

Introduction: Fictions of African Dictatorship

Since the rise to power of autocratic leaders across Africa in the early years of independence, artists, filmmakers, novelists, poets, photographers and song-writers have been preoccupied with the compelling figure of the dictator, placing him at centre stage in their work. Their concern with the question of dictatorship requires little speculation, for African dictators and their regimes have defined the postcolonial period in Africa. Within a decade of independence, nearly all African states had evolved into dictatorships or single-party regimes, and the consequences of their autocratic regimes are still felt across the African continent today. Christopher Miller points to the irony that, having demanded nationhood, Africans found themselves subject to nationalism of quite a different sort: 'The arbitrary borders between African states, which had been ignored or critiqued [...] by the theory of Pan-African nationalism, were reasserted as the armatures of a more familiar state nationalism at the service of new elites.'¹ However, in his study of writing and authority in Latin American literature, Roberto González Echevarría reminds us that 'It is not simply a matter of arguing that, since there have been and still are dictators [...] literature ought to reflect that fact.'² Instead, he contends, power and rhetoric are bound up and cannot exist independently of one another.

The Latin American dictator novel has received considerable critical attention, with some critics asserting it as a genre that is 'specific' to Latin

- 1 Christopher Miller, 'Nationalism as Resistance and Resistance to Nationalism in the Literature of Francophone Africa', *Yale French Studies* 82.1 (1993): 62–100 (65).
- 2 Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 65.

America.³ A subgenre of Latin American historical fiction, the dictator novel can be divided into three general waves, although it can be traced back as far as the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century accounts of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's and Fransisco López de Gomara of Hernán Cortés' conquest of Mexico.⁴ Josaphat B. Kubayanda demonstrates in his article 'Unfinished Business: Dictatorial Literature of Post-Independence Latin America and Africa' that modern African dictator novels share with their Latin American counterparts the same concerns about post-independence disillusionments and new performances of tyranny, whether social or political. Kubayanda argues that literary works from both Africa and Latin America 'portray totalizing codes that pinpoint an unfinished business of decolonization'.⁵ Patrice Nganang goes further, to argue that the *roman de la dictature* (dictatorship novel) points to dictatorship in the postcolony as the clearest embodiment of the continent's experience of tragedy.⁶ Drawing on the work of Achille Mbembe, Nganang describes dictatorship novels as texts that lay bare the tragedy of dictatorships which leave little room for opposition. As Mbembe explains in *On the Postcolony*:

[In] the postcolonial historical trajectory, the authoritarian mode can no longer be interpreted strictly in terms of surveillance, or the politics of coercion. The practices of ordinary citizens cannot always be read in terms of 'opposition to the state', 'deconstructing power' and 'disengagement'. In the postcolony, an intimate tyranny links the rulers with the ruled [...]. If subjection appears more intense than it might be, this is because the subjects of the *commandement* have internalized authoritarian

3 Moira Fradinger, *Binding Violence: Literary Visions of Political Origins* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 177.

4 See Echevarría, 'The Dictatorship of Rhetoric/the Rhetoric of Dictatorship: Carpentier, García Márquez, and Roa Bastos', *Latin American Research Review* 15.3 (1980): 205–28 (206).

5 Josephat Kubayanda, 'Unfinished Business: Dictatorial Literature of Post-Independence Latin America and Africa', *Research in African Literatures* 28.4 (1997): 38–53 (38).

6 Patrice Nganang, *Manifeste d'une Nouvelle Littérature Africaine* (Paris: Homnisphères, 2007), p. 200.

epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life.⁷

For Mbembe, the very intimacy of tyranny is precisely what prevents resistance, entangling as it does the ruler and the ruled within a convivial space.⁸

Unlike the Latin American dictator novel, the African dictator novel genre remains under-discussed by scholars, and only a few works, including Nuruddin Farah's trilogy of novels 'Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship' (1980–1983) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) have received significant critical attention.⁹ Fictional representations of dictatorship beyond the dictator novel have received less attention still, barring perhaps Wole Soyinka's play *A Play of Giants* (1984). The absence of Soyinka from this volume indicates the impossibility of providing a comprehensive account of such a vast, and growing, corpus. While this volume contributes to the wider discussion of African dictator fiction, it recognizes the breadth of fictional representation of the dictator across genres, eras and nations, and aims to underline that range in its diversity. It includes chapters that examine the representation of the dictator in the short story, the novel, film, photography, the documentary and the essay, which focus on dictatorships across North and sub-Saharan Africa, from Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Guinea, Kenya, Malawi, Morocco, Nigeria, Somalia and Swaziland. Work remains to be done on others genres, such as poetry, and portrayals of other contexts, such as

7 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 128.

8 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 129.

9 Studies include Cécile Bishop, *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship: The Aesthetics of Tyranny* (2014), Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, *Dictates of Authority: Aesthetics with Politics in the Spanish American and African Dictator-Novel*, Unpublished thesis, New York University, 2014, Josef Gugler, 'African Literary Comment on Dictators: Wole Soyinka's Plays and Nuruddin Farah's Novels', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 26.1 (1988): 171–7, Gitahi Gititi, 'Ferocious Comedies: Henri Lopes' *The Laughing Cry* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* as "Dictator" Novels' in Charles Cantaloupo (ed.), *Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o: Text and Contexts* (1995): 211–26, and Robert Spencer, 'Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the African dictator novel', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47 (2012): 145–58.

Mugabe's recently ended thirty-seven-year reign in Zimbabwe; we hope in turn that this volume will lead to further investigations in these areas. Some contributions, such as Mari and Solis' chapter on diaspora, explicitly state the transnational focus this volume establishes, in order to point to the wider global significance of dictatorship. The collection of essays highlights both the creative potential and the expansive nature of African cultural space. Styles, tropes and concerns vary across borders, but also recur in strikingly similar ways from context to context, indicating that writing the dictator remains a transnational project. Importantly, this forms part of a wider transnational move among African writers and critics to wrest control of African representation and memory for themselves. Within this, *Fictions of African Dictatorship* includes studies of a number of lesser-known fictional representations of dictatorship, including works by In Koli Jean Bofane, Eric Sibanda, and Tiyambe Zeleza alongside high-profile figures such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ahmadou Kourouma.

The volume's attention to the multiple intersections between fiction and dictatorship necessarily raises questions about the efficacy of fictional representation as a mode of representing and resisting authoritarianism. Several contributors point to the strategies employed by dictators to fictionalize their own representations in order to portray a particular image of themselves, while others focus on the potential of art to interrogate the performance of dictatorship. While the authors of some chapters focus on the aesthetic techniques used to circumvent censorship or to operate political critique, others bring the question of language to the fore, pointing to its central importance in depicting and contesting regimes built on discourses of unanimity and exclusion. Far from drowning everything out, here these tirades find themselves creatively manipulated in textual form: with satire or irony. Fiction is also examined as a potential space of resistance, a space in which alternative versions and visions of reality can be presented. The range of writing here in turn challenges any fiction that experiences of power and politics across the African continent are uniform. As such, contributors interrogate the multiple, intersecting layers of fiction in a diverse range of real and literary spaces, which include the visible and aesthetic, the linguistic and discursive.

While many of the figures and events portrayed in the works of fiction examined here are based on historical events, the line between the two is often blurred. In *History meets Fiction*, Beverley Southgate reminds us of the difficult relationship between history and fiction when she remarks that ‘historians have long prided themselves on producing works that specifically *contrast* with fiction – that are “historical” works precisely by virtue of *not* being fiction, that are verifiably “true” in a way that fiction does not aspire to be.’¹⁰ Thus, contributors to this volume examine a number of points of contact between fiction and history, which include the use of fiction as historical evidence, as a means of revisiting the past in fresh ways, presenting figures and events from alternative perspectives, and as a way of posing difficult questions.

The chapters in Part I, ‘Portrait of a Dictator’, examine the fictional representation of the dictator, focusing particularly on the image of the dictator as symbolic of a wider imaginary. This chapter brings to the fore the particular impact of all that is visual: how power holders manipulate what is perceived and visible to their gain, and how aesthetic interventions can constitute forms of visual resistance. In the opening chapter, Angie Epifano focuses on the importance of image and the role of photography in building a nationalist imaginary around dictator figures. Centring on the reign of Sékou Touré in Guinea, Epifano expertly demonstrates how daily life is manipulated to display the ideology and power of this leader. Touré’s policies and practices are carefully contextualized in this chapter, which reveals how particular images were intentionally circulated to feed into a specific cultural ideology. Epifano examines postures, clothing, symbolism and setting in these images, each of which was imbued with layers of meaning to cement Touré’s nationalist aims. In contrast to Epifano’s specific focus on Guinea, Khalid Lyamlahy reflects in his chapter on the transnational reach of the volume’s theme, placing his analysis of Bensalem Himmich’s *Le Calife de l’épouvante* in a corpus of dictatorship texts from Latin America and the Arab world. Lyamlahy unpicks the inherent complexity in this corpus, namely regarding the ambivalence of

10 Beverley Southgate, *History meets Fiction* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 2.

the term dictatorship, and the limitations or ‘impouvoir’ (impotence) of dictatorial literature in terms of its political efficiency. Himmich’s historical fiction narrates the tyranny of Al-Hākīm bi Amr Allāh, sixth Fatimid caliph who ruled Egypt from 996 to 1021. The use of parody and the trope of madness constitute Himmich’s ‘resistance by sarcasm’, which Lyamlahy (a novelist himself) demonstrates with close attention to the text. Then, turning the focus to film, Rita Keresztesi examines Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s *Le Président* to place Bekolo in a lineage of filmmakers who approach pressing, violent political situations from the perspective of comedy. Keresztesi shows how the genre of documentary has been reworked, using fiction and the imagination to better represent the complex forces of necropower at work in the postcolony. In the case of Paul Biya’s Cameroon, Bekolo’s film enacts a kind of taking-back of the screens that were otherwise so dominated by the president’s own media. Keresztesi examines a whole range of cinematic devices used by Bekolo here to put on show the ‘unfreedom’ of Cameroon and the nonetheless persistent presence of hope that artistic production will somehow usher in the end of Biya’s regime.

Those in power act out various roles which include, among others, benevolence, intimacy, omniscience, and omnipotence. The chapters in Part II, ‘Performance and Myth-making’, draw attention to these performances, to the very staged nature of many power practices, and to the traditions that inflect them with particular significance. Eline Kuenen’s chapter, ‘Creation through Inversion: The Carnavalesque Postcolonial State in the Novels of Alain Mabanckou and In Koli Jean Bofane’, argues for the disruptive qualities of writing by the new generation of francophone African writers to which Mabanckou and Bofane belong. However, she also sets these two authors apart because of their uniquely paratopic position, as well as their questioning of the very position of the francophone writer (and she traces their own shifting positionalities). The chapter examines the roles of theatrical elements and the carnivalesque in creating an alternative version of reality that points to the performative tendencies of the banality of power in the postcolony. The juxtaposition of the serious and the comical, she argues, reveals the arbitrary nature of much postcolonial politics, and indeed, the many fictions at work within it. In Chapter 5, Maria Muresan provides an original reading of the well-known novel *Wizard of*

the Crow by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Muresan unpicks specific rituals in the novel to outline the author’s thinking about democracy in the context of post-independence inequalities. The layers of allegory and myth that Muresan analyses are shown to fictionalize various aspects of Daniel arap Moi’s politics. Sorcery and witchcraft are at the heart of this, critiquing racial discrimination, highlighting spiritual and moral crises, and shedding light on those neglected within patriarchal traditions. Muresan brings together her close reading of two scenes with insights from a broad critical and literary corpus to provide here a new reading of a familiar but rich text. In Chapter 6, Bindi Ngouté Lucien turns her attention to Ahmadou Kourouma’s post-1990 novels, illustrating the use of myth and totem in the creation of heroic images of the dictator. Drawing on examples from *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998) and *Allah n’est pas obligé* (2000), Lucien explores the wider links between dictatorial power and myths in Africa. The chapter examines the appropriation of animalistic attributes, including strength, speed, violence and fecundity, and the reliance on mythical elements, to interrogate the performance of power by African dictators, both real and fictional.

The chapters in Part III, ‘Compromised Freedoms’, shift the focus to the consequences of dictatorship and the role of fiction in reclaiming liberty by opening up the possibility of alternatives and providing the opportunity to reflect on the possibility of their realization. In ‘The Author and the Authoritarian: Gamal al-Ghitani’s *al-Zaynī Barakāt*’, Alya El Hosseiny analyses Gamal al-Ghitani’s *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, which depicts the fall of Cairo to Ottoman invaders in the early 1500s. Themes of sight and surveillance indicate that this novel constitutes rich textual territory for exploring dictatorial power, in this case in Egypt. In the face of the oppression of state authority, El Hosseiny demonstrates the power of the dissident potential and creative dynamics of orality (*ḥadīth*) and writing. El Hosseiny’s attention to the multiple narrative approaches and perspectives in the text highlights what is in evidence across this volume of essays: that a broad and varied range of textual and filmic creative strategies are required to contest the single-minded, tyrannical control critiqued in each of the texts. Kerry Vincent’s chapter turns to the detective story and, against a backdrop of the language politics of Swaziland, traces the publishing history of Eric

Sibanda's siSwati story, 'Sagila Semnikati' (The Owner's Knobkerrie). By assessing the subtle editorial differences between the editions of the story, Vincent demonstrates the roles literature and drama can play in cementing or challenging particular narratives of guilt and innocence. Plot is given priority over character to reveal how the detective story genre can intertextually play on events happening in the real-life context of production. Vincent provides fascinating insights into this kind of fictional capturing, and the political stakes involved in literary critiques of state practices. In the next chapter, "My characters, my plots, are under my pen": Authority as Dictatorship in King-Aribisala's *The Hangman's Game*, Madeleine Wilson details the critique of postcolonial Nigeria that is effected through an inversion of the common trope of a larger-than-life patriarchal figure. Multiple layers of fiction reveal damaging addiction to control, as the self-referential novel explores contests over body, agency, and word.

Finally, Part IV, 'Forms of Resistance', turns to a focus on the local and the transnational as a form of resisting nationalist agendas. As Miller remarks, 'As the objective of most writers moves from anticolonialism to antineocolonialism, the relation of the writer to the African state shifts, and exile becomes directly proportional to the radicalism of critique'.¹¹ This part opens with F. Fiona Moolla's comparative reading of the work of Nuruddin Farah and Ahmed Omar Askar, which illustrates and argues for the contemporary relevance of such literary representations. Moolla draws interesting parallels between Siad Barre and other authoritarian rulers, carefully contextualizing her analysis and thus underscoring the transnational concerns of this volume as a whole. Whilst assessing the strengths of quite different approaches to the same theme in terms of genre, she pinpoints a fascinating paradox between presence and absence, and provides additional insights into the processes of textual production. In Chapter 11, Asante Lucy Mtenje focuses on two novels by Malawian writers to illustrate how their characterization of female subjects goes against the norm, in multiple ways. Mtenje shows that although not in the foreground, or depicted as central protagonists, the female characters in Tiyambe Zeleza's

11 Miller, *Nationalism as Resistance*, p. 94.

Smouldering Charcoal and James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt* constitute sites of political resistance. The agency with which they use their sexuality challenges ideas of propriety within and beyond the texts. Mtenje's chapter draws out the importance of such examples by building a clear picture of the socio-cultural and political context, in particular the policies and codes imposed within the strict regime of Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Finally, in their chapter, 'Mighty Mouth, Minor Literature: Siad Barre's Dictatorship in Italian Postcolonial Literature', Lorenzo Mari and Teresa Solis immerse us in literary responses to autocratic rule in Somalia. They argue for the value of reading 'minor literatures' (in this case Somali literature written in Italian) in order to find the most vivid representations of his dictatorship. These texts, the authors suggest, are where greater nuance is to be found regarding women's resistance to Barre's regime, for example. Intergenerational divergences in literary representation are well traced in their analysis of texts from the Somali diaspora. The ambivalence they reveal in this corpus leads the authors to conclude that any 'active solidarity' proposed by Deleuze and Guattari remains, at least for now, far on the horizon for Somali literature.

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