to end the DACA Programme.

On another level, *Behold the Dreamers* mockingly designates Jende Jonga and his fictional family as bush fallers chasing an illusory dream, the ambition to make a better life in the US. In fact, they are chasing both the American Dream and their unfruitful dream as bush fallers. The title of Charles Nfon's novel, *Greener from a Distance*, plays on the agrarian origins of the term "bush falling" as an adopted metaphor from animal rearing. In the "Introduction" to this novel, Nfon writes:

In transhumance, man and livestock move from the dry pasture in the mountains to the greener grass in the valleys. The reward, the green patches of grass along the banks of rivers and lakes, can often be seen from a distance. [...] Similarly, people move from developing countries to the developed world in search of better lives ... seeking greener pastures. However, the greener pasture in that far away country is often a matter of perception. It is a dream, which, in most cases ends up being just that ... a dream. Still many [from Cameroon] yearn to be part of that dream especially the American dream and Albert Ndifon was no exception. (v)

It is important to note that Nfon's repeated use of the word "dream" (four times in this excerpt) reinforces the notion of bush falling as chasing dreams, especially the American dream, discussed above. Nfon's title, probably inspired by the expression "grass is always greener on the other side of the fence," evokes the general perception of bush falling in Cameroon as the movement of people in search of "greener pastures," that is, the agrarian dimension of bush falling mentioned earlier. His title and "Introduction" also prepare the reader for eventual failure on the part of some bush fallers in the novel as they demonstrate the dream-like, unrealistic nature of the concept of bush falling. He asserts that bush falling is a dream and ends in most cases "being just that...a dream," an unachieved dream. This already suggests for readers that the novel will be a cautionary tale aimed at dissuading would-be bush fallers who have only limited knowledge of what bush falling entails; as he begins his novel by stating that his

central character Albert is no exception to the many bush fallers who often end up chasing unachievable dreams. *Home is Best*, Tasi's title, sounds like an advert about the goodness of home, reminding bush fallers not to travel beyond their home/country or to always remember home wherever they go; that they can only find true fulfilment and success back home.

Mbombo's novel, *The Last Bush Faller: Saga in the Diaspora*, has both a title and subtitle, all of which open up layers of meaning regarding clandestine emigration. As the only one of the five novels that overtly employs the term "bush faller," his main title *The Last Bush Faller* suggests that if his message is heeded, then Jobias the protagonist bush faller character in the text will be the last Cameroonian to fall bush. This suggestion is further supported by his subtitle *Saga in the Diaspora*. The use of the word "saga" evokes, albeit arguably, the host country or diaspora as a place of endless struggles for survival amidst hardships. The whole title seems to suggest that the protagonist will be the last bush faller after all the troubles and challenges he encounters abroad, more specifically in the USA. Manjoh's title, *Snare*, projects bush falling as entrapment. This is true of nearly all the fictional bush fallers in Manjoh's novel, especially Pam and Jerry. Once in Germany, these two young people discover the unpleasant realities of bush falling and are seemingly unable to disentangle themselves from that mesh of suffering and failure. Away from the above paratextual analysis, let us turn now to other ways in which these authors depict bush falling negatively.

### Contrast and Authorial Intervention Open Bush Fallers' Eyes

Other methods through which these authors convey their message of discouraging bush falling include some of their stylistic choices. Foremost among these strategies is the use of contrast. By contrasting different versions of the lives of some of their characters, as well as settings, the authors offer possibilities for readers to assess the motivations behind bush falling as well as the authors' own attitude towards this phenomenon. At the level of individual characters, one striking contrast is between the Jongas' life in America and their life in Cameroon upon their return. By the time of their return, they have made money in the USA amounting to about "ten million CFA francs" (Mbue, 352) which can be considered a sign of successful bush falling since they could not easily raise such an amount while in Cameroon. The sharp disparity between the tight rooms they rented while in America and the spacious house they will be renting in Coconut Island in Cameroon with a "1998 Pajero" (Mbue, 356), however, has surprising implications. The tightness of their single room and inability to own a car in the USA becomes a symbol of some sort of imprisonment as bush fallers, while the spaciousness of their Cameroonian house—a house that will be "furnished with basic necessities and a housemaid" (Mbue, 357)—symbolizes their newfound freedom and prosperity as returned bush fallers. In this way,

returning becomes a desirable option for bush fallers, whether they are successful or unsuccessful.

With regard to settings in most of the novels under study, Cameroon is sharply contrasted with the various developed countries to which bush fallers emigrate. One opposition is between Cameroon as a place of poverty, corruption, underdevelopment, political repression, laziness and laxity, and western countries as rich, developed, organized, hardworking and less corrupt. In *Snare*, for instance, there is bribery, corruption and theft at the airport in Pays, the fictional name for Cameroon (151), and frequent water cuts in major Pays cities (62). Due to bad roads, cars frequently break down along the Cameroon-Central African Republic road (Tasi 84). Police and custom officers take bribes in Cameroon (Nfon 11 and 17) while elections are rigged to allow Lionman to stay in power (Nfon 84). Neni's father is poor as he often "complained about his financial headaches and delivered a lecture about CFA francs not growing on mango trees whenever one of his eight children asked for school fees or new uniforms" (Mbue 14). Jende even declares that "[m]y father is poor. Cameroon has nothing" (Mbue 40). Jobias's parents borrow a lot just to make sure he travels to America in order "to alleviate the economic distress they were drowning in" (Mbombo 34). By exposing such ills and problems in Cameroon, these authors are not only showing some of the factors that push bush fallers to emigrate, but are also advocating, as I argue, positive change in order to curb bush falling and raise their country to the standards of those they want to go to at all costs. I also argue that these negative depictions of the home country translate the authors' subtle appeal to aspiring, real-life bush fallers to identify those aspects of their society that need to be improved upon, if they must avoid suffering, as most of the bush faller characters do, abroad. As one example, Nji preaches to his friends that they have to learn to be hardworking and patriotic if their countries are to become westernized (Manjoh, 13). Relatively successful bush fallers such as Nji and Akwi in *Snare*, Samson in *Greener from a Distance*, Rita and Jobias' landlady in *The Last Bush Faller* as well as coming-of-age characters such as Albert, Vero and Njem (and Jobias to an extent) seem to be dispensers of advice to other bush fallers.

Furthermore, some of the authors use characters to voice warnings and negative comments about clandestine bush falling, thus reinforcing the didactic nature of the novels in question. This is what I designate as "authorial interventions" which are aimed at discouraging clandestine bush falling. In *Snare*, Chef, the German cook who sympathizes with African bush fallers, tells Jerry and his friends on one occasion "that it would have been better for them to have stayed in Africa" (Manjoh, 90). Likewise, the German professor who helps Egbe at the bus station, being aware of how much they suffer as bush fallers in Germany, also advises him that "[i]t is better to stay in Africa" (Manjoh, 142). The third-person narrator in *Greener from a Distance* is keen to lay bare the slightest attempt by bush faller characters to conceal the hardships they face abroad. Samson tells Albert that the main thing keeping most bush fallers in America is their children: "the American dream has escaped

most first generations but they continue to see or hope for a future for their children” (Nfon 110). Here these authors seem to suggest that, like the “first generations,” many bush fallers have wasted their lives chasing illusive dreams and others should not emulate them. In their interviews, to be discussed in detail later, Manjoh and Mbombo confirm this interpretation as they claim that they intended to use their novels to educate aspiring bush fallers on some of the difficult and often hidden realities of bush falling. The third-person narrator in *Home is Best*, in providing some of the reasons why the Njems have decided to return to Cameroon, reveals that “they heard and witnessed the wasteful and wasted life of some of the Cameroonians in the US: some smoked marijuana and were ashamed of going home. They drugged to drown bad consciences, apparently” (Tasi 230). They live in a system where it is difficult to regularize their illegal immigrant situations and where most of the educational qualifications from Cameroon/Africa are not recognized. Through fictional characters, Tasi and other authors question such systems. Having discovered that they must go back to school in America in order to “qualify for better jobs,” Vero and Njem question this system that compels bush fallers to start from scratch: “Why were they being obliged to think that they had acquired nothing at home and to debase themselves with descending to new training for the American society?” (Tasi 229-230). In the face of such realities, Tasi suggests, the characters must learn to value what they have back home and by extension help to improve their home country. Thus, one of the visions of such authors is to show Cameroonian (and by extension African) youth the duty they owe their country (continent) in terms of development instead of admiring and striving to live and succeed in other people’s countries (continents). And some of the novelists tap from oral traditions to subtly transmit this message in their texts.

### Drawing Wisdom from Oral Traditions

Drawing on African oral traditions, these authors use African proverbs in their novels to warn against clandestine bush falling. Finnegan (2012 [1970]) acknowledges the abundance of proverbs in Africa, particularly in the Bantu area, the Congo and West Africa. Cameroon is located around the two latter regions. According to Finnegan, a proverb is “a saying in more or less fixed form marked by ‘shortness, sense, and salt’ and more distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it” (383). Underscoring the importance of African oral traditions within African written literature (fiction), Obiechina opines that when proverbs (what he calls “narrative proverbs”) are used in a novel, the ideas expressed through them bear “the stamp of communal approval” because they are “linked to the storehouse of collective wisdom” (201). With this in mind, I would argue that these novelists, especially Nfon, Mbombo and Mbue, tap into the storehouses of Cameroonian (African) communal wisdom to offer counsel to bush fallers and aspiring bush fallers. An example of

this can be found in *Greener from a Distance*. While reproaching Matt for having defrauded his customers before leaving Cameroon for America, Albert reminds him of an African proverb: “If you defecate at the door on your way out of the house, you will have to clean the poop before getting back” (Nfon 99). Still talking to Matt, Albert adds: “You left a big one, I left nothing” (ibid). This proverb is similar to a Yoruba proverb which states that “[o]ne who excretes on the road, will find flies when he returns” and Finnegan describes this as “an exaggerated equivalent” of the English saying that “one reaps as one sows” (387). The lessons implied here are twofold. The first is that Matt ought to have been honest in his business dealings in Cameroon because he must make peace with his offended customers if he wants to return home. The second is that bush fallers should not commit criminal acts in their home countries before departure; otherwise, they would be unable to return if their missions fail abroad. Figuratively, poop or excrement in this proverb symbolizes wrongdoing which breeds negative consequences, especially for illegal bush fallers such as Matt. Albert who is not guilty of such wrongdoings would easily return to Cameroon, the novel suggests.

Commenting on the figurative quality of proverbs, Finnegan notes that “one of their most noticeable characteristics is their allusive wordings, usually [expressed] in metaphorical terms” (380). When Jobias returns for good, his father salutes his decision, telling him that “a hunter does not remain in the forest because the hunt was poor” (Mbombo 129). This proverb expresses the idea of bush falling as a hunt, going on a hunting expedition with the hope of bringing home a good kill. Most importantly, the proverb encourages unsuccessful bush fallers to return home instead of staying abroad and getting frustrated. If they come back home, they can always start their lives afresh, and they would never lack something useful to do with their lives. That probably explains why Jende, in *Behold the Dreamers*, also speaking in proverbial terms, assures his asylum lawyer Mr. Bubakar, when revealing his impending return to Cameroon, that “my people say if God cuts off your fingers, He will teach you how to eat with your toes” (Mbue 348). If bush fallers do not succeed abroad, they could do so at home; God would teach them to make it at home. These authors, therefore, employ African proverbs as that “communal form that transcends the narrow limits of pure aestheticism and entertainment to encompass broad social and ethical purposes” (Obiechina 201). Proverbs enhance the didactic quality of their fiction, particularly the educative dimension of their vision with respect to illegal mass emigration in Cameroon. Considering the admitted function of such African proverbs as cautionary tales (Finnegan 2012 [1970], Obiechina 1992, Aboluwodi 2014), these authors employ them in order to convey their activist messages to illegal bush fallers. Another strategy used by these authors is their portrayal of bush falling as a phenomenon based on excitement, lies and illusions.

## Excitement, Lies, and Illusions as Manure for Clandestine Bush Falling

One prominent factor responsible for many failures in bush fallers' adventures is the fact that, as the novels suggest, bush falling is based on uninformed excitement, lies, illusions and fake appearances or appearance versus reality. Unreasoned excitement is conveyed in these novels through characters like Vero and Njem, Neni Jonga and Jerry whose families organize big send-off parties for them shortly before their departures for America and Germany respectively. In Mbue's novel, Vince and his father Mr. Edwards are some of the characters who help the readers to perceive the illusive nature of bush falling. Mr. Edwards cannot understand why Jende praises Limbe as a special and unique place and yet cannot remain there. Vince, on his part, does not fully grasp why Jende insists that America is so good for him. He tells Jende that this is nothing but refusal to acknowledge the illusion he is living in (Mbue 103). *The Last Bush Faller* opens, on its very first page, with Jobias bemoaning the elusiveness of his dream in the US as his "hopes of making quick money and building a skyscraper were fast becoming elusive" (Mbombo 1). In Nfon's novel, Matt is telling lies about his profession to a girl in Cameroon whom he intends to marry and bring over to America. This helps Albert to understand why women who marry bush fallers then divorce them upon arrival in the States: "They get here and discover the liar they got married to and that leaves them no other choice but to run away" (Nfon, 95).

Relatedly, Eric Tangumonkem (2012) in his poem "Greener Pastures," acknowledges how lies fuel bush falling; the speaker in his poem laments that "we [bush fallers] bought a lie and are paying a hectic price/ We left for greener pastures/ For the land flowing with milk and honey;/ Land of plenty and boundless opportunities." The "hectic price" they pay points to their sufferings, hardships and wasted lives as bush fallers. Interestingly, "hectic" also evokes the idea of too much work and lack of time which most bush fallers struggle with in these novels. Furthermore, this excerpt evokes the illusive, paradisiac conception of western countries among bush fallers. Most aspiring immigrants often believe that they are going to a paradise: Jobias talks of "split-second-to-paradise" and "Promised Land" (Mbombo 34); Jerry thinks he has "indeed made it to paradise" (Manjoh 4). Manjoh equally revealed in a 2016 radio interview with Charles Tembei on the Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) that she, like many aspiring bush fallers, initially believed that Germany or the western world was a paradise. This probably explains why some bush fallers come of age in the novels after discovering that their destinations are not a paradise.

## The Bildungsroman Dimension of Bush Falling

Among all the bush faller protagonists in the five novels, Albert in *Greener from a Distance*, Vero and Njem in *Home is Best*, and Jobias

in *The Last Bush Faller* come closest to what one could qualify as characters who evolve or literally come of age (in terms of character arc), learning from their experience, thus conferring the status of bildungsroman on these novels. In bildungsroman novels, part of the narrative emphasis is on some character's formation, often the protagonist's, as they evolve into maturity, thereby becoming better versions of themselves through the acquisition of knowledge and self-discovery (Okuyade, 2011 and Svendsen, 2017). Drawing on Buckley, Okuyade submits that the growth of the protagonist of a bildungsroman occurs in patterns: "the sensitive, intelligent protagonist leaves home, undergoes stages of conflict and growth, is tested by crisis and love affairs, then finally finds the best place to use his/her unique talents" (144). The main characters in some of the novels under study do go through at least some of these stages of growth. In one instance, after discovering the elusive nature of bush falling, Albert makes up his mind to return to Cameroon. While "some friends [pressure] him to stay [in America] but he would rather be content with what he had in Cameroon than chase an apparently elusive dream" (Nfon, 114). Similarly, after experiencing the difficulties of emigrant life in the US, Vero and Njem decide to return to Cameroon and only visit America from time to time using their DV Lottery-earned Green Cards (Tasi, 230). The journeys undertaken by such bush fallers, therefore, result in "maturity," "lucidity" or "self-understanding" (Mortimer 5, 9, 11) which in turn leads them to perceive their home countries anew as worthy of success too. Jobias, for his part, declares: "I was going back to tell the truth about bush falling." He then adds that "my predecessors had been faking the reality" (Mbombo 126). Nonetheless, it is difficult to believe him since his going home is mainly a means of escaping his impending imprisonment in America, where he caused a road accident, unlike the decisions freely taken by Albert and the Njems to return home.

Having realized the hardships bush fallers face in Germany, Jerry, just like Jobias, confesses that bush falling continues unabated because "people who go back to Pays don't tell the truth about this place [Germany/host countries]. They make those who are back home think it's all roses, which is but a lie" (Manjoh 90). It is important, however, to note that neither Jerry nor many other bush fallers seem ready to tell the truth upon their own return. When he goes home to take his fiancée Pamela to Germany, Jerry rather shows off in the city of Buea and plays the very rich and successful bush faller, partying in expensive clubs and renting luxurious cars. Even when Pam arrives in Germany, he continues to deceive her by pretending that he works in an office when he actually works as an unskilled labourer at a construction site (Manjoh 92). Consequently, after discovering his lies, Pam abandons him in Germany and starts a relationship with Egbe. Ironically, a week before Pam and Egbe travel home for their planned wedding, she "[stops] working in the hotel in order to refresh herself" so as not to "[look] unhealthy when she [goes] home" (Manjoh, 148). This is an opportunity she too could use to tell the truth about bush falling to aspiring bush fallers back in Pays, but she rather prefers to go home

with a carefully refreshed appearance which in itself perpetuates the false beliefs among aspiring bush fallers that falling bush is a quick means to make wealth, look good and change one's social status. It is ironic that Pam perpetuates false beliefs about bush fallers when she herself was deceived. This is one of the fascinating ways in which Manjoh employs irony in her novel.

That behaviour portrayed by characters such as Jobias, Jerry and Pamela might be explained by Alpes's argument that even those Cameroonians who are aware of the lies and risks involved in bush falling still deliberately choose to fall bush (Alpes 90). Yet the authors of these novels seem to suggest, through protagonists such as Nfon's Albert and Tasi's Njems, that some aspiring bush fallers might avoid going abroad if they had foreknowledge of what bush falling really entails. This explains why, after listening to the story of Samson's initial ordeals in America, Albert asks him: "If you knew what you know now, would you have left Cameroon to come to the USA?" (Nfon 109) to which Samson replies he still would have left. Albert's decision to return to Cameroon at the end of the novel then proves that he personally would answer this question in the negative. As Nfon's coming-of-age protagonist in this novel, the reader is most likely to identify with Albert. Albert's question provides another possibility for linking these novels to the use of cautionary tales in African oral traditions as discussed earlier. One could speculate that many young Cameroonians would answer this question in the negative after reading these novels. In *Snare*, Nji acknowledges that life is indeed difficult for bush fallers in Europe and pledges never to allow anybody he "knows" to travel to Europe "just like that without any sense of purpose" (Manjoh 90). This echoes Manjoh's declarations in her 2016 CRTV interview where she stresses the need for bush fallers to have well-defined and informed purposes before travelling abroad. Those who fail to heed such advice, I suggest, might pay heavy prices to survive abroad, including the possible loss or swapping of their identities, as discussed below.

### Resurrection through the Swapping of Identities

Fueled by desperation and lack of foresight, the swapping of identities between dead and living bush fallers in these novels seems to suggest that bush falling is a form of death, a transition between different selves. In *Greener from a Distance*, Befe Mboma assumes Chefon Mola's identity in America (Nfon 38). While suffering from a terminal disease and unable to work, Chefon Mola lends his identity card to Mboma to enable him to work since he does not have the required immigration papers to work. Eventually, the real Chefon Mola dies while already in Cameroon; before his death, he mails all his personal papers to Mboma who would later confess to his daughter Jessica that "... the terminal disease took his life eventually and from that time on there was only one Chefon Mola – me" (Nfon 56-64). Thus, he finally regularizes his immigration status in the US thanks to this new identity

acquired from his dead friend. He metaphorically dies before he can survive in America as a bush faller.

In *The Last Bush Faller*, likening himself to Sizwe Bansi in the anti-apartheid play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Jobias actually confesses that he has to die in order to live or to escape pending imprisonment in America as he devises an escape strategy consisting of using the passport of his late friend Mike (Mbombo 122). In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, a 1972 premiered play co-written by three South Africans, Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, Sizwe Bansi, who is illegally seeking work in Port Elizabeth, is advised and encouraged by Buntu to assume the name Robert Zwelinzima by taking the passbook (work permit) which they discover on Zwelinzima's corpse. The intertextual dimension of this allusion in Mbombo's novel shows how "death" can be used as a survival strategy in difficult situations such as racial discrimination (apartheid) and illegal immigration. In other words, survival (or resurrection) for some bush fallers is only possible through their metaphorical death or the swapping of their identities with dead people. Little wonder therefore that, in the face of such possibilities, some of the authors such as Manjoh and Mbombo go beyond the narrative format to profess their activism against clandestine emigration outside their literary texts.

### Some Authors Avow their Activism

The publicly-voiced opinions of some of the novelists further support the anti-bush falling tone of their novels. Manjoh in the CRTV interview with Charles Tembei (cited earlier), in a radio programme dubbed "Literary Half Hour," attests to her anti-bush falling perspective in *Snare*. She asserts that the novel was inspired by her experiences and those of other bush fallers in Germany where she went to study after obtaining her Bachelor's degree in Cameroon. The activist nature of her novel is thus confirmed, especially when she reveals that she had offered a copy of the novel to Cameroon's Ministry of Arts and Culture and was lobbying for copies to be bought for local libraries while also struggling to raise funds in Germany to reprint the book in Cameroon. She further states that she had been offering some free copies of the novel to some young people in Cameroon. After discovering the realities of immigration in Germany, she continues, she even advised her younger siblings, who wanted to abandon their jobs in Cameroon and travel to Germany, to stay home. After repeatedly stating that she is not against people travelling for studies and other genuine reasons, she clarifies that "I want to propose selective travel," adding that bush fallers should have a "purpose" for travelling. She also deplors the fate of many of her African friends who lost their student visas in Germany and left for other countries, some filing for asylum in Britain. Then she declares that "I stand now as a voice of the people [bush fallers] speaking on their behalf."

Similarly, in an online interview, Mbombo asserts that he writes to "entertain, philosophize, and teach the world" and moves on to reveal

his anti-bush falling message for young Africans/Cameroonians. Replying to a question on motivations behind his writing, he asserts:

For example, in my latest novel *The Last Bush Faller*, I focused on wanton immigration of Africans to America or the West in general. My intention in this novel is to paint the true gloomy picture of what Africans in the Diaspora do to eke out a living. I think that the mass exodus of young and talented Africans to the West in quest of “manna” is illusory. With some focus, hard work, and commitment back in Africa these dreamers, who only think the pasture is greener on the Other Side, can make it too. This will save them the heartaches of debts they accrued to cross over, the mean and multiple jobs they do to survive, and the falsehood they relay to others in Africa to maintain a certain echelon and aura. (Mbombo, 2017)

A DV Lottery-facilitated Cameroonian bush faller living in Maryland, USA, Mbombo continues to be fascinated by bush falling. One can surmise that his stories and perspective on clandestine emigration are informed by the daily experiences of some legal and clandestine bush fallers around him, especially given the high number of undocumented migrants living in the USA, as well as some of his friends and relatives in Cameroon who might be aspiring to fall bush. In 2017, for instance, Mbombo published a short story entitled ‘The File’ which explores the anxieties of a wretched Cameroonian couple, with a dying mother-in-law, haunted almost to death by fear that rats have eaten the file containing the husband Bofua’s personal documents needed for his DV Lottery interview (Mbombo 2017b). The file is finally found and the story ends without Bofua attending the interview or travelling. This story explores the anxieties that characterize bush fallers when they fail to travel like the case in Nfah-Abbenyi Makuchi’s 1999 “American Lottery” mentioned earlier. Even in Mbombo’s novel, *Jobias*, after his failure abroad, remembers his friend Tumenta who failed to travel and became mad (Mbombo 135).

Although Mbue seems more ambivalent when confronted with questions on immigration in relation to her novel *Behold the Dreamers*, some of her comments reveal her concern with the irregular aspects of emigration. Mbue acknowledges that her novel was inspired by the hardships and struggles of illegal immigrants “trying to get papers, trying to become [American] citizens.” She adds that one of her objectives in the novel was to expose “the pain of illegal immigration for the people who live it. Because right now people hear, ‘Oh, 9 million illegal immigrants!’ and they do not think about the stories behind those numbers, those people, and the struggles of living without papers” (Charles, 2017). Interestingly, Mbue herself is a Cameroonian immigrant in America, having now acquired US citizenship. Though she immigrated to the US as a college student after high school in Cameroon, she also falls into the category of bush fallers, albeit a legal one, because *all* those who travel from Cameroon to more industrialized nations are known as bush fallers. It must be recalled, however, that activist messages in these novels mainly target

illegal bush fallers and those without defined purposes for emigrating. The novels and their authors (including the present author) are not against travel and emigration. Rather, they warn against (or draw attention to) the dangers of illegal emigration in the hope that emigrants from Cameroon and Africa (but not necessarily refugees) will make informed choices about emigration and the legal procedures involved in it. Mbue admits elsewhere that she wrote her novel to show what it means “[t]o be struggling with poverty, to be barely getting by in America. I wanted to write about what it’s like to be an immigrant. I wanted to write about me” (Rocco 2017). If a legal bush faller like Mbue is confronted with such hurdles as poverty and the difficulties of becoming American, then there is little wonder that illegal bush fallers like Jede Jonga in her novel suffer even more.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the return of bush fallers (immigrants) in five Anglophone Cameroonian novels as their authors’ contribution toward combating illegal and purposeless immigration. These novels fit into the category of migration/diaspora fiction and one of their hallmarks is that they emphasise the concept of home, at a time when cosmopolitanism and mobility are increasingly rendering the concept of ‘home’ more fluid; insisting that homes are mobile as are those who migrate. Perhaps, this new turn of longing for home can be explained by rising populism and national border closures, exemplified by former US President Donald Trump’s anti-migrant rhetoric, Italy’s “Salvini Decree,” Hungary’s “Stop Soros” laws and Britain’s 2016 Brexit Referendum, all partly driven by rising migrant crises.

In these novels, even successful bush fallers who manage to regularize situations in their host countries maintain strong relations with their countries of origin, which they perceive as their real homes. Citing Marjorie Garber, Chambers argues that migrants “can’t go home again” because they are already home (42). He equally differentiates between “travel” and “migrancy,” stating that travel “implies movement between fixed positions, a site of departure, a point of arrival, [and] the knowledge of an itinerary” whereas “migrancy [...] involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain” (5). The novels studied here offer the possibility to challenge this argument, not only because the migration of bush fallers blurs the dividing lines between travel and migrancy but, more importantly, because the bush faller characters in the novels display a heightened awareness of where home is, that is, their homes of origin or departure. Most of them (such as Jobias, Pam and Jende) constantly remit money home and often like to find out from newly arrived immigrants how their country is faring. Others, like the parents expecting better futures for their kids, seem to consider their present countries as homes. Thus, it becomes difficult to say who is a traveler and who is a migrant as they are both. While the novels do provide some opportunities for the triumph of cosmopolitanism

(discussed elsewhere), the longing for home and eventual voluntary and/or forceful returns are a strong feature of these texts.

We can identify the authors of these novels as literary activists, but not in the political sense of the term “activism.” Rather, the didacticism of their novels, with messages that can possibly influence readers to review their intentions and ambitions of becoming bush fallers, together with the avowed commitment of some of these authors to address illegal bush falling in their works, qualify them as literary activists. These authors seem to respond to Fox’s question about literary activism: “What good is interpreting the world if we are not changing it in material ways?” (15). Corroborating Fox, Shady Cosgrave contends that the world could become a different place if people took particular, concrete actions aimed at improvement, after having read books with activist twists. Most importantly, it must be restated here that the novels and their authors (including the present author) *do not* advocate an end to travel and emigration. On the contrary and to a large extent, they seek to warn against the dangers of clandestine emigration so that emigrants from Cameroon and Africa (but not refugees) can make more informed choices about emigration and the legal procedures that it entails.

## Notes

1. This article is excerpted from a postgraduate dissertation entitled “‘Bush Falling’ in Cameroon Anglophone Fiction: A Literary Response to Illegal Immigration” which I submitted to the Universities of Perpignan Via Domitia (France), St Andrews (UK), and Santiago de Compostela (Spain) in June 2018 in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Erasmus Mundus Master’s Crossways in Cultural Narratives. I am highly indebted to my two supervisors from St Andrews, Professor Nicki Hitchcott, and Santiago de Compostela, Professor Margarita Estévez-Saá, for their academic guidance in writing the dissertation. I also acknowledge the three anonymous reviewers for *Postcolonial Text* whose feedback helped me to improve the article.

2. For details on how the Global North plunders African resources, creates instability, and drives emigration, see Dearden (2017), Honest Accounts (2017), Milne (2015), French (2015), de Haas (2008), Akokpari (2000), and Martin (1999), among others.

3. It must be admitted here that it can be challenging to study an unpublished novel, especially given the fact that its final published version might contain substantial changes. Nevertheless, given that *Home is Best* engages with emigration in a fascinating manner, I could not but choose to include it in this study once I discovered it in the hands of Cameroonian editor NMI Education. I previewed the novel in its advanced stages of publication in 2016 and was accorded written

permission by the publisher to use it in my research (See appendices in my Master's dissertation).

4. Also see Jørgen Carling (PI), "Representations of Migration and Return in Nigerian Cultural Production," Research Project, Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO), January 2017 – July 2019, <<https://www.prio.org/Projects/Project/?x=1755>> accessed 4 June 2020.

5. See for example Oniwe (2017), Rushton (2017), Crétois (2017), Kaboré (2016), and Philippe (2012). See, for instance, the African Union's "African Common Position on Migration and Development" (Banjul, The Gambia, 25-26 June 2006) and the African Union's "Draft Common African Position (CAP) on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration" (Kigali, Rwanda, 16-21 October 2017).

6. See, for instance, Kaye (1996) and Jillson (2016).

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