SENSING BIMBIA: Ancestry Reconnection in an Anti-Crisis Atmosphere

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The second-to-last day of the last Seeds of Return program marked the near end of a ten-day effort to help African Americans reacquaint themselves with Cameroon as their DNA- identified homeland by catching our breath in Kribi.[1] The routine so far had mostly been the same: naming ceremonies, meetings with local elders, learning how to wait—on a bus, on getting food, on getting things to go as planned. As the group traveled from Douala through the grass fields of the West region, and now to the coastline of the South region, it was clear that submitting a saliva sample by brushing a swab gently along the inside of one's cheek did not match the time, energy, and labor required to make sense of ancestry in the DNA-identified home. To end the program in Kribi, well-known as a point of leisurely escape for the most affluent Cameroonians and the largely American and European expatriates, was to catch our breath, to pause, to take stock of the experience of ancestry before the group prepared to head back to the United States.

That morning, I decided to take a walk with Roberta.[2] I had first met Roberta, a morning person my mother's age from Georgia, at the cusp of dawn as she sat in the corner of the Planet Hotel dining room. A morning person myself, I had gone down for breakfast before everyone else hoping to get my bearings

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 41, Issue 1, pp. 107–133, ISSN 0886-7356, online ISSN 1548-1360. Cultural Anthropology *is the journal of the Society of Cultural Anthropology, a section of the American Anthropological Association.* Cultural Anthropology *journal content published since 2014 is freely available to download, save, reproduce, and transmit for noncommercial, scholarly, and educational purposes under the Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0 license. Reproduction and transmission of journal content for the above purposes should credit the author and original source. DOI: 10.14506/ca41.1.05*

as the group confronted their jetlag. To my surprise, however, Roberta, sipping her coffee, had beaten me and the wait staff to start the morning. This, I would learn, would set a precedent for most of our interactions: she was not going to miss any details, and she never shied away from asking questions. From the meaning behind the tin pyramidic structures we would frequently pass in the West, to asking someone to translate what an elder was saying during a naming ceremony since she did not speak French, Roberta sought out what she didn't know.

This morning would be no different. The dawn, like the tide, was still. The crest broke gently a mile out from shore against the handmade wooden boats cradling elder fishermen. Each step, barefoot, was an opportunity to break open our bodies' stiffest parts after traveling in a packed mini charter bus. With it, Roberta unearthed a question no one had otherwise been noticeably willing or interested in asking: "I remember Bimbia was on the program. Do you know why we didn't go?" I took a breath. I both knew the answer and had come to learn intimately over the past year how to not name the answer directly. "I think the program was aware of what is going on in the area. They probably thought it was best not to go given the circumstances," I reassured her. She wasn't satisfied with my answer. Neither was I.

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Located near the port city of Limbe, Bimbia is a slavery memorial materially linking Cameroon to the legacy of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade imprinted onto Africa's Atlantic shoreline. But what distinguishes Bimbia from more well-known sites like Gorée Island in Senegal or Cape Coast and Elmina castles in Ghana is its uniquely postgenomic presencing: few people knew anything publicly about the site until the arrival of Cameroon's DNA-identified diaspora. For instance, on February 23, 2016, the former U.S. ambassador Michael Hoza, alongside Cameroon's minister of Arts and Culture, Narcissus Mouelle Kombia, provided remarks at the site to inaugurate the apportioning of $1.14 million USD from the U.S. State Department Ambassador's Funds. The funds were meant to honor Bimbia as an African cultural heritage site. Yet Hoza would reframe the site as a point of "common ancestry" between the two countries. Listing the names of famous African Americans who had traced their genetic ancestry to Cameroon—specifically, the musician and producer Quincy Jones, the former secretary of state Condoleeza Rice, the late Challenger astronaut Ronald E. McNair, the filmmaker Spike Lee, and the actress Angela Bassett—Hoza

recalled how, "through pain, tragedy, and loss suffered in the past, Cameroonian lineages from multiple and diverse parts of this country had given the United States some of the best and brightest of its citizens."[3] The rise of Cameroon's (celebrity) genetic diaspora, had provided the United States and Cameroon with a unique opportunity to reconsider the ways they had been connected to one another through the history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade at the site. Because Bimbia's recognition was inextricably linked to the return of the genetic diaspora, the two would be intertwined by the ways in which they could mutually presence one another.

By the time of Roberta's arrival at the end of 2018, Bimbia's DNA-catalyzed presencing would have to contend with an atmosphere of violence between the state and the English-speaking regions where the site is located. Being located in the southwestern, English-speaking region of the bilingual, but largely Francophilic, nation of Cameroon would ultimately put Bimbia in the crosshairs of an antagonism between the Southwest and Northwest regions and the postcolonial state, more commonly referred to at the time of my fieldwork as the "Anglophone" crisis.[4] What began as an organized strike in October 2016 by the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC), a lawyer and teacher union, calling attention to professional double standards of practice—including French-speaking Cameroonians practicing French civil law in local courts rather than following the English common-law standard, knowing that the inverse would be unlikely—had escalated. Peaceful protestors were met with force by the state, and separatists, commonly referred to as "Amba Boys," had emerged to fight for an independent "Ambazonia," targeting police forces and civilians alike.

In what follows, I situate the exchange between Roberta and me about Bimbia's disappearance from the Seeds of Return itinerary as reflective of a new mode of crisis sense-making, most notably in response to what I describe as an *anti-crisis atmosphere* in Cameroon in 2018. Heeding Roberta's dissatisfaction with my response as a point of inquiry, I use this concept to address a sensorial shift in crisis knowledge-production processes when atmospheric violence is affectively oriented *against* the "Anglophone" crisis. I use anti-crisis atmosphere to capture the material conditions by which the capacity to think with and against crisis gets evacuated and neutralized, leaving behind compounding ethical paradoxes that expose and disturb circumstances that might otherwise be taken for granted as morally good and fixed—including the ways that a genetic (African American) diaspora relates to their DNA-identified home through a site like Bimbia.

Emerging scholarship on genetic diaspora has focused on how diaspora is susceptible to being fixed by DNA. For instance, Noah Tamarkin (2020, 86) reminds us of how genetic diaspora unfolds as a "*partially* failed" project of connection, as DNA becomes the grounds for enacting diaspora in the absence of any other shared materials, including ties to the state. Similarly, Alondra Nelson (2008b, 2008a, 2016) has detailed how genetic ancestry testing can become a critical, albeit complicated, means of historical repair, most notably for African Americans seeking to legally address slavery's legacy of racialized dispossession in U.S. courts or genealogically by seeking an African homeland that may not have been possible to know without genetic technology.[5] Like crisis, the fate of genetic diaspora is often framed in terms of a fixed relation, evoking notions of an unrealized "good" either through a therapeutic value of repair as redress for historical injury or repair as making whole through reconnection or return that can be naturally secured.

Drawing on nearly twenty-four months of ethnographic research—beginning in the United States but ultimately finding its way to Cameroon—this article reorients the study of genetic diaspora away from its genetic constitution and toward the constitution of a relation to people and places that exceed DNA test results. By following the Seeds of Return program, including activities like visiting Bimbia, my research seeks to illustrate how ancestry can emerge as a critical site of knowledge production—both genetic- and crisis-oriented. In recognizing that the loss and absence that has typically marked African ancestry for the African diaspora is presenced differently when ancestry knowledge production takes shape at "home" in Cameroon, new opportunities emerge for the genetic African diaspora to be affected by and affect what is happening in Africa today.

My own ethnographic positioning is particularly sensitive to this: Like most ancestry-reconnection program participants, I am an African American woman. However, I arrive as an anthropologist who is the relative of a DNA test taker, rather than being one myself, particularly because the genetic material analyzed was not biogenetic material we share. In turn, I find that my presence more closely resembles Deborah Thomas's (2019) mode of affective witnessing, using my own indirect ties to genetic ancestry testing to make sense of potential new modes of sociality without preemptively rendering them fallacious due to the presence of DNA.

As Bimbia then receded from view, with little to no explanation, in the midst of the "Anglophone" crisis, I use this article to illustrate how the genetic diaspora's return becomes a new avenue for assessing how transformations in postcolonial sovereignty *feels* through emerging modes of crisis knowledge production.

AN ATMOSPHERIC APPROACH TO ANTI-CRISIS

From climate change, to the state of Wall Street, to pandemic and epidemic health outbreaks, one of the central challenges of studying crisis is resisting the urge to clarify what crisis is. As Janet Roitman (2014, 41) details in *Anti-Crisis*, "crisis is an observation that produces meaning." Despite the ways that crisis beckons a sense of moral indictment, much of what gets articulated as crisis reflects a moral uncertainty, allowing us to pose the question of "What went wrong?" without context beyond the terms that crisis allows in itself. In turn, Roitman designates "anti-crisis" as a way of considering crisis "otherwise" to provide the critical distance that crisis typically denies. Instead of focusing on whether a crisis is "real," and, as a result, through the dichotomies of absent/present, right/wrong, true/false, Roitman analogizes the crisis knowledge-production process to an "enabling blind spot" for two interconnected purposes. As a problem of perspective, Roitman first hopes to showcase how crisis emerges as a second-order observation that does not easily allow us to see the perspective it prescribes a priori. By then thinking against crisis, we can secondarily consider how knowledge gets captured and organized discursively as a problem through crisis, regulating "certain questions to be asked while others are foreclosed" (Roitman 2014, 94).

This approach proves critical for Africanist anthropologists, who are often grappling with "a particular kind of postcolonial common sense" (Appel 2019, 24) associated with the African state as a "failed" state formation. Namely, it is not simply that *crisis* too easily becomes synonymous with Africa. To the extent that this crisis narrative of Africa is saturated, it takes on the air of being embodied, overdetermining the people, places, and historical moments unfolding in the continent as essentially failed or destined for failure, and rendering ethnographic analysis futile. As a result, the ethnographic challenge is to do more than understand Africa "otherwise" than crisis; it is to create analytical space to make crisis untimely for the ethnographic present we are witnessing (Goldstone and Obarrio 2017). Building on Wendy's Brown's (2009, 14) concept of untimeliness as a "technique for blowing up historical time, yet [that] is only non-utopian to the extent that it exercises a profound reading of the times," making crisis untimely points to attempts at recapturing a present that does not make crisis the only now within which Africa's presence can be observed and experienced. At times, this requires ethically wresting Africa from ahistorical representations of disorder that risk trivializing current manifestations of crisis as a primordial problem unworthy of more careful examination. In other moments, when current

articulations of crisis emerge, it also entails reflecting on how we observe the reproduction of crisis more carefully. If crisis gains its sense of imminence by subverting the present through comparison to past conditions that have ostensibly jeopardized the future, addressing Africa's future otherwise than crisis demands consideration of how crisis can be pragmatically deployed according to specific material conditions (Larkin 2017; Roitman 2017).

In part, this form of anti-crisis analysis honors the fact that the otherwise, unlike crisis, does not operate as a "transcendental signifier," and instead pushes us to ground our analysis in the set of improvised social formations that take shape in the relation to the worldmaking practices that crisis knowledge production necessarily obscures (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). But I also argue that, as demonstrated by Bimbia's disappearance, the grounds for understanding crisis through analogies of the body, including through the production of "blind spots," requires that the *anti-* of our analysis be revisited. Namely, how do we observe what we cannot observe, and how do we attend to the power of crisis narratives when they are evacuated from, instead of oversaturating, everyday life? And yet, as demonstrated by Roberta, how does the evacuation of crisis narratives create a different kind of pressure, one that may neither be seen nor heard, but can still remain on the precipice of being felt and acted out/on—even with limited familiarity or proximity to the supposed crisis in question?

I turn to atmosphere first as a way to consider the broader sensorial conditions of crisis knowledge production beyond the body. Growing ethnographic work demonstrates how atmosphere helps us "deterritorialize thought" (Howe 2015), pushing us to use affective sensorial attunements to destabilize bodily/embodied reasoning through an attention to sensations (Choy and Zee 2015; Shapiro 2015; Zee 2022; Stewart 2011). However, Timothy Choy (2018) also admonishes us that atmosphere, notably through sensations, should not be misunderstood as a reflection of an embodied substance. Rather, he reminds us that what can be most productive about atmosphere is that it allows us to assess "how people adjust relations and relational capacities when motivated by an atmospheric question" (Choy 2018, 56). In turn, like anti-crisis, my turn toward atmosphere is not meant to suggest that there is an essential object of anti-crisis or an anti-crisis condition. I instead use an atmospheric approach to thinking with and against crisis to consider what new ethical modes of relatedness take shape as individual actors work with and against one another by working against narratives of crisis.

And yet, in working against crisis, in what ways does the atmospheric question shift away from directly responding to "What went wrong"? It is here that I secondarily use atmosphere to attend to shifts in understanding atmospheric violence. A concept developed by Salih Can Açıksöz (2016, 201), atmospheric violence points to the ways that state violence is mediated through our environments rather than on individual physical bodies. Focusing on the weaponization of tear gas by the state in response to protests, in which the neutrality of doctors gets politicized by the state irrespective of their own interests, Açıksöz provides a new way of materially capturing an ethical aporia. As the "good" that neutrality often provides to protect certain actors (like doctors) itself gets neutralized and repurposed for other means, the tear gas becomes an artifact of structural violence and the ways that relations and interests get re-arranged accordingly.

Drawing on Black feminist theories of materiality through "absented presencing" (Hammonds 2004; da Silva 2017), I am interested in how witnessing the emergence of a material void requires tempering the urge to frame crisis as a problem of recognition—either from the state or of visibilization. As Zakkiyah Iman Jackson (2018, 633) notes, voids do not inherently signify absence as an emptiness we see; voids can be understood as an effect of different forces as they compound, allowing us to assess "that which withdraws from direct empirical observation" in the process. Recognizing the ways that Bimbia disappeared from ancestry-reconnection programming in tandem with escalating violence in Cameroon's English-speaking regions around the "Anglophone" crisis, I am interested in how atmospheric violence takes a different shape through the materialization of a void, through the invisibilization of people and places, as well as silencing through the denunciation and non-articulation of crisis narratives.

SEEING WITH/OUT BELIEVING

Bimbia catalyzed Timothy's path to Seeds of Return; he describes his first encounter with the site as the moment "when [his] life began." A master's student at a local university in Yaoundé, Timothy had grown up in the Southwest region. His work with Seeds of Return, like that of others I had met, did not necessarily require he participate in every program. Rather, as demonstrated in our original meeting during a public outreach activity at the Musée National du Cameroun, he did what he could to help promote awareness among other Cameroonians about the importance of learning about reconnection as someone who had never encountered Bimbia or the history of slavery despite his proximity to the site. "When you hear about such things, it doesn't prick you. You just get over it and

continue," Timothy told me during an interview in July at a local café. Bimbia, like the history of slavery in Cameroon, was something that happened elsewhere, not anywhere near the place he called home. He would eventually get "pricked" by Bimbia after offering to help set up chairs for a public talk about the site. In learning more about Bimbia, and encountering the genetic diaspora of African Americans returning to Cameroon through Seeds of Return, he noted how his "scope expanded," describing his ignorance of the site as nothing short of scandalous, shaking his head repeatedly in indignation.

But as dusk set on the road in front of us, and the evening crowd poured into the neighboring tables and booths, I used the cover of surrounding conversations to ask Timothy about Bimbia as the conflict in the region continued. "My research has helped me to understand that many of the things people are doing in this country is politics," Timothy responded. "It's politics left, politics right. Up, down, and so forth. The crisis has not, will never impact the program." As a matter of geography, the "Anglophone" crisis was largely unfolding in the interior, nearly 200 kilometers north of Limbe in Mamfe. By contrast, Bimbia's location along the coast allowed the seashore to act as a natural barrier. But the most compelling evidence of how the program could evade and transcend the regional conflict rested on the genetic diaspora's *desire* to know Bimbia for themselves:

> Those who are interested about it always come. They [the genetic diaspora] don't bother with whatever strikes. They know it is a political issue, which cannot affect them. They are not scared. They will come. They still come because they want to use their eyes. They want to become like Thomas in the Bible: see and believe it, rather than listening and believing.

Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman (1995, 326) remind us that figures of the subject that emerge in the crisis knowledge-production process reflect "a shared ensemble of imaginary configurations of 'everyday life,' imaginaries which have a material basis." For this reason, Timothy's analogization of African Americans' determination to go to Bimbia with the biblical parable should not be taken literally. Rather, recognizing the ways that spirituality can be indicative of how shifts in postcolonial sovereignty feel (Geschiere 1997), I am first interested in how the apostle metaphor reflects an effort to make the "Anglophone" crisis's uncertainty more intelligible. But in situating this group of African Americans in a transcendental position to the "Anglophone" crisis, Timothy also reinforced how the genetic diaspora's return emerged as an "offshore" (Appel 2019)

management strategy for himself of sovereignty at "home."[6] To the extent that the parable of Thomas signified both a response to the material conditions of the "Anglophone" crisis and how ancestry reconnection could serve as a way around these circumstances—if not out and away from them entirely—I use this section to consider how Bimbia could logistically anchor this new sense-making strategy against the "Anglophone" crisis through the mode of affective reasoning most associated with the parable itself: doubt as a problem of belief.

Deborah Thomas (2019, 24) demonstrates in the context of navigating state violence in postcolonial Jamaica that doubt affectively suspends the imagination, creating ambiguity that immobilizes ways of acting and living. The limitations imposed on my own ethnographic witnessing were no exception. One of the earliest questions I had received about my research by other scholars in Cameroon was, "You're not working in the Anglophone region are you?" The question doubled. Although pointing to an understanding of the literal field of my ethnographic research on the ground, the question also acted as an imposition of limits on my inquiry as conditions in the English-speaking regions intensified.

While my primary focus was on understanding the materiality of ancestry through land gifts in Kribi made by a wealthy Cameroonian landowner to the first two cohorts of the inaugural Ancestry Reconnection Program (ARP), Seeds of Return's predecessor, I had listed Bimbia in nearly every fellowship application I had ever written since 2012. For my own research, I recognized that I did not need to directly see the site to consider how the recent recognition of this slavery memorial reinforced they ways in which ancestry could be reconfigured for African Americans and Cameroonians to impact one another beyond the double helix. However, by the time I arrived in Cameroon in late November 2017, Bimbia's ability to legitimize my own research, even indirectly, had been ostensibly foreclosed.

Heeding warnings from others, I did not include the Southwest region on my research permit, so as to not risk the possibility of rejection. It did not matter whether this risk was "real." Rather, Sarah Luna (2018) reminds us that even rumors, in the context of atmospheric violence, can be experienced as discursively contagious, prompting pragmatic, material responses irrespective of whether it is observably "real." By April, these risks took on a sense of urgency when the U.S. embassy issued a travel warning to the area, as the second Seeds of Return program of the year would unwittingly complete its final visit to the site. Less than two months later, at the U.S. embassy's Fourth of July gathering, I was struck that, when explaining my research to an aspiring Cameroonian Fulbright

scholar, he just assumed I was in Kribi—*because I could not* be in Limbe. As a problem of ethnographic knowledge production, doubt had overdetermined the conditions of possibility for how I and others around me could physically see Bimbia in my research.

Here doubt serves two purposes. First, through doubt, the ability to develop a "critical historical consciousness" (Roitman 2014, 31) of something going "wrong" was suspended, as the present/presence of the "Anglophone" crisis becomes unthinkable. Second, however, doubt intensified the ante of recasting the a priori origin story crisis knowledge-production demands, evacuating historical consciousness for a more resolute and indirect form of sense-making: belief. By opposing belief to (scientific) reasoning, anthropologists have demonstrated how abstract interpretations of causality can mistakenly treat modes of reasoning oriented toward a personal "why" as a failure to understand the nature of social life (Evans-Pritchard 1937). In turn, belief is used to consider how fields of meaning get constituted and realigned (Good 1994; Moran-Thomas 2015), situating this mode of sense-making to observable practices. Yet in this context, as certain practices, including observation itself, became curtailed, in what ways was this form of crisis-knowledge production pointing to a renegotiation of how to define "what" the/a moral good could feel like and be in relation to the "Anglophone" crisis? And how did Bimbia, as a site that could not be seen, provide a point of clarity?

REDRESSING WOUNDS

Bimbia's origin story began with a series of questions that elders of Limbe III district posed to ARP organizers who came in search of the site in anticipation of the genetic diaspora's arrival in late 2010: "Who sent you here? Why do you want to know? Why are you asking questions that no one has asked in over 100 years?" (Aubrey 2018, 78). Each question revealed that Bimbia, locally referred to as the "cursed place" (*lieu maudit*),[7] was a site long shrouded in secrecy, making its disappearance in the midst of the "Anglophone" crisis in 2018 less unique to the crisis itself. But insofar as secrecy is entangled with risk management, these questions also illustrate how secrecy becomes a means of managing threatening relations (Ferme 2001), including the terms of concealment itself (Jones 2014, 54).

Given the ways in which awareness of the historical conditions contributing *directly* to the "Anglophone" crisis were rendered unnecessary, I am interested in how this circumstance creates a unique opportunity to situate the acutely

affective conditions of absented knowledge production around the "Anglophone" crisis through the origin of gaining access to the site. With hindsight, we not only know that people beyond Limbe III eventually managed to access the site; insofar as the reveal of the site was inextricably tied to managing an external threat, I suggest that this form of hindsight also provides an affective mode of recognizing the reproduction of atmospheric violence around Bimbia through the reproduction of absence against the "Anglophone crisis."

As I learned in my first encounter with Bimbia during the second (and, ultimately, final) ARP, the physical environment surrounding the site does not accommodate anything outright, making access to Bimbia anything but seamless. Natural light ends at the entrance. There the ceiling drops, and the firmament begins anew at the bend of twenty-foot-tall bamboo clusters, fanning further out from the center as they grow. Taller branches arch into their neighbors, though they do not always touch. The slender green leaves recoup what remains out of reach of the most ambitious stalks, dancing with and over each other as if to deny that a sky above exists. Sometimes the leaves move against their will with a slight breeze. But with no more than the sound of those very leaves filling the shadows, the tiniest rays of sunlight that sneak in—if just to bear witness to dust particles, mosquitoes, and beds of bamboo leaves past—feel out of place, lost, if not wholly intrusive. In turn, reckoning with Bimbia as a cursed place requires addressing how difficult it is for the site to be possessed by forces outside of it—including the genetic diaspora's feelings of returning "home."

Drawing from Lisa Aubrey's *In Search of Bimbia* (2018), the trajectory toward Bimbia began with reframing a fundamental misunderstanding of what was necessary to bring the genetic diaspora "home." An African & African American Studies professor working with the group, Aubrey noted that ARP organizers were unaware of one of the essential experiences needed to make ancestry reconnection legible and legitimate: visiting a slavery memorial. The challenge for ARP organizers: none of them knew that such a site existed in Cameroon. For Aubrey, DNA made it unfathomable that the country had no such site. As she explained:

> How can there not be [such a site]? My reasoning was that if there is a Cameroonian DNA diaspora, there certainly must be an exit point from where people of Cameroonian ethnic groups had been taken away into transatlantic slavery. Among those taken would be the predecessors and ancestors of the DNA Cameroon diaspora today. And I wanted Cameroonians to know and care about what happened to us. (Aubrey 2018, 22)

Most empirically compelling about Aubrey's argument is not whether or not her hunch about an association between DNA test results and a slavery memorial held true. Empirically, this was proven to be the case. Rather, I am drawn to how Aubrey's affective form of seeking knowledge of Bimbia requires a different orientation to the genetic nature of ancestral knowledge production. In the absence of other material, DNA did not will a site into existence. Rather, DNA set the stage for the conditions of possibility to envision that *something like Bimbia* could exist and be known. That this was a matter of believing without physically seeing the sight, I argue, has little to do with whether she was right or wrong. Rather, the driving force behind this inquiry was a regime of care, and one in which awareness of Bimbia depended on sharing in a vulnerability: familiarity with one another as unknown.[8]

Through Aubrey's collaborations with Cameroonian researchers and extensive archival work, this line of inquiry ultimately led an ARP organizer to reach out to elders in Limbe III. As a consequence of the exchange, ARP organizers were permitted to share the site with ARP participants, setting Bimbia up as a staple for ancestry-reconnection programs like Seeds of Return. The site would also gain the attention of Cameroonian and American government officials, who materially invested in the site's preservation.[9] This genetically catalyzed inquiry not only enabled Cameroonians and African Americans to become more familiar by acquainting each other with the respective wounds of slavery they carried; as awareness expanded outward from Limbe III, both in Cameroon and beyond, it also compelled others to ethically redress a wound otherwise carried locally.

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On his return from the fifth annual European Union–African Union summit in Côte d'Ivoire on November 30, 2017, only a few hours before I would arrive at the same airport to begin fieldwork, Cameroon's president, Paul Biya, held a press conference. He commented on the death of two ambushed policemen killed outside of Mamfe the day before by an armed wing of the Ambazonia Defense Forces (ADF) as retaliation for the arrival of government security forces in the area.

> I think that things are now perfectly clear that everyone in Cameroon is victim to repeated attacks by a band of terrorists claiming to be a secessionist movement. In response to these acts of aggression, I want to reassure the Cameroonian people that every measure will be taken to prevent these criminals from causing harm and make sure that peace and security are protected throughout the national territory.[10]

Local media reports would describe his statement as a "declaration of war" (Doh 2017). Here, however, I do not wish to assess the president's juridical right to declare war. Talal Asad (2010) reminds us that at the heart of "just war" logics lies a paradox: the idea of a justifiable and honorable use of violence rarely points to peace and the absence of violence, but instead mobilizes justice to reconfigure the limits of where and against whom the use of violence can be legitimate and inconsequential. Rather, I am interested in how this declaration reasserted the state's legitimate role as national caretaker—specifically through the management of an "Anglophone" consciousness in Cameroon since the dissolution of federalism in 1972.

With Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjoh (2003, 52–53) defining the "Anglophone" consciousness as "a feeling among Anglophones that their community with its distinct colonial legacy was subject to marginalization, exploitation and assimilation by the Francophone-dominated state and even by the Francophone population as a whole," I am interested in the concept's parallels to W. E. B. Du Bois's (2014) framework of "double consciousness" to give language to the sense of alterity Black people came to live with in the United States. As a perpetual outsider within, Du Bois, like Konings and Nyamnjoh, points to a sense of inferiority that becomes internalized in response to external conditions, including those created by the state. I focus on how this doubling points to an inequality forged within the postcolonial African nation state in terms of how the state demonstrated interests in reparative governance.

In his inaugural address as prime minister in 1958, prior to the postcolonial state's formation, Ahmadou Ahidjo endorsed reunification. At once pointing to the splitting of German Kamerun into French Cameroun and the Southern and Northern British Cameroons after World War I, reunification also reflected how the Southern British Cameroon (the contemporary English-speaking regions) had enabled French- and English-speaking Cameroonians to act as mutual sources of relief to one another from their respective colonial regimes. As a consequence of indirect rule, Southern British Cameroon was marked by growing internal resentment between native populations and Igbo migrant populations as a consequence of being subjected to the direction of neighboring Nigerian provinces (Ardener 1962; Amaazee 1990). French-speaking Cameroonians would regard the area as *une colonie d'une région d'une colonie* (a colony within a colony) (Johnson 2015, 94), But aware of the ethnic tensions in the area, French Cameroonian migrants seeking to escape the harsh French colonial administration would strategically align English-speaking Cameroonians with French Cameroonian

nationalists, L'Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), and, as a sign of solidarity, hope to expel the British and French from the area expeditiously (Amaazee 1994; Awasom 2000).

In turn, following the 1961 UN referendum vote, Southern British Cameroon unsurprisingly chose to join its brethren-comrades to the east for independence. Noteworthy is how quickly the postcolonial state would demonstrate its disinterestedness in the federalist experiment. The Ahidjo administration's unilateral dissolution of federalism through centralization effectively nullified a postcolonial governing structure of conscience without explanation and (moral) reason, setting the precedent for the postcolonial state to designate the English-speaking regions as the nation's political "Other."

In turn, Biya's own ascension to the presidency in 1982 would depend on his ability to prove that he felt differently. As Ahidjo's former prime minister, Biya would create a point of distinction between himself and Ahidjo by promising a "New Deal" for Cameroon. Seeking to provide a breath of (political) fresh air following the heavy restrictions on political dissent by his predecessor (Joseph 1978, 40), Biya focused on constructing a new society rooted in "social justice": through "rigor," "integrity," and "moralization," a mutual investment could be made between citizens and the state to aid in Cameroon's national development, unencumbered by past corruption (Takougang 1993). For Biya, Cameroonians were Cameroonians first. During his first visit to the region as president, he decided to speak English when addressing English-speaking Cameroonians, in addition to criticizing his predecessor's centralization policy that had spurred their discontent. By providing a balm to the sense that anyone could be otherwise unrecognizable to the state, Biya sought to alleviate the sense of betrayal the English-speaking regions felt from his predecessor.

Thirty-five years later, as the state under Biya's leadership used regional violence against state actors to justify a hard line against the "Anglophone" crisis, how was a new sense of responsibility taking shape toward this particular postcolonial wound? In what ways had "crisis" become a means of untethering the state's capacity to take care of the nation from a moral investment in remedying grievances in the English-speaking region? And how would that disinvestment take on new meaning when, through Bimbia, the grievance redressing an altogether different wound of slavery remade its image?

SECURITY WITH/OUT REASSURANCE

On the morning of October 1, 2018, I was tagged in a Facebook post soliciting a new cohort of African Americans hoping to join a Seeds of Return trip at the end of the year. I searched for my name in the Facebook thread. It was buried, stacked alongside other African Americans who had participated in one of the earlier trips I had shadowed, a few familiar team members from the French-speaking regions, and another, Jacky, who I had not met and did not recognize. We had been tagged to respond to a comment made by someone who had an interest in participating in the tour. Yet he noted a specific reservation around Bimbia: "What about security issues in that part of the country?" Renée, a Seeds of Return organizer based in the United States, responded with reassurance:

> All will be fine. This question always comes up. It came up on earlier trips and pilgrimages. It came up at a meeting tonight. Never has there been an incident. We ensure that we are protected and secure, and for those who wish not to join us out of concern, we respect their decision. The photo of the flier was taken [in] January 2018. I will send you the clips from the entire trip. No incident anywhere we traveled.

I did not know what to say. I did know, based on the changing conditions of fieldwork since earlier that year, that I was unwilling to remain silent, choosing to respond, albeit diplomatically. "I can confirm that no incidents took place last time (we went in the midst of the internet shutdown)," I wrote. "But having been in Cameroon since last November, and only having been back to Bimbia in April, I would personally feel better commenting on security after the election is over. I also think some of the Anglophone team members would have a better sense of things at the moment."

Other comments soon followed. Sherri, a woman from the Midwest who I had met traveling with Seeds of Return earlier in the year, reassured the man that everyone was safe. A few hours later, Jacky responded. "Living in Limbe, NO incident has ever happened to any of our visitors. Allah is always with us," she wrote emphatically. Quickly, it became clear that my decision to take a more deferential response to the issue of safety put the security of my rapport to Seeds of Return members in jeopardy. Renée "liked" my Facebook response. Other responses were "loved," with Sherri's response accompanied by a note of thanks and excitement at the prospect of traveling together again in the future.

Out of place in more ways than one, I contacted one of the Seeds of Return volunteers, Jean-Louise, via direct message. He was generally frank with me, and I tended to seek him out for clarity about my potential ethnographic stumblings, of which this appeared to be one. "I think you were not wrong, writing that comment," he messaged me:

> But the comment is not giving full assurance to the readers, since you say it is only after the elections that you [will comment]. . . . There have always been troubles in one way or the other in some parts of the country. But we don't go to those places, and if for the time you have spent here, you have never found yourself in the middle of such insecurity (as most Western media portray it), I think you can assure the general public—particularly in the framework of the pilgrimage, which is just a one-week program.

By aligning my statement with the interests of the Western media, Jean-Louise might be heard echoing the words of Édouard Glissant (1989, 2), noting that the West "is a project, not a place." But as a problem of projection, notably as secured against the "Anglophone" crisis, Jean-Louise and I were also struggling to negotiate one of the central dimensions of an anti-crisis atmosphere: reterritorializing neutrality, particularly from within.

In part, this is why it was not lost on me that Jean-Louise's statement deployed autochthony. Understood as an "appeal to the soil" (Geschiere 2009, 212), autochthony draws its power from *affectively* territorializing belonging, typically through analogies of land. Here however, the appeal is not to the nation state but to the prospect of an otherwise space based on racialized loyalties. Through a discourse of security, the postcolony could not only be deemed irrelevant to concerns about accessing Bimbia; keeping the status of the postcolony at bay, and distinct from the work of ancestry reconnection, could also secure access to Bimbia as a necessarily anti-racist strategy that neither of us would willingly undermine.

He and I both knew all too well how safety was the discursive grounds for racializing places like Cameroon as spaces in which safety could not be guaranteed, and required careful questioning from us as people of African descent, regardless from which side of the Atlantic we originated. From my time studying abroad in Malawi and Ghana to the nearly two cumulative years spent in Cameroon since 2011, I had spent the better part of a decade assuaging loved ones' concerns about safety on the continent. And even at a time when my sense of

Figure 1. A screenshot of a *Washington Post* article covering the Anglophone crisis. Alongside the headline "Africa's next civil war could be in Cameroon" is an image of two patrol officers holding rifles as they stand in the middle of traffic.

security was shifting, coverage of the "Anglophone" crisis elsewhere frustrated me deeply. Attention was rare. When given, context was minimized. Take, for instance, two headlines at the time of my fieldwork from the *Washington Post*: "Cameroon has been in crisis for six months. Here's what you need to know" (Morse 2017) and "Africa's next civil war could be in Cameroon" (O'Grady 2018). With accuracy oriented toward audience acquisition for/over content representation, efficiency depended on leaning into the aspects of the "Anglophone" crisis that were most aligned with an external idea of Africa: the spectacle of violence. Whether the "Anglophone" crisis had been compressed in a matter of months or made to fit into the telos of a continent naturally caught in a chaos of its own making made no difference—certainly not when accompanied by an image of two police with automatic rifles standing in a sea of taxi cabs.

As a problem of atmospheric violence, these media representations pointed to what Christina Sharpe (2016, 104) has described as the atmospheric density of anti-Black racism encapsulating Black people's lives—even within Africa. Indeed, as Jemima Pierre (2012, 26) reminds us, one of the predicaments of racializing Blackness in Africa is having to hold competing "racial projects," "that serve to delineate the various and contested nature of racecraft." By (im)moralizing

Western media narratives, Jean-Louise and I both recognized how the "Anglophone" crisis could easily up the ante of pathologically racializing Cameroon in excess of any actions taken by the postcolonial state. However, insofar as security apparatuses anticipate the performance of a specific sensibility (Browne 2015; Holbraad and Pedersen 2013), security also became a new grammar for improvising an anti-racist strategy against the "Anglophone" crisis as violence escalated in the English-speaking regions, with which neither Jean-Louise nor I could agree.

I return first to the ways Jean-Louise and I struggled to lay claim to the value to the terms of my ethnographic presence. As a problem of time, Jean-Louise noted how my own fieldwork suggested that my concerns about safety were misplaced: A week (and a half) spent in Cameroon for ancestry reconnection compared to nearly a full, uninterrupted year of fieldwork was practically nothing. While this rendered my diplomacy incredulous to the broader work of ancestry reconnection, it also forced me to reckon with the difficult nature of attempting to secure access to Bimbia based on the circumstantial timing of reading a Facebook post.

It was neither coincidence nor inconsequential that I was reading and responding to the thread in Yaoundé. A broader experience of securitization around the political capital and throughout the rest of the country had become normal. Since my arrival in late 2017, I had grown accustomed to the regular experience of security checkpoints while traveling through the country, compared to almost never having such encounters before I had left Cameroon last in late spring 2015. This included crossing two when traveling from Grand Batanga into the center of Kribi to get to the bakery by moto; writing my name in a book at the checkpoint on the periphery of Kribi coming from Edea; or walking the length of a city block, past the slew of vendors who had set up shop in the space between where passengers descended from and got back onto their respective buses. Even my IDs had been worn for the worst: Although I had renewed my passport before coming, the edges soon began to fray as the silver eagle at the center of the cover quickly became indecipherable. My yellow vaccination card, after circulating among the careless fingers of police offers who transformed into medical experts based on their egos' whims, barely held together in its plastic cover. Although these kinds of security checkpoints were inconvenient, they demonstrated the ways in which "safety" had compounded a sense of inconvenience that had long marked everyday life, rather than constituting a point of exceptional difference.

Figure 2. A man walks along the road after getting off the bus at a security checkpoint on the way into Yaoundé in December 2017. Photo by Victoria M. Massie.

Nonetheless, by the time I was reading the Facebook post, securitization was central to a bigger struggle to secure a "line of flight" out from within the "Anglophone" crisis. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 20,000 refugees had sought asylum in Nigeria since October 2017.[11] For those who could not leave Cameroon formally, or who found themselves caught between "Amba Boys" and government officials, Douala and Yaoundé had become points of refuge if they could afford it (Stone 2018; Gillis 2018). In September, Che Ngong Gilbert, the Northwest regional delegate of Transport, issued a press release requiring those in the region to be preapproved for their trips out of the area "as a measure to secure and protect those persons traveling out of the Region" (Alfa Shaban 2018). The moment I arrived in the city, I received a message from a colleague informing me that the U.S. embassy had officially warned U.S. citizens not to travel to the capital in anticipation of potential responses to and around the election.

Strategizing ways to move forward against the "Anglophone" crisis had become a means for various people to secure a source of relief that could fix the effect of immobilization enveloping people's lives. Reassuring a way to Bimbia, I

argue, served a similar purpose. By neutralizing the genetic diaspora's potential proximity to violence in the area near the site, anti-Black racism could be mobilized against the "Anglophone" crisis without question. Nonetheless, through an anti-racist autochthony, securing this projected line of flight to Bimbia was also reconfiguring its biopolitical ties to racism as a sovereign right to dispossess another's life (Mbembe 2019, 71). At the moment of using Bimbia to put an end to the atmosphere of racism enacted elsewhere, securing a way to the site in Cameroon despite the "Anglophone" crisis also entailed indirectly enabling the material devaluation of life at "home," as violence in the English-speaking regions was being reorganized, and at an accelerating speed. To the extent that these circumstances created pressure to evacuate violence from the work of ancestry reconnection, they also reiterated how other alternatives had been exhausted.

With my ethnographic relationships on the line, I would, by the end of the day, backtrack on my reservations. Facebook notified me that Jean-Louise loved my statement. Despite the intense nature of the exchange, I felt some sense of relief that I had done the "right" thing. However, not long after, I received another notification: Jean-Louise had changed his response to "like."

AN ANCESTRAL CALL FOR PEACE?

At the end of *Anti-Crisis*, Roitman (2014) wrestles with the limits of an anti-crisis theoretical framework in practice. Unwilling to succumb to extreme deconstructionism, she cautions us away from using anti-crisis cynically to suggest that no crisis is real, pushing us to instead maintain our focus on the crisis "blind spot," because of how it dictates the questions we can and (cannot) ask, and, as a result, the worlds we can (and cannot) create and witness. The encounters described in this article illustrate why this is necessary. Due to the unforeseeable and unprecedented nature of the genetic diaspora's return and the attendant search for the site, recent access to Bimbia signified an obligation to relate to one another through a curiosity-induced care. While this did not require familiarity, it did amplify the escalating modes of defamiliarization unfolding to manage the "Anglophone" crisis.

As the state and others took on the work of making non-/no observable sense of the crisis, modes of relating through direct awareness were affectively suspended and foreclosed. In this particular anti-crisis atmosphere, a "moral" good had to be intensely restructured according to how one could make good on one's distance to the "Anglophone" crisis without reasonable explanation—typically by denying the capacity for a reason to be given. Accessing Bimbia, as

Figure 3. An African American stands out in a crowd at the Ngondo Festival. Photo by Victoria M. Massie.

a site more closely associated with the legacy of slavery than with postcolonial nation-building, allowed ancestry reconnection to be positioned well beyond the challenges of the "Anglophone" crisis. And yet, escalating violence in the region where Bimbia was physically located ultimately emphasized the chronic "failure" connecting postcolonial sovereignty and ancestry reconnection simultaneously: the promise of freedom (Hartman 2006, 172).

However, is this enough to, as Roitman (2014, 94–95) suggests, harness the contingency of crisis because "we have no choice but to ground our faith in it"? Or, as she indicates citing William Rasch, will it lead us to further "reconcile *ourselves* in the *inevitability* of antinomies?" (Roitman 2014, 94; emphasis original)? To conclude this article, I turn to a message provided by the ancestors at the event that had replaced Bimbia by the end of 2018: the Ngondo festival.

An annual cultural celebration for the Sawa ethnic groups along the Waori River on the outskirts of Douala, Ngondo featured as one of its critical events *le plongement* (the submersion). A man was chosen to submerge himself into the Waori River to receive and convey the sacred message the ancestors had for the Sawa people that year. Although no one in the Seeds of Return group could see what was happening, the weight of the message could be felt as we waited. One person commented that it felt like the man had been submerged for nearly ten minutes. Soon, the festival emcees announced this year's sacred message: the ancestors were calling for *la paix*, or peace. The English-speaking emcee channeled this message through the words of the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe:

> We are going to say this time around that we want peace. Peace is the main thing that can build a country and make it solid. Chinua Achebe said, "When the center cannot hold, things are falling apart." So please, hand in hand, be you from the North, the South, West, to East, it is important that we are together. We are one. That is why you hear [*sic*] last year "Moto Mo Mboa Po" ["One Nation, One People"]. It shouldn't only be in the families. It should be in the offices. It should be in towns. It should be in the whole of Cameroon and Africa and the whole world. So this time around, we need peace. Peace, peace, and peace again.

What could an ancestral call for peace offer for understanding the limits of an anti-crisis atmosphere in Cameroon at the time? Toni Morrison (1984) reminds us that, in Black literature, the presence or absence of an ancestor is a measure of one's rootedness, providing the conditions of possibility for a communal reckoning, one in which an ancestor's wisdom forces one to recognize that an ancestor's end is also their own. It is here that I would like to locate the evocation of Achebe. At the heart of *Things Fall Apart* is not merely a guide through how the protagonist Okonkwo wrestles with the ways he has had to make himself a "strong man" against nearly all odds and in ways that have failed. It is that Okonkwo's recovery ultimately comes from efforts to galvanize those around him to fight the colonial reordering of life that "has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Achebe 2009).

As the atmospheric violence of the "Anglophone" crisis seemed to have engulfed everything and everyone, ancestors served as a reminder of the need for other figures of deterrence to emerge as humans carry "crisis" to its most destructive extreme (Koselleck 2002, 247). At a moment when the political conditions in Cameroon had created a Gordian knot of ethical voids, in which Bimbia had become entangled, maybe it could only be the ancestors who could provide a potential remedy for the crisis's current "blind spot": the unquestioned good of the contemporary postcolony. With ancestors both serving as figures tied to the people and as ones whose presence exceeds the boundaries of the postcolonial nation-state, ancestors may have been offering the only anti-crisis antidote possible as we gathered together: a force for/of perspective.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the disappearance of the Bimbia slavery memorial from ancestry reconnection programming activities in 2018 as a reflection of an emerging effect

of the "Anglophone" crisis in 2018: an anti-crisis atmosphere. Building on growing literature that treats atmosphere as a mode of sensorial attunement, this article puts ethnographic focus on how changes in postcolonial sovereignty against the "Anglophone" crisis became unobservable but were consistently on the precipice of being felt. By drawing on the affective conditions of ancestral knowledge production, including a simple curiosity to care precipitating initial public access to Bimbia, Cameroonians cannot only use the genetic diaspora's return to neutralize the impact of atmospheric violence by the postcolonial state. Managing and sustaining the genetic diaspora's return also signifies a chronic paradoxical struggle to create and maintain a reparative line of flight from the processes of racialization within and beyond the postcolony as "home." [crisis; African ancestry; genetic diaspora; racialization; Cameroon; atmosphere; postcolonial sovereignty]

NOTES

Acknowledgments Let me begin by thanking the *Cultural Anthropology* editorial collective and peer reviewers for their sincere investment in the promise of this story and for providing the feedback necessary to give it the clarity it requires. This article would not have been possible without my interlocutors in the Seeds of Return network—both those named in this article and those who helped make this research possible over the years—to whom I remain grateful. Research and writing for this article was supported by the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Fulbright Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, the UC Center for New Racial Studies, the UC Berkeley Center for African Studies, and the UC Berkeley Center for Race & Gender. This material is indebted to the generous feedback at its earliest stage provided by the Anthropology Department and the Kinship & African Diaspora Workshop at Tufts University in 2019–2020. The CAAAS Junior Scholars Workshop and the Inclusive Bioethics communities at Rice University provided invaluable feedback in the process of developing the article for submission. Thank you to the Café Nomad writing group—James Doucet-Battle, Sandra Harvey, Ashwak Hauter—for your unwavering support, and Hallie Wells for your careful developmental edits. Later revisions benefited from comments by my colleagues Cymene Howe and Ilana Gershon, as well as from generous feedback following a presentation for the Science, Technology and Society Program at the University of Michigan.

1. Seeds of Return references a composite of different ancestry reconnection programs organized by a variety of people. I use a composite to protect anonymity, but the composite also reflects a shared genealogy—taking shape after the original Ancestry Reconnection Program (ARP) in Cameroon and briefly referenced later in this article—and the overlapping network of volunteers and activities among the different programs I shadowed.
2. Pseudonyms are utilized throughout this article.
3. U.S. Embassy in Cameroon, "Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation Bimbia Inauguration," February 23, 2016, https://cm.usembassy.gov/sp-02232016/
4. In this article, I put *Anglophone* in quotation marks to note how the term is used to discursively mark cultural differences between Cameroonians from the English-speaking regions and their French-speaking counterparts. In my time conducting fieldwork, I have never heard of someone originally from the French-speaking region referred to as a "Francophone" Cameroonian, pointing to the power inequality imbued to the use of *Anglophone*.
5. Though this is subtle, I also want to reiterate that seeking information on an ancestral homeland, even as a Black person, does not mean that one will get an "African ancestry" result. What distinguishes my approach from others, however, is that I am

not interested in using this disjuncture between DNA and racial identity to prove that race is not biologically "real," because my bigger concern with this anti-essentialist framework is that it traffics in its own form of gene fetishism by conceding too much authority to DNA to secure our sense of our ourselves (Massie 2022).

6. I draw on Appel's concept of "the offshore" to call attention to the thin, deterritorialized notions of sovereignty that get enacted and mobilized to manage flows of capital between a genetic diaspora and a DNA-identified homeland, particularly *as if* they were fluid. In part, by focusing on the affective conditions shaping a genetic diaspora's return, I decenter DNA as the substance of genetic diaspora to explicitly mark the affective work required to create and sustain a sense of Cameroon as "home" in Cameroon often with and against the state and that exceed biogenetic substance. Additionally, given that dual citizenship is not currently possible in Cameroon, I also use the affective conditions of return to decenter juridical notions of a right of recognition by the state. By using affect as a measure of proximity between genetic diaspora and a DNA-identified homeland, I challenge how genetic diaspora is conceptualized as a public that "falls outside of any concrete recourse to states and the claims of citizenship" (Tamarkin 2020, 60).
7. UNESCO, "Bimbia et ses sites associés - UNESCO World Heritage Centre," https://whc.unesco.org/fr/listesindicatives/6478/
8. This focus on curiosity (and its thinness) for care is distinct from Duana Fullwiley's (2011) concept of *entraînement*, in which the preexisting social fact of being family, and the depth that comes with this, makes the affective transfer of biosocial knowledge production possible.
9. There would be concerted efforts to get Bimbia recognized as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2021, following a rejected application in 2017.
10. This constitutes a translation of the speech, originally made in French. The original French was removed to accommodate article word count.
11. UNHCR, "Anglophone Cameroonians in Nigeria Pass 20,000 Mark," 2018, https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/3/5ab0cf2b4/anglophone-cameroonians-nigeria-pass-20000-mark.html

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