

Beautiful Ecology: Resource Extraction, Surreality of Landscape and Aesthetics of Ruin in Liberia

Danielle Taana Smith | Syracuse University

<https://doi.org/10.71106/WQJQ6349>

Sites of Extraction: Blue Lake and the Nimba Mountain Range

Blue Lake in Bomi Hills, in the north-west region of Liberia, should not exist. It did not exist when I grew up in Bomi Hills and sat with my siblings in the back of our grandfather's pickup truck (he worked at the iron ore mine), as we drove up the dusty winding roads through the hills, sucking in the air that was laden with red dust particles that floated everywhere from the mines. At the top of the hills, we gazed down in awe at the gaping craters far below, where the iron ore had been extracted. As children, it was a special treat to visit the mines. Blue Lake was formed by iron ore mining. It lies in a great depression in the hills, surrounded by the dense forest that seems, from a certain vantage point, entirely untouched. The depression that holds the lake is the scar left by decades of extraction at the Bomi iron ore mines, one of Liberia's oldest and most extensively mined sites. When the mining ended, groundwater flooded the void, and the color of the lake is a product of the mineral composition of what was left behind. The vegetation that frames the lake grows in soil that has been poisoned by mineral extraction processes. Photographs of Blue Lake circulate on social media, tagged with the language of discovery, beauty, and Liberia's hidden natural wonders. The lake is stunning, by any visual measure. However, its beauty and peaceful stillness do not reflect environmental resilience or recovery, but show environmental devastation through time.

In spring 2026, I returned to Liberia to conduct research on environmental destruction caused by the extraction of natural resources, and the impacts of extraction on national development. I was excited to go to Bomi Hills, to see if the house where I had grown up, the elementary school, the creek we crossed to go to school, and all the places I loved as a child, were still there. I wanted to see the lake, which I had never seen. I had studied the reports, concession agreements, and environmental impact assessments, and believed that I was prepared for the environmental damage. But at the gates of the compound to the lake, armed security guards forbade us from traveling further, to get any closer to the mines. We then wandered through Vai Town, which had developed to support mining operations, and I recognized places from my childhood; a general store, the public market, the road to the high school, which branched off to my grandmother's house. Then we drove to a remote hill, and the driver pointed in the direction of Blue

Lake in the distance, which we could not see. I stood at the edge of something I did not have the language to express. I was not prepared for the way the landscape seemed to offer itself as an image of abundance while concealing, beneath its vibrant greens, the fact that the land had been contaminated from mining. I was not prepared for how Vai Town seemed to be unchanged and suspended in time.

This essay attempts to reflect on a particular kind of violence that is slow, beautiful, and very difficult to perceive, to express, and to resist. It draws on fieldwork conducted in Monrovia, Liberia, and at resource extraction sites across Liberia to examine an under-theorized dimension of environmental destruction, which is its beauty. The iron ore mines of Bomi Hills have left behind Blue Lake, a body of water with surreal clarity that became a popular tourist destination. In Nimba, the iron ore company town of Yekepa and the scarred Nimba Mountain range above it are promoted in international travel guides as adventure tourism destinations, even as mining of the range expands and intensifies. In Nimba, beauty is not merely a by-product of resource extraction, but an intentionally curated aesthetic by the extracting company. The landscapes that frame these mining sites are photogenically lush with vegetation and vivid with color. This beauty is not incidental; rather it is part of how extractive violence operates to conceal environmental devastation beneath surfaces that the eye perceives as beautiful, making destruction difficult to name. Drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial spaces, and Walter Rodney's theorization of the underdevelopment of Africa, this essay argues that the aesthetic surreality of Liberia's extraction landscapes constitutes a form of violence and of visual politics that transform ecological wounds into natural wonders.

If Blue Lake in Bomi Hills represents the accidental beauty of an abandoned mining extraction site, the wound that time and water have turned into a natural wonder, then the Nimba Mountain range in northern Liberia represents something more calculated and in some ways more disturbing; it is the beauty of an active extraction site that has been deliberately curated into a destination. On its website for Liberian operations, ArcelorMittal, one of the world's largest steel and mining companies, noted that it has extracted and exported iron ore from the Nimba mountain massif since 2011, operating one of West Africa's largest iron ore mining concessions under an agreement with the Liberian government. Yekepa is the company town whose housing, roads, schools, and basic services are provided by ArcelorMittal. The company controls the physical and social environment of the community that has developed around its operations. Lonely Planet describes Yekepa as a curious "Truman Show-esque mining town" owned by ArcelorMittal, a place that looks like a town but functions as an extension of the mine, where the boundary between community and corporate asset is blurred. An expatriate described Yekepa as "a drinking town with a mining problem" (Bell), which darkly captures the ethos of a community organized around the needs of the extraction operation rather than around the lives of the people who live there.

Yekepa is the "jumping-off point" for hiking Mount Nimba and camping along the trail (Lonely Planet). Atlas Obscura publicizes the defunct site, the ruins of the Liberian American Swedish Minerals Company (LAMCO) that preceded ArcelorMittal's operations, as a destination in its own right. Travelers can engage local guides to explore

the abandoned industrial infrastructure. The standard excursion features a tour of the derelict equipment and a trek to the ridgeline where the borders of Liberia, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire intersect (Bell). Liberia's Ministry of Information, Culture & Tourism frames this history as spectacle. It declares that Mount Nimba offers "an opportunity to learn about the region's fascinating mining history," biodiversity and breathtaking views. It notes that the road to the mountain's summit was paved in the 1960s by LAMCO to service the mine, and that the "remnants of their activities remain and are being swallowed up by the surrounding rainforest." The government does not mention that ArcelorMittal's current Phase 2 expansion into the mountain range is a \$3 billion project commissioned in 2025 that is expected to quadruple iron ore output to twenty million tons annually (Fellajuah), and that ArcelorMittal is actively continuing the process whose ruins tourists are invited to admire. The hiking trail passes through an active mine and its own future ruin. The ruins of the old mine, the machinery reclaimed by the rainforest, and the topography of a mountain that has been partially removed by decades of extraction, are presented as tourist attractions.

The tourist and the local extraction workers occupy the same mountain at the same time, organized by the same company, and serve different but complementary functions in the global economy of image and natural resources. The co-existence of active extraction and promoted tourism is an instance of what I try to name in this essay. At Blue Lake, the aestheticization of the mining scar was perhaps the inadvertent product of time. In Nimba, the aestheticization of the landscape is intentional. The beauty of the mountain, its biodiversity and scenery, and its position on the border of three countries, form part of ArcelorMittal's corporate narrative about its presence in Liberia as a force for development, conservation, and responsible stewardship of the landscape, albeit which it simultaneously consumes.

The Surreality of the Extraction Landscape

By surreality, I mean something more than strange or unexpected. I mean the word in something closer to its original sense, as a quality of reality that exceeds the real, that presents surfaces which do not correspond to the conditions that produced them, and that offers the eye something the mind cannot fully reconcile. The extraction landscapes of Liberia are surreal in this sense. They are places where the visual language of beauty, which includes seemingly idyllic towns, green hills, and clear blue water, is deployed over the reality of extraction, contamination, and loss. From a distance, the Bomi hills look like they have been there for over one million years. Up close, however, there are signs of human intervention, with some hills formed from material displaced by extraction, reshaped by erosion, and overgrown by the forest.

In Nimba, the surrealism of the landscape is compounded by scale, because the mountain that the tourist stands on is not the mountain that used to be there. The part of the massif that lies within Liberia has been more extensively mined than the sections in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, making the difference in profile visible from the mountain's ridgeline. The terrain tourists admire is the terrain that remains after a significant portion of it has been shipped to steel mills in Europe and Asia. The panoramic views that tourism websites celebrate are the views from a mountain summit lowered by extraction. Yet the

landscape is genuinely beautiful. The East Nimba Nature Reserve was partially established around the extraction site as a form of environmental mitigation, and is intended to protect the biodiversity of the rainforest. However, it also functions as corporate reputation management. The Ministry of Information, Culture & Tourism describes the biodiversity, rare plant and animal life, and the panoramic views of Mount Nimba as part of Liberia's rich natural heritage. The rusted equipment of the old LAMCO mine, half-swallowed by the rainforest, is promoted as a prime destination to experience this heritage. The ruin is already aestheticized and packaged as a destination point.

In Liberia, the visual record of extraction is constantly overwritten by the lushness of nature. The ecological wounds close and scar, not because they are healed, but because the surfaces have been re-covered with vegetation. Beneath the greenery, the soil remains contaminated and the water table eroded. The communities that depend on the land for farming, water, and the ecosystem services that sustain their livelihoods live in an altered and toxic world that no longer appears to be so.

Slow Violence and the Politics of Visibility

Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence addresses the problem of visibility. Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). He is concerned with the representational challenge of making slow violence visible when it lacks temporality, body, event, and rupture that make violence visible to media, policymakers, and the public imagination. Liberia's extraction landscapes present a specific and acute version of this challenge. The violence here is both slow and actively disguised by beauty emerging from the speed of tropical regrowth, which aesthetically transforms sites of destruction into sites of wonder. Blue Lake is Nixon's slow violence made into image. The violence has not faded from view, but has been replaced by something which is sought out as desirable. In Nimba, the disguise of the landscape is sophisticated but the violence is ongoing, the extraction is active, and the mountain is continuously reduced. Yet the corporate and tourism apparatus frames the range as a destination for adventure, conservation, and the appreciation of biodiversity. To see the mine as a mine requires active resistance to the framing offered by entities ranging from the Liberian government to ArcelorMittal's corporate communications, and to international travel guides.

This is what I mean when I describe these landscapes as surreal. Surrealism, in its artistic and literary register, was concerned with the way that surfaces deceive what is perceived, and how the ordinary and the beautiful can be sites of something profoundly wrong, the way the unconscious mind erupts through the ordered appearance of the real. Similarly, the extraction landscapes of Liberia erupt with extraordinary beauty that the mind must actively work against and must hold in suspension, while making visible what lies beneath (the toxic soil, disenfranchised communities, rivers carrying mineral residue into the water systems on which people depend, and the livelihoods that are disrupted when the mines close). In Nimba, surreality has an additional layer because the beautiful surface is not only natural but is also corporate, and is curated and marketed by the very actor responsible for its destruction.

Walter Rodney's framework adds a structural dimension to Nixon's phenomenology. In *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Rodney argues that what appear as poverty and underdevelopment in Africa are not the natural conditions of the continent, but the produced outcomes of a global economic arrangement in which African resources are systematically appropriated into wealth out of Africa. In Liberia, this global economic arrangement includes contracts, machinery, and exit routes through which iron ore leaves the country. ArcelorMittal has operated in Liberia since 2005 and is now the country's largest foreign investor and private-sector employer. The iron ore it removes from Nimba travels by railway to the Port of Buchanan, a corridor that is being upgraded at a cost of \$800 million to support the transport of higher volumes of ore (Fellajuah). This is reminiscent of the road that LAMCO paved in the 1960s which was built to service the mine. The World Bank's account of the Liberian economy shows the same arrangement at the national scale. The economy grew by 5.1 percent in 2025, driven by a 17 percent expansion in mining and by gold and iron ore exports (World Bank Group). Despite these gains in export trade, services have expanded by only 4.6 percent, so that, for example, only 32 percent of Liberians have access to electricity (World Bank Group). While the statistics represent growth, they fail to show the scale of the leakage of resources out of the country.

Walter Rodney's claims about how underdevelopment is produced in Africa can be traced in the terms of ArcelorMittal's Phase 2 expansion. Iron ore production is set to quadruple from five million to twenty million tons a year, while annual payments to the government are projected to rise from \$35 million to \$125 million (Fellajuah). A simple calculation shows \$7.00 of public revenue per ton currently and \$6.25 per ton after the expansion, such that the state's share per unit of ore produced decreases even as the volume of extraction increases. The corporation celebrates the concentrator as the first domestic production of high-grade iron ore concentrate in Liberia. Yet the ore that is shipped out is used for steel that is manufactured and sold elsewhere, generating profit out of the country, which is the pattern of exporting raw or semi-processed materials which Rodney theorizes. Liberia is integrated into the global economy with terms that present the transfer of wealth as investment, employment, and partnership.

ArcelorMittal marvels that Liberia's mine is considered among the most beautiful mining environments in the world. The beauty of the landscape completes these economic arrangements through imagery that allows an economy organized to move value out of the country to be seen by tourists and investors as a gift to the country rather than as extraction. Using Rodney's theorization, the beauty of these landscapes can be seen (literally) as a form of this appropriation; the destruction of Liberian land and livelihoods is appropriated simultaneously and in real time, into iron ore for global steel markets and into images of wilderness and adventure for the global tourism economy. The sites are extracted twice, once for ore and once for beautiful scenery. Neither form of extraction leaves value in the country that is commensurate with what is taken.

The Colonial City and the Landscape It Does Not See

Frantz Fanon theorizes in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the colonial world is a compartmentalized world; for example, the settler's town is well-lit and clean, while the

colonized quarter is a place of notoriety and degradation (31–32). Fanon's analysis of colonial urban space is spatial and visual, as the colonial city is organized so that the costs of extraction are borne in places the center does not see, which are intentionally designed to be invisible to those who benefit from what is taken from these sites (129). In Fanon's analysis, the settler's town is where the center becomes visible within the colony. In my analysis, the center extends more broadly to the position which Fanon describes when he argues that Europe's wealth was made from extracting resources from colonized countries (129). The center describes the places where extracted value is consumed, as distinct from the places where it is taken from. In Liberia, the center is not a single town, but extends to the steel mills in Europe and Asia that receive the ore, the shareholders and executives of the company that sells it, the investors who finance it, and the travelers who meet the mountain as scenery through guidebooks. Yekepa, the expatriate town, is its local outpost. Vision in the center is limited by distance, which keeps the mining pit, the contaminated soil, and the polluted water out of the consumer's field of visibility.

Fanon's account of compartmentalization is worth setting out in detail, because my essay builds on it. Compartmentalization presents a map of who lives where, and a distribution of visibility, in which the zone that produces the wealth is kept out of view of the zone that enjoys it. This carries into Liberia. In Fanon's colonial city, the frontier between the zones is policed and is marked by barracks and police stations (31). In Liberia's extraction economy, the frontier is marked by the security gate of the mining compound, the boundary of the concession, and the edge of the nature reserve. It separates the zone from which the ore is taken and the zone in which the value of that ore is realized. Adding to Fanon's analysis, these landscapes show that the visual partition can be maintained by beauty and by exclusion. The zone that bears the cost may be shown and even celebrated, as long as what is shown is a beautiful mountain and not an extractive operation.

Yekepa is a Fanonian space made strange or surreal by the presence of the tourist. It is not quite the neo-colonial quarter (ArcelorMittal's corporate social responsibility programs have built schools and provided some services), but the spatial logic is the same, and the community exists in relation to the mine, and not the other way around. The company town is organized around the needs of the extraction operation. Expatriates live in "shiny white container houses" while local Liberians live in "typical basic huts" (Bell). Fanon's division of two worlds occupying the same space, governed by the same company, separated by race and class and the hierarchy of the global extraction economy, is visible. What is contemporary is that this divided space has been made beautiful and offered to the global tourist imagination in travel guides as a "curious" destination whose very strangeness becomes part of its appeal.

Liberia's extraction landscapes extend Fanon's insight beyond the city and into the rural. They add a dimension to his conceptualization, which is the possibility that the spaces of extraction become beautiful through their transformation and through corporate curation, and that this beauty performs a new kind of invisibility. The Bomi hills are not invisible in the way that Fanon's colonial quarter is invisible through deliberate exclusion from the settler's gaze. The Nimba Mountain range is not invisible because ArcelorMittal

excludes it from view. Both are invisible in a more insidious way as they are seen, but what is seen conceals the everyday violence that happens there.

In Monrovia, this same dynamic plays out in the relationship between the city's beaches and surrounding neighborhoods, the meeting of the urban landscape and the Atlantic Ocean. Monrovia's beaches are popular tourist attractions. The neighborhoods that spread inland from the beaches seem picturesque in the way that poverty sometimes is portrayed as vibrant with color and life. This picturesque quality is itself a form of violence which aestheticizes abject living conditions that should elicit political outrage. It transforms suffering into resilience and makes the human costs of extraction a backdrop for photographic images and tourism. Many people in Monrovia live in houses that are not completely built, with zinc roofs rusting in the humidity, concrete block walls gathering mold because they were not plastered, and rooms open to the wind and rain. People live without electricity and without running water in the capital city, as the mineral wealth of the country is exported. Twenty million tons of iron ore will leave Liberia annually from ArcelorMittal's Nimba operations alone under its Phase 2 expansion, passing through the Port of Buchanan.

Tourist Destinations and Sacrificial Zones

Sacrificial zone is a term used in environmental justice scholarship for places that are designated, implicitly or explicitly, as acceptable sites of destruction in the service of economic production elsewhere. In these zones, the environmental and human costs of extraction are externalized onto communities with insufficient economic power to resist, while the benefits of the destruction flow to shareholders, states, and consumers in distant markets who never see the places whose sacrifices make their consumption possible. Bomi Hills is a sacrificial zone. The mining extraction ended, the Liberia Mining Company closed, and the landscape was abandoned. Blue Lake is a memorial of that sacrifice. It is beautiful and almost unconnected in the public imagination to the economic arrangements that produced it. The communities that live in proximity to the mine and that continue to bear the costs of the extraction of their land, water, and livelihoods have no equivalent memorial and are not listed on tourism websites.

Similarly, the Nimba Mountain range is a sacrificial zone whose sacrifice is ongoing as ArcelorMittal's expansion increases iron ore production. The company describes its expansion as a game changer for the West African region, using the language of modernity and development. The Liberian government, which has negotiated royalty arrangements and employment commitments as part of the concession, frames it similarly. President Boakai attended the commissioning ceremony with ArcelorMittal's executive chairman Mittal, and described the expansion as a demonstration of "confidence in Liberia's potential and future" (Fellajuah). The language of confidence and future potential is the language of the investor, and not the language of the community whose mountain is hacked away. The Nimba Mountain range is distinctive as a sacrificial zone because of the explicit integration of tourism into the extraction economy. The nature reserve, the hiking trail, the travel guide listings, and the corporate conservation programs are not separate from, but continuous with the extraction operation. They serve multiple functions simultaneously. They provide ArcelorMittal

with the appearance of environmental stewardship that greases its relationships with the Liberian government and international investors; they generate an image of the company as a socially responsible actor that can be deployed in corporate communications; and they transform the landscape of extraction into a commodity in an economy of experience, while the mining economy continues its work.

I hope that I am clear about what I am saying and what I am not saying. I am not saying that the beauty of the Nimba Mountain range is fake. It is genuinely beautiful and its biodiversity is important. Liberians who take pride in the range, who include it in an image of Liberia as a place of natural wonder, are not wrong to do so. The capacity to find beauty in what has survived and continues to survive alongside destruction is a form of resilience. What I am saying is that this beauty is instrumentalized by the government, extractive companies, the tourism industry, and the global circulation of images in ways that make it harder to demand an accounting for what is taken from the mountain and from the people who live in its shadow. Communities in Yekepa, Bomi Hills, and Monrovia are not case studies. They are people living with the consequences of decisions made by known actors who should be held accountable and compelled to act differently. The beauty of the landscape does not change that. If anything, it makes it more urgent that where beauty is deliberately curated, the work of seeing through it becomes more political.

A Different Kind of Seeing

Blue Lake is a site of destruction so thoroughly transformed that it has become an object of wonder and a tourist destination. The Nimba Mountain range is a site where the transformation of destruction into beauty is not accidental but deliberate, not the work of time but the work of a corporation, and not innocent but strategic. Together, these two landscapes trace a continuum of what I am calling the aesthetics of ruin in Liberia's extraction economy, from the inadvertent beauty of the abandoned mine, where water and vegetation have done what time always does to wounds (covers the surface, even if it does not fully heal), to the curated beauty of the active mine, where corporate communications, tourism promotion, and conservation programming collaborate to ensure that the landscape is seen in a particular way, as wonder, opportunity, and evidence of responsible stewardship, rather than as what it also is, which is a mountain being removed, a community organized around its removal, and a country whose resources are exported faster than the national investment that was negotiated in exchange.

The theoretical frameworks I have drawn on (Nixon's slow violence, Rodney's underdevelopment, and Fanon's colonial city) are useful not because they explain Liberia from the outside but because they name processes that the beauty of the landscape actively conceals. Slow violence is difficult to see because it is slow and because it is sometimes beautiful (in Nimba, a corporation pays to keep it beautiful). Underdevelopment is difficult to see because it presents itself as natural conditions rather than produced economic outcomes. The colonial organization of space is difficult to see in a landscape that is presented as a tropical paradise by the government and in international travel guides. Naming these processes is the beginning of a different kind of seeing that holds

beauty and destruction simultaneously, that refuses to let beauty serve as consolation for or distraction from destruction, and that asks how the image was produced, who profits from it, and who continues to pay for it. It is possible and necessary to hold both of these truths at once.



Works Cited

- “About ArcelorMittal Liberia.” *ArcelorMittal Liberia*, 2023, liberia.arcelormittal.com/aboutus.
- Bell, Alissa. “Mount Nimba LAMCO Mining Site.” *Atlas Obscura*, 2025, www.atlasobscura.com/places/mount-nimba-historic-lamco-mining-site.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Press, 1963.
- Fellajuah, Stephen G. “ArcelorMittal Inaugurates World-Class Iron Ore Concentrator.” *The New Dawn*, 6 June 2025, www.thenewdawnliberia.com/arcelormittal-inaugurates-world-class-iron-ore-concentrator/.
- Lonely Planet. “Mt. Nimba.” *Lonely Planet*, 2026, www.lonelyplanet.com/points-of-interest/mt-nimba/1556607.
- Ministry of Information, Culture & Tourism. “Mount Nimba.” *Enjoy Liberia*, 2026, <https://enjoyliberia.travel/pages/mount-nimba/>.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.
- “Phase II Expansion Projects.” *ArcelorMittal Liberia*, 2026, liberia.arcelormittal.com/Phase_II_Expansion_Projects.
- Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, 1973.
- World Bank Group. “Liberia.” *World Bank Group*, 2026, www.worldbank.org/ext/en/country/liberia.