

PART III

Compromised Freedoms

7 The Author and the Authoritarian: Gamal al-Ghitani's *al-Zaynī Barakāt*

In the early 1970s, Egypt experienced a period of major transformation. The sudden death in 1970 of Gamal Abdel-Nasser (known simply as Nasser), the charismatic leader of the 1952 coup d'état, national hero and defender of the Suez Canal against European powers, and pioneer of Arab nationalism, meant a sea change in the way the Egyptian state operated: from a tightly controlled state-socialist autocracy, proudly leading the non-alignment movement, to a looser police state, and eventually an America-friendly free market economy, under Anwar al-Sadat.¹ While the transition was never to a democratic regime, the atmosphere of surveillance and fear did let up, and political opponents, mostly mollified by then, were afforded some breathing space outside Nasser's notorious prisons.

Critics such as Samia Mehrez, Roger Allen, and Céza Kassem Draz have described the emergence of a 'young generation' of writers in the 1960s in the Arab world, a generation that will express its 'dissatisfaction and disgust with the state of Arab society' (Allen 57) both before and especially after the Six-Day War of 1967. In the face of widespread censorship and political repression, writers of this generation often constructed symbolic narratives; along with al-Ghitani, writers including Son'allah Ibrahim and 'Abdel Hakim Qasem drew on historical events, folk culture, and their own experiences of repression – al-Ghitani and Ibrahim had both been incarcerated under the Nasser regime – to compose allegorical tales for the suffocating political atmosphere of their time, taking advantage of the

1 While I follow standard transliteration for most Arabic words, including names, in the case of historical figures and internationally known writers I have opted for a simplified transliteration already widely in use.

slim margin of freedom of expression afforded to them. Gamal al-Ghitani's writings, in particular, were strongly influenced by medieval historiography and sometimes tend towards the mystical, and his best-known work, *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, stands as a sophisticated example of the parabolic style that he and his contemporaries favoured, as well as of al-Ghitani's own preoccupation with language, especially medieval historiographical style. Widely considered a masterpiece of Egyptian literature, it was published in 1970–1 in serial form in the magazine *Rose al-Yūsuf*, and then as a book in the mid-seventies. It is set in Cairo in the years 1506–16, and tells the story of the fall of the city to Ottoman invaders, after a chaotic period of Mamluk rule.² The story is told through several modes of narration, which include government spy reports, a European traveller's account, as well as stream-of-consciousness narration from the point of view of students and sheikhs at al-Azhar, a major religious university. Here, al-Ghitani's choices regarding genre, writing style and narrative strategies are interwoven with the novel's focus on surveillance and tyranny, in order to produce a text that resists authoritarianism in the author's own time. Close analysis reveals that themes of authoritarianism and surveillance highlight the interplay between present and past in this allegorical novel and the way in which language is invested with a power far beyond that of an autocrat.

The novel *al-Zaynī Barakāt* opens with the scene of a Cairo in uproar after the Ottoman invasion in 1517, narrated by a Venetian traveller named Visconti Gianti. The narration then switches back to events some ten years earlier, when a character named al-Zaynī Barakāt Ibn Mūsā was appointed in a most powerful post. Although he first declines the position, giving the impression of disinterest in power, he is eventually made *muhtasib* of Cairo; that is, the commercial overseer, in charge of regulating prices, preventing corruption, and more generally safeguarding public morals. In a city that was then a centre for merchants, Ibn Mūsā wields enormous power. He proceeds by using the police chief, Zakariyā Ibn Rāḍī, and his agents to monitor and inform on the population. Zakariyā recruits students

2 The Mamluks were slave-soldiers that were originally brought to the Middle East from the Balkans, and who eventually rose to power in the fourteenth century.

and sheikhs at al-Azhar to inform on their colleagues and uses his army of spies to control Cairenes.

As the narrative proceeds, it becomes clear that Ibn Mūsā is more concerned with internal power struggles and with maintaining his popularity, than with the very real threat of foreign invasion. He establishes a system of public announcements for the benefit of the population, in which he regularly proclaims his commitment to the public good and the preservation of morals. However, the rivalries between different Mamluks become difficult to control, and threaten the stability of the regime. As state power disintegrates, the Ottomans invade, sacking the city and terrorizing the people, who had so far been kept in the dark about the foreign threat. By the close of the novel, the regime falls. However, al-Zaynī Barakāt simply transitions to working under Ottoman rule.

Considered a seminal example of Arabic novels in the post-Mahfouz generation, *al-Zaynī Barakāt* has been addressed by many critics, and I will give here a brief overview of the most important scholarly works analysing the novel. In a 1981 article,³ Céza Kassem Draz has focused on the uses of irony in *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, arguing that al-Ghitani uses pastiche and parody to create estrangement. In *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (1995), Roger Allen includes it in a chapter he devotes to the analysis of twelve influential and, at that time, relatively recent novels.⁴ Allen describes *al-Zaynī Barakāt* as ‘a work of fiction that uses historical documents’ (196) and also highlights al-Ghitani’s use of strategies of pastiche and irony. By contrast, Fakhri Salih, in his 1997 article in *Sutur*, chooses to zoom in on the allegorical function of the novel, and argues for *al-Zaynī Barakāt* as a radical departure from pre-existing Arabic works, due to its use of the historical novel as allegory for the present or recent past.⁵ In his book *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary*

3 Ceza Kassem Draz, ‘In quest of new narrative forms: Irony in the works of four Egyptian writers’, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 12 (1981): 137–59, 144.

4 Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 195–208.

5 Fakhri Salih, ‘Al-Riwāya al-‘Arabiya wa Ashkāl al-Sard al-Turāthiya’, *Sutūr* 2 (1997): 76–8.

Modernism in the Levant (2001), Stefan G. Meyer builds on his predecessor's analyses, highlighting both the allegorical dimension as well as the novel's use of irony.⁶

All these works have focused on *al-Zaynī Barakāt's* relationship to historical events and texts, underlining its functions as pastiche and commentary on both the historical past and the author's contemporary reality. While these themes are important and do hold a place in my own analysis of the novel, I am also interested in the text's techniques and narrative strategies as they relate to the novel's themes of surveillance and tyranny. Indeed, in contrast to the aforementioned examples, Samia Mehrez's analysis focuses on the internal logic of the text, rather than simply drawing links with either an historical moment or a corpus of pre-modern texts. In a chapter dedicated to the novel in her *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction* (1994), Mehrez, like Kassem Draz, draws on Gérard Genette theory of intertextuality to highlight the potential for allegory in the novel.⁷ However, her analysis excavates al-Ghitani's narrative strategies from within a multi-layered text, and is one I find most productive and will be drawing on to inform my own reading of the novel.

The novel is structured into six 'Pavilions', or sections, each divided into short chapters, which are told from the point of view of one of six characters. The characters we follow include the title character, who was the markets inspector of Cairo and a powerful historical figure. Thus, we are told the story of the last decade of Mamluk rule in Cairo before Ottoman rule, which was marked by political repression and widespread government spying, and throughout the novel, we are shown how systems of *baṣṣāṣīn* (literally 'lookers'), or spies, with al-Zaynī Barakāt Ibn Mūsā at their centre, control the lives and minds of Cairenes.

The eponymous character, al-Zaynī Barakāt, is progressively revealed to be a secretive, manipulative tyrant, using a carefully curated public image to consolidate his own power, undermining even his closest advisors. The parallel between al-Zaynī and Nasser, at least as the latter is perceived after

6 Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 55–9.

7 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 96–118.

the 1967 defeat, are key to a contextualized reading of the novel. Mehrez points out:

Several critics have not failed to note the affinities that exist between the character of al-Zaynī and that of Nasser. Both figures seem to elicit the same controversial questions: are they good or are they evil? Are they working for the people or simply manipulating them? Are they villains or are they heroes?⁸

But more than simply portraying him as a symbolic titular character, through the representation of al-Zaynī the novel draws a parallel with a painful moment of Egyptian history. The humiliating defeat of Egyptian forces in 1967 was only made worse by the systemic state propaganda which tried to conceal the truth from the Egyptian public for as long as it could. When the news reached the populace, it was a gigantic blow, which fostered disillusionment with Nasser. Even though the Egyptian leader's popularity kept him at the head of the state (after he stepped down and massive demonstrations demanded his return), 1967 was a turning point in the Egyptian psyche, and especially in arts and literature.⁹ Therefore, the themes of propaganda, of lies and concealment were directly relevant to the writer's present, and *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, published shortly after Nasser's death, has been read as a damning indictment of his regime.

The novel revolves around a system of surveillance. The first hint of the spy network is found near the beginning of the novel, shortly after Ibn Mūsā's appointment as overseer, when we are told the story of a slave girl whom he rescues from an abusive master. Visconti Gianti describes how some people felt about the incident:

But another group felt that he had intruded on the most private matters of people's lives; and that no one at all could feel safe in his home or about his family, especially after a rumour indicated that the girl had never appealed to al-Zaynī at all; that he had found out about the matter through dubious methods which enable him to acquire information about the minutest details that occur within homes. (25)¹⁰

8 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 101–2.

9 Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 59.

10 While my analysis at large is based on the original Arabic text, I quote from the beautiful and faithful English translation by Farouk Abdel Wahab.

In an earlier chapter, whose events occur ten years later, Cairo is compared to 'a terrified woman fearing rape late at night' (9). The fall of the city is represented as sexual violence, and as tantamount to the emasculation of its male citizens. Beth Baron argues that '[o]nce the nation was envisioned as a family, the concept of family honor could easily be appropriated as the basis for national honor.'¹¹ The latter 'worked as a concept because at more or less the same time as the notion of national honor emerged, the nation was imagined as a woman.'¹² The slave girl's sexual abuse thus foreshadowed the fall of Cairo.

Apart from the spies' intimate acquaintance with their subjects, the theme of knowledge emerges as a reflection on the role of the intellectual, through Sa'īd, the Azhar student, and his sheikhs and fellow students. Despite being presented as simple-minded and naïve, Sa'īd goes out of his way to spend more time with the sheikhs, from whom he has excessive respect; in his honesty and desire to keep the moral high ground, he is the opposite of 'Amr, who works as a spy for Zakariyā, the police chief. Ibn Mūsā and Zakariyā are also defined by their knowledge, but it is excessive, Faustian knowledge, obtained through dangerous and cruel means. They possess precisely the kind of knowledge which enables them to break Sa'īd's spirit. It might be pointed out here that Sa'īd is from Upper Egypt, an historically poor and under-developed region, and therefore belongs to the poor working class. His growing suspicions towards al-Zaynī Barakāt result in his getting detained and tortured, and seeing the girl that he loves marry someone else (as Ibn Mūsā has arranged). By the end of the novel, he is roaming the streets, driven to madness. The political betrayal and national catastrophe are therefore paralleled by a personal crisis.

Zakariyā himself, the police chief and chief spy, is eventually made to think that al-Zaynī Barakāt has been spying on him as well, using a personal spy network, thus doubling the levels of surveillance and creating a structure of concentric circles around the leader. However, that impression is revealed to be an illusion, carefully planted by Ibn Mūsā, in order

11 Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7.

12 Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 7.

to maintain his control over his subordinate. The illusion of surveillance therefore acts as a real threat, breaking down the barrier between reality and fiction, in the internal narrative of the novel. In this instance, too, al-Ghitani is taking the opportunity to comment on his contemporary reality: Nasser's spies were rumoured to be everywhere, and yet at the same time many were convinced the regime planted those rumours in order to keep the population in check. By giving credence to the latter narrative, al-Ghitani evokes a form of literary resistance.

The very idea of resistance literature has been widely contested. Indeed, in *Resisting Novels*, Lennard J. Davis argues that the novel form is inherently conservative, because it emulates life without being life itself.¹³ Opposing the novel to political resistance, Davis classes it as a form of psychoanalytic resistance, a 'defensive reluctance or the blockage of change'.¹⁴ Even what he calls the 'overtly political novel' cannot, according to him, change the world, only its representation.¹⁵ However, in *Resistance Literature*, Barbara Harlow argues that the novel does participate in reality: 'the resistance writer, like the guerrilla of the armed liberation struggle, is actively engaged in an urgent historical confrontation'.¹⁶ Never strictly separated from life, the novel becomes 'an indictment'.¹⁷ Harlow ties this to 'the resistance writer's demand for a politicization of interpretation'.¹⁸ As we will see below, the role of allegory in *al-Zaynī Barakāt* is essential to its political project. However, language itself is also a powerful force that builds up and tears down tyranny. In his study of Latin American dictator novels, *The Voice of the Masters*, Roberto González Echevarría shows how language becomes a manifestation of power, identifying the author with the dictator.¹⁹ Echevarría argues that in post-Boom novels, language is also the means by which authority

13 Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

14 Davis, *Resisting Novels*, 12.

15 Davis, *Resisting Novels*, 225–7.

16 Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 100.

17 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 98.

18 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 77.

19 Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

is demystified: 'what the new literature is doing is dismantling Literature itself, not replacing a relation of power with another within an unchanging concept of literature'.²⁰ I will show how both dynamics operate in *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, language being a key to both authority and resistance.

The history of Arabic literature has long been a history of orality. Indeed, poetry, considered the preeminent genre and appearing much earlier than prose, was passed down orally, with the exception of the very best *qasīdas* [odes], which were written down and reportedly hung on the Holy Ka'ba, a sacred site of Islam, in use since Pagan times. In reference to that honour, those poems were called *al-Mu'allaqāt* [the hung ones]. Thus, while orality was the principal medium of transmission of literature, writing conferred an honour upon the work being physically preserved for future memory. After the rise of Islam, and with the death of its Prophet, an oral tradition of *ḥadīth* was born, passing down the prophet's words with a complex system of attributions (*isnād*). In *Arabic historical thought in the classical period*, Tarif Khalidi chronicles the emergence of *adab* (literature) out of this tradition, brought about by the bureaucratic system of the Abbasid caliphate:

But perhaps the most important political impulse to the systematic development of interest in the sciences of the Arabic language came from the Arabization of the administration, undertaken by the caliph 'Abd al-Malik and carried through by his successors. This policy resulted in a gradual and far-reaching transformation of the bureaucratic structure, the creation of new routines of government and the rise of new classes of bureaucrats and a new secretarial 'style'. The new bureaucrats were soon to become skilled professionals who were trained to express the finest shades of mood and meaning in the letters and directives of their masters and frequently passed on their jobs and skills to their descendants. As court procedure came to be imitated in provincial capitals, a corps of state secretaries with a highly developed art began to occupy a distinct and influential position throughout the empire and to be associated in the popular mind with a particular style of literature, to which we shall return below.²¹

20 Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters*, 85.

21 Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought in the classical period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 84–5.

Adab, which is often translated as literature but corresponds more to Belles-Lettres, therefore rose from the spread of literacy and from the need for textual models in prose. *Al-Zaynī Barakāt*, emulating the language of sixteenth-century historiography, inserts itself into the lineage of early modern *adab*, emphasizing the power of language. Ibn Mūsā's spy network collects oral stories, and we see them transformed into written reports that can condemn a person to jail and torture. Thus the word, spoken and written, is invested with a power. In its oral form, the word serves as a source of information for the state's spies; written, however, it becomes a weapon to use against Ibn Mūsā's adversaries.

Throughout the novel, as readers, we have access to certain documents that are used to tell aspects of the story. A major role is accorded to historiography, as the novel contains several pseudo-translations of imaginary writings: most of them are excerpts from the travelogue of Visconti Gianti, a fictional representation of the European travellers of the time. As well, in the Fifth Pavilion, we see a summary of papers from a report on a conference between Chief Spies from various places, which one of the protagonists participates in. This report is followed by appendices of which we see only the cover pages – translations of papers presented by other Chief Spies. What role do these pseudo-historical documents and their pseudo-translations play in the narrative? In fact, the multiplicity of points of view is essential to this work's novelistic – and anti-novelistic – project: the implosion of the unit, confusion, and alienation of the reader all function as a commentary on the difficulty of making sense of history, both ancient and modern. To quote Mehrez, the novel includes 'a very elaborate form of pastiche, wherein al-Ghitani imitates several kinds of documents. He draws on a repertoire of medieval conventional forms.'²²

Such a hybrid pseudo-documentary identity is in fact central to *al-Zaynī Barakāt*. The insertion of imaginary historical documents lends the novel what can be termed an imagined intertextuality, which complements the strong intertextual links it entertains with a historiographical text from the period – Ibn Iyās's *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā'i' al-Duhūr*

22 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 109.

[*The Wonders of Blossoms in the Events of the Ages*], which the novel borrows from heavily. Mehrez comments that '[t]he relationship between *al-Zaynī Barakāt* and Ibn Iyās's medieval chronicle can best be defined in Gerard Genette's term 'hypertextuality'. This relation of hypertextuality is therefore used to reattach al-Ghitani's novel to a canon of classical Arabic prose, and inscribe it within the Arab literary tradition.²³

In her chapter, Mehrez goes on to expand on the themes of parody and pastiche, relying on Genette's work on hypertextuality to show how al-Ghitani uses those strategies to efface the speaking subject:

Hypertextuality operates on two levels: *parody*, which is the *transformation* of the elements of the hypotext, and *pastiche*, which Genette identifies with *imitation* of the hypotext. In *al-Zaynī*, parody is identifiable on the level of style, where some of the most prominent stylistic characteristics of medieval Islamic historiography are reused to create the 'fictional world' of the novel. Here I am referring especially to the use of narrated discourse and the passive voice.²⁴

Mehrez therefore points out that '[t]here is no responsible 'I' at which a finger can be pointed.' While she does argue that 'the absence of the 'I' is a way in which the historical text can reflect a collective consciousness', one cannot help but wonder if al-Ghitani's use of these devices be a kind of 'disguise' that absolves the writer from his political responsibility.²⁵

In analysing the fictional documents that al-Ghitani presents us with in *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, Mehrez divides them into 'authority-people documents' and 'authority-authority documents'.²⁶ These two categories correspond roughly to oral and written documents, which we will return to shortly. The former are accessible to the characters of the novel at large, but the latter are only seen by some of them (usually Zakariyā or al-Zaynī himself), and the reader; some of them are not even available to us, as with the case of the reports of which we see only the title. This device gives us as readers direct access to the poles of authority in the text. Therefore, the

23 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 102.

24 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 103.

25 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 99.

26 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 110.

reader not only witnesses the spying, but becomes a spy her- or himself. In complicity with the writer, our informant, we mirror, albeit in a fragmented and incomplete fashion, the voyeurism which, as a theme, pervades the novel. In an increasingly televised world, we can all think of ourselves as being watched and watchers: we are all *baṣṣāṣṣīn* as well as the people they spy on. However, by witnessing events and texts that are inaccessible to 'normal' characters, we are made complicit with Zakariyā and, especially, with al-Zaynī Barakāt. Their authority is thus subverted, making the written word a weapon of resistance against oppression.

In addition, the inserted texts sometimes operate against authority. For instance, one of the texts for 'the meeting of the world's police chiefs in Cairo', authored by the police Chief, Zakariyā, details various forms of torture that he uses on suspects. Such a detailed description reveals the subject of physical violence to the reader. al-Ghitani himself has commented on the role of pain: 'the pain felt by a soldier in the Hellenic, Pharaonic, Babylonian, Assyrian or Mamluk era in war, is the same pain that a human being can feel now, and this is what I call the unicity of human experience.'²⁷ Therefore, pain gives us access to other peoples' struggle and a way into solidarity and resistance.

Indeed, the historical novel generates an intersection of two or more times: as Faisal Darraj explains in his chapter titled 'Gamal al-Ghitani and the aesthetics of the novelistic experiment', the time of the events and the time of the writing of the novel are brought together.²⁸ Moreover, as we read the text and participate in the creation of meaning, the time of our reading is superposed to those two:

The historicity of reading produces the historicity of the text that is read. For the text that is sought by a reader from a different time encounters questions that its writer never conceived of, and it divides itself between silence and speech. However, divided between silence and speech, it finds new life because life is found in renewed imperfection, and not in imagined perfection.²⁹

27 'Roundtable discussion: al-Riwāya w-al-Tārīkh', *Fuṣūl* 17.1 (1998): 405–34.

28 Darraj, *Nadhbariyyat al-Riwāya w-al-Riwāya al-ʿArabiyya*, 231.

29 Darraj, *Nadhbariyyat al-Riwāya w-al-Riwāya al-ʿArabiyya*. Beirut: Arabic Cultural Center, 1999, 231.

There is thus a parallel drawn between several historical moments by the very process of writing and reading a historical novel, and that parallel emphasizes the temporal gap between writer, subject matter and reader. Darraj says of al-Ghitani that he 'took from history a document with limited temporality and a single meaning and transformed it through the novel' (Darraj 232). Therefore, al-Ghitani's text is not only a transparent allegory for Egypt in the 1960s, and the fall of Mamluk Cairo a medieval counterpart for the 1967 defeat, but at every moment of reading it creates its own allegory to reflect the reader's contemporary reality.

This novel straddles historical, documentary, allegorical and fictional genres. It also operates an internal 'cultural translation': the sixteenth century is used as an allegory for the twentieth. However, it is also pitted against it; in a world of polymaths and fluid identities, our modern categories do not apply; the novel itself is an anachronism. *al-Zaynī Barakāt* may thus be read as a formal contestation of the most authoritative genre of modern literature. In her analysis of parody in the novel, Kassem Draz explains:

Parody as a particular type of transtextuality aims at imitating a text, it is a device which emphasizes the 'litterarité' of literature since its main aim is to destroy the mimetic illusion and does not aim at imitating nature but at imitating literature; by doing this it destroys the realist illusion and comes as a reaction to the realist concept of art.³⁰

Similarly, the superposition of medieval and modern Cairo puts in question the mimetic role of the novel. Coming on the heels of Mahfouz's realist chronicles, al-Ghitani's novelistic experiment is a bold re-imagination of what 'fiction' can be, when drawn from historical chronicles, and superposed so transparently to a present reality.

As Cairo falls prey to the Ottomans, only one of the Mamluks, Sultan Tumanbay, resists. However, history tells us that Tumanbay will be defeated, captured and executed. *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, on the other hand, persists in his administrative duties after the defeat, showing that corruption is more powerful than heroism. Through the examples of Sa'īd the student and

30 Kassem Draz, 'In quest of new narrative forms', 140.

Sultan Tumanbay, the novel presents us with a narrative of failed resistance, whether against the invaders or against the corrupt and oppressive state. However, in its narrative strategies, it uses the medieval historiographical form to veil the 'I' while simultaneously implicating reader and writer deeply into the political transgressions. It implodes the authority of the narrator and of the tyrannical characters by making readers into spies, and juxtaposes the medieval defeat with the author's and reader's contemporary realities, creating an infinite allegory that functions as a constant indictment of tyranny. *al-Zaynī Barakāt* therefore exchanges literal resistance with literary dissidence, and simultaneously revises the meanings of author and authoritarian. While resistance fails in the narrative, al-Ghitani's novel itself becomes a form of resistance. By using it to challenge state authority, official historiography, and even the unity of the novelistic genre, the author creates a space of freedom from authoritarianism.

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8 The One Who Does His Majesty's Bidding: Censorship and the Banality of Power in siSwati Crime Fiction and Drama

While many writers across the continent have discussed the figure of the African dictator in their fiction and drama, in Swaziland literature the potentate's presence is made most notable by his absence. SiSwati writing generally appears to sidestep potentially controversial topics. Instead it seems content with presenting variations on the same parochial themes, as Clara Tsabedze claims,¹ laying it open to the kind of criticism Mazisi Kunene levelled at black South African writing in an article published in 1968. Kunene labelled this writing 'situational literature' continuing to say, 'it deals with factual situations, without drawing any significant conclusions; ... the writers lend themselves to the requirements of the school audience and purge their works of any paragraph, word or phrase, that might be deemed subversive by missionary and government standards.'² Kunene's judgement was meant to be an indictment of bantu education under the apartheid regime, and certainly a good deal of siSwati fiction goes beyond this kind of desultory scribbling, but factors like self-censorship and school audience that influenced early writings by Swazi authors have persisted as forces that have helped shape Swaziland literature.

Like many other African nations, Swaziland struggled to achieve self-representation by reforming a colonial education curriculum and introducing literature written by local authors. Because of its colonial history and attendant influence by missionaries from South Africa, formal use of its

1 Unpublished seminar paper.

2 Cited in Albert S. Gerard, *Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic* (Berkeley: University of California, 1971), 266.

mother tongue, siSwati, was stifled by English and isiZulu, both of which were the languages of official record up until independence in 1968. When siSwati was finally introduced into the curriculum after 1968, education authorities introduced a series of workshops in an attempt to nurture budding siSwati authors. What followed soon after was a literary output tailored for the education market, a trend that has continued up to the present. However, much of the literary production has been influenced by an autocratic state that uses a traditionalist ideology to suppress freedom of expression. Many of these elements converge in the publishing history of Eric Sibanda's siSwati detective story, 'Sagila Semnikati' (The Owner's Knobkerrie). The story's original setting – the royal grounds where the *Ncwala* ceremony takes place – was quietly removed in the second edition of the anthology in which it originally appeared.³ Subsequently, the ritual site reappears in a radio play adaptation of Sibanda's story written by Swazi actor and playwright, Sibusiso Mamba.⁴

Often dubbed Africa's last absolute monarchy, Swaziland is less known for its written literature than for its annual public rituals, its oral performances which draw large crowds of tourists and journalists. Every year in a ritual of its own the global media descend on Swaziland during the time of the *Umhlanga*, and then again for the *Ncwala*.⁵ For outsiders, while the former promises a display of thousands of bare-breasted maidens, one of whom might be chosen to become King Mswati's next bride (at the moment, he has fourteen wives, according to some sources⁶), the latter – the *Ncwala*, or ritual of kingship – offers the supernatural and secretive aura of primeval ceremony. For insiders, while the *Umhlanga* reinforces

3 Wandile Mathonsi alerted me to alterations to the original story while conducting research as part of the team working on an annotated bibliography of Swazi literature. He also translated both the original and revised stories. Without his alert eye and valuable assistance, this piece would not have been written. Telamilile P. Mkhathswa also helped with some of the translation.

4 Mamba, Sibusiso, *Sagila*, 2006. I wish to thank Sibusiso Mamba for providing me with a copy of the manuscript.

5 While often spelled 'Incwala', I follow Andrew Apter's rendering of the word, which is based on Hilda Kuper's distinction between its noun-prefix usage. See Apter, p. 50.

6 See, for instance Socrates Mbamalu's article in *allAfrica*.

the allegiance of the king's subjects and ensures the king's patrimony, the *Ncwala* fortifies his position as ruler and shapes the consciousness of the nation. Or at least that is the official narrative, a stance that increasingly has led to a great deal of largely muted discontent. The pomp and ceremony of Mswati III's appearances and the excess represented by his fleet of luxury cars, his private aeroplane, and his bevy of wives, each with her own palatial residence, in a country with the grim distinction of having the highest HIV/AIDS infection in the world,⁷ along with a devastating poverty level, constitute grotesque and obscene displays that mirror Achille Mbembe's notion of 'the banality of power'.⁸

Certainly, the *Ncwala* is a manifestation of Mbembe's assertion that 'the postcolony is a particularly revealing (and rather dramatic) stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline'.⁹ Alan Booth notes that Mswati II (who ruled from approximately 1825 to 1865) gave the *Ncwala* 'unprecedented emphasis as an annual ritual reaffirmation of the symbiosis between himself and the nation ...'.¹⁰ Following the example of his father and their royal predecessors, Mswati III has continued the celebration as a means of consolidating power and gaining the approbation of the general population. Its ancient origins as a first fruits celebration linked to the astrological movement of the sun and the moon, its highly ritualistic design, concluding with the elemental conjuring of fire and water, its dramatic display, indeed, even the vocabulary used to describe its components – water priests; pilgrimage; warriors; sacred enclosure, for example – these combined elements produce an extremely powerful drama of kingship. This is most cogently exemplified by Hilda Kuper's observation, 'When there is no king, there is no *Incwala*,'¹¹

7 An article published by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation provides the following statistics: 'South Africa has the highest number of people living with HIV in the world (7.0 million). Swaziland has the highest prevalence in the world (28.8%).'

8 Achille Mbembe 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', *Africa* 62/1 (1992), 3–37.

9 Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes', 4.

10 Alan R. Booth, *Historical Dictionary of Swaziland* (Maryland and London: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 210.

11 Hilda Kuper, *An African Aristocracy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 197.

which so economically gathers together two strands of the ritual: power and performance. In effect, the king *is* the *Ncwala*, so any rendering of the ceremony into fiction, either positively or negatively, becomes an implicit representation of the monarch.

While the *Ncwala* is a religious ceremony, it is also a ritual of kingship and an affirmation of national identity. Kuper notes that its function is 'to protect the King, symbol of the nation, against rivals from within, and enemies from without'.¹² This dramaturgy of power is intimately linked to the ruling elite's manipulation of tradition and ideology of traditionalism, which ostensibly rests on adapting useful practices from the present to a bedrock of traditional values.¹³ Thus, in the name of tradition, following the general election in 1972, Sobhuza II had repealed a Westminster-style constitution imposed upon the country by Britain in 1963 that limited his influence, and announced that he would rule by decree. He outlawed political parties, regulated the number of people who could hold meetings, and introduced an order-in-council that would allow the detention of anyone for up to sixty days, measures that were only revised prior to the October 1993 election. By 1978 Sobhuza had established a reconstituted *tinkhundla* system (ostensibly modelled after ancient Swazi traditional councils) that in effect bypassed parliamentary democracy. Hilda Kuper writes that under this system 'individual rights ... were subordinated to the interests of an autocratic aristocracy'.¹⁴ A year after King Mswati III's accession to the throne in 1986, during a speech to mark his nineteenth birthday, he reaffirmed his father's vision: 'I have the unshakeable belief in tradition, and still wish that the entire African continent would follow their traditional norms and choose only what suits them from western traditions'.¹⁵

12 Hilda Kuper, *Sobhuza II: Ngwenyama and King of Swaziland* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1978), 340–1.

13 Hugh Macmillan, 'Swaziland: Decolonization and the Triumph of "Tradition"' *Journal of Modern African Studies* 23/4 (1985), 643–66.

14 Booth, *Dictionary*, 318.

15 Msibi, Nhlanhla, *The Delayed Revolution: Swaziland in the Twenty-First Century* (Kindle Edition, 2014).

But while such an impressive performance worked during his father's reign, its effectiveness has become more questionable. Mswati's invention of a system of monarchical democracy, which he claimed in 2013 came to him during a thunder storm, or his revelation at the 39th SADC assembly meeting in June 2016 that he believes in 'democracy as an idea but not as an ideal because things that are ideal to you may not be ideal to other people' (*Mail and Guardian* np), would be merely a laughable part of the grotesque and obscene that Mbembe identifies as being intrinsic elements of the banality of power, if it were not for the very real instances of ongoing human rights abuses.¹⁶ In short, the practice of defiant African alterity that the *Ncwala* represented under King Sobhuza has in many ways been reduced to an event or function alongside other traditionalist practices

- 16 Buhle Dube and Alfred Magagula's caustic remarks are worth quoting at length: Swaziland is in a fairly unique position as it has more than one document which claims to be the supreme law of the land: the King's Proclamation to the Nation No 12 of 1973 (the '1973 Decree') and the Constitution of the Kingdom of Swaziland Act No 1 of 2005 (the '2005 Constitution'). The 1973 Decree is still in effect; a decree can only be repealed by decree, and there has been no decree repealing the 1973 Decree. The 2005 Constitution vests most powers in His Majesty. For example, he appoints the Cabinet, the judges and the Civil Service Commission. He can veto any law and is not properly bound by the laws of the realm However, this is nothing compared to the 1973 Decree. That document places 'all executive, judicial and legislative functions' in the King. In other words, the 1973 Decree allows the King to rule by decree. It was this power His Majesty used on 6 February 2006 when he declared that the 2005 Constitution ... would come into force on 8 February 2006. The King's ... Proclamation No 1 of 2006 demonstrated that the 1973 Decree was still fully operational. As things stand in the state of Swaziland in 2011, there can be little doubt that the 1973 Decree is the supreme law of the land. Two recent examples of how the law operates with impunity were the imprisonment of Thulani Maseko, a human rights activist and lawyer and Bheki Makhubu, editor of *The Nation*, for 470 days (they were finally released in June 2015), and the February 2016 attack on University of Swaziland students by security police, who drove an armoured vehicle into the crowd, injuring one student so badly that her spinal cord was broken.

that foreign journalists in particular draw upon to present the nation to the world as a kind of royal African theme park or cultural village.¹⁷

As such, the annual ritual reflects and reinforces the more mundane, banal operations of government, whose exploitation of traditional structures also includes modes of censorship. The tight restriction placed on the news media and voices of dissent extends beyond the control of state television, radio, and print media to the world of book publishers. Macmillan Publishers holds a monopoly on the production of educational materials following an agreement with the government first struck in 1979 and renewed for a further ten years in 1988.¹⁸ In turn, local writers and editors hired by Macmillan practise a form of self-censorship, as they expunge from their own work as well as that of others any material that might be considered subversive by the state. This is evident in the various iterations of Eric Sibanda's 'Sagila Semnikati'. Originally set during the *Ncwala* ceremony, Sibanda's story was subsequently recast, the *Ncwala* written out of it and replaced with a traditional wedding ceremony as educational authorities, publisher, writers, and editors performed a version of Mbembe's 'mutual zombification'¹⁹ in their unwitting attempts to make literal the original siSwati title, which metaphorically refers to 'the one who does his majesty's bidding'.²⁰ Subsequently in 2006, another Swazi writer and actor, Sibusiso Mamba, adapted Sibanda's original story as an English radio drama that was broadcast on BBC radio, reinserting the *Ncwala* as the setting and

- 17 Comaroff & Comaroff refer to an article in the *Cape Times* on Swaziland to reinforce their comparison of KwaZulu-Natal to a culture park (fn 25, 156). As a ceremony, the *Ncwala* has featured in the writings of foreign visitors and journalists since the nineteenth century, when it was often viewed as either proof of an autochthonous cultural heritage or as a display of savage brutality. During the twentieth century, the print media has tended to sensationalize it as a means of critiquing royal power.
- 18 Late in 2000 the government proceeded to introduce the development of school textbooks for the secondary level as well. Mavuso, Makana, 'The Book Chain in Swaziland' in Roger Stringer, ed., *The Book Chain in Anglophone Africa* (Oxford: INASP, 2002), 83–6 (85).
- 19 Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes', 4.
- 20 Lucy Dlamini offered 'The One Who Does His Majesty's Bidding' as another possible translation. The manuscript translations are not paginated.

shortening the title to 'Sagila'. With Mamba's English rendering, the detective story's capacity to represent and propose change to social systems and their structures reaches a global audience.

Sibanda's story, 'Sagila Semnikati', is a whodunit murder mystery set during the nation's most sacred rite of kingship. The mutilated body of the wealthy and respected farmer, Fabagiye Mamba, is discovered on the eve of the *Ncwala*. More unsettling is the realization that his death was a medicine murder, and that various parts of his body ('his tongue, his nipple, his right eye, and his beard')²¹ have been cut away and taken along with the titular sagila, or club, which was his proud possession. As the story progresses, the setting of the royal residence and the *Ncwala* ritual seem to fade into the background. The detectives question a number of suspects, but when each is proven to be innocent, the investigation circles back to the site of the murder at the Ludzidzini royal compound where the *Ncwala* was held.

Like the conventional murder mystery, character is secondary to plot. Sibanda's story depersonalizes the police officers, usually called 'senior detectives', instead allowing the story's narrative thrust to remain firmly on the investigation. When the detectives are given a voice, they generally discuss the direction that they should or should not have taken. This lack of a central character who analyses events and makes pronouncements creates an oddly distanced, objective effect. The suspects who are put forward are conventional types that appear often in Swazi literature. There is the farmer who had been engaged in a land dispute with the victim, the victim's favourite but junior wife, who may also have stolen his money, and the stranger who had been seen carrying a club. These suspects, however, are each dismissed in short order. The story's potentially troubling critique of state power begins when the detectives review the case one year later, as one of them speculates, 'Maybe the killer is one of those living in the royal residence, or somebody related to them.'²² His partner concurs, 'We made

21 Original text: 'Akusekho lulwimi, libele, liso langesekudla, kantsi nentjwebe ihin-indziwe' (138).

22 Original text: 'Awucabangi yini kutsi lowambulala kungaba ngumuntfu wakhona lapho esidzidzini, noma-ke lohlobene nemuntfu wakhona?' (141).

the mistake of looking far from the scene of the crime.²³ This, it turns out, is precisely the case. Following a further investigation, two senior warriors who resided at the royal residence during the *Ncwala* are finally arrested and charged with murder and fraud.

Even though the club itself is actually discovered at the home of one of the warriors, not on the grounds where the *Ncwala* had been performed, it would appear that Eric Sibanda made the mistake of *not* setting the scene of the crime far enough from the royal residence, of *not* being satisfied with placing the killer amongst the all too common farmers, or wives, or strangers found everywhere in the nation. In preparation for a revised edition of the anthology, *Khulumani Sive* in which 'Sagila Semnikati' had appeared, Macmillan Swaziland asked Sibanda to make changes to his story. In particular, the editors wanted him to situate the murder in a different location and context from that of the royal residence and the *Ncwala*. Sibanda refused, arguing (perhaps disingenuously) that the *Ncwala* was peripheral to the story, that it was a story about medicine murder. It is Eric Sibanda's belief that following his refusal to revise his story, Macmillan approached another Swazi writer who then made extensive changes, including most importantly the removal of the *Ncwala* as setting and its replacement as the more innocuous *umtsimba*, or traditional wedding scene. However, a lecturer from a local Teachers College who is one of Macmillan's regular writers and editors, disputes Sibanda's claim, insisting that *she* was hired by Macmillan to edit the story. She argues that the original version, with its implicit link between the *Ncwala* and ritual murder, was unSwazi, which in local terms is an extremely powerful accusation to level against someone.²⁴ As Mirta Virella writes in an article on censorship in Argentinian cultural production,

the regulations and decrees that testify to the control of culture are semantically interwoven and engender prescriptive practices that are organized through contagion

23 Original text: 'Tsine sesuke safuna khashane sashiya ekhaya' (141).

24 Sibanda discussed the issue with me in his office at the University of Swaziland. I had an opportunity to talk to the actual editor (who shall remain anonymous) outside the UNISWA library in July 2014.

and inclusion. Accordingly, a discourse takes shape in which each isolated prohibition is absorbed and understood as a general prohibition.²⁵

With her accusation of being 'unSwazi,' the editor firmly situates the discourse of censorship in the arena of nationalist sentiment. And as if to prove how much she is willing to sacrifice, her name does not appear among the list of authors or editors in the book. Instead, Macmillan retained Sibanda's name, as if to suggest that he had revised the story himself.

When the 2001 edition of the anthology was published, the whole of Swaziland was gripped by reports of the capture of a serial killer named David Simelane, who is believed to have killed forty five women between 1999 and 2001. Further, during the course of ongoing interrogations, Simelane claimed that he did not act alone, that he had been hired by a prominent local businessman and two members of parliament to collect body parts to be sold as *muti*. Perhaps this case (still unresolved by 2004 when the second edition of the anthology was published) may have influenced Macmillan's decision to revise Sibanda's story. The ongoing discovery of mutilated female bodies was reported to a population bewildered and terrified by the ravages of HIV/AIDS and some were using *muti*, or traditional medicine, in an attempt to combat the disease. When Simelane started his killing spree in 1999, Swaziland was being confronted with another crisis. In a carefully researched article on the mass-murderer, Shaun Raviv writes,

By one account, nearly 50,000 people had died of AIDS at that point, nearly one out of every twenty Swazis, most of them in the prime of their lives. [Alan] Whiteside told me that there was a cemetery at the bottom of the hill by his school, and it served as an indicator of the epidemic for him. 'Every time I went past,' he said, 'it just grew, the red mounds of earth scarring the veld.'²⁶

This was also the year that King Mswati called the nation together to fight HIV/AIDS, even as he chose yet another wife following the *Umblanga* ceremony that year. Mbembe's notion of necropolitics describes the king's

25 Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes', 4.

26 Shaun Raviv, 'The Killers of Swaziland', *The Big Roundtable* <<https://thebigroundtable.com>> accessed 8 August 2017.

empty rhetoric which in effect created the conditions for 'death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*'.²⁷ Sibanda's short story had captured a small part of this world, and the implications of a medicine murder occurring during the kingdom's most sacred ritual meant Macmillan felt its own close association with government at least partially threatened.

The second version of the story attempts to stay true to the situational irony of the original by locating Fabagiye's death during a private wedding, a celebration of a fresh beginning. However, the new site and altered ceremony depreciate the significance of the crime as it appears in the original story and empty the act of ritual murder of its potentially subversive value. Early in the original story Sibanda writes,

A lot of people were shocked and amazed by Fabagiye's death. A man to die when he had attended the incwala ceremony! And then rot away for days without being found! What had happened to his neighbours who were also there? Fabagiye left on Saturday in readiness for the incwala which was to be danced the following Tuesday.²⁸

The edited rendering retains the exclamatory sentences, but modifies the occasion:

A lot of people were shocked and amazed by Fabagiye's death. A man to die when he had attended a traditional wedding! His cousin's wedding, too! Fabagiye left home on Tuesday in order to help his cousins with the wedding preparations at Masini, across the Mkhondvo River. The wedding was on that Saturday.²⁹

27 Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15/1 (2003), 11–40 (40).

28 Original text: 'Kubamangalise kufanele bantfu kufa kwaFabagiye. Ukhona nje umuntfu longafa aye eNcwaleni? Adzimate umuntfu acishe abolele emalawini pho angabonwa ngumuntfu? Kani lawa lamanye emajaha emmango labekaye eNcwaleni abekadze akuphi? Fabagiye usuka lapha kunguMgcibelo, iNcwala itawugidvwa ngaLesibili lolandzelako' (138).

29 Original text: 'Kubamangalise kufanele bantfu kufa kwa Fabagiye. Ukhona nje umuntfu longafa aye emtsimbeni? Emtsimbeni wemzala wakhe nekwent! Fababiye usuka lapha kakhe ngalweSibili utsi uyawusita emalungiselelweni emtsimba wemzala

Sibanda continues on as if to underscore the setting of the murder, whereas the editor of the second version dutifully decontaminates the site. The original edition reads:

His family was then shocked to receive a message that Fabagiye had died at the traditional capital. But he had been in good health when he left! The deceased had been discovered in his hut at Ludzidzini by children who were playing hide and seek. A child who had hidden in Fabagiye's open hut had come out screaming his lungs out, one would swear he had chanced upon the deadly mamba snake.³⁰

The revised edition reads:

His family was then shocked to receive a message that Fabagiye had passed on. His wives had been to the wedding and come back on Sunday, leaving him in good spirits and health. The deceased had been discovered by herd boys four days after the *umhlambiso* rite which concludes a traditional wedding. The boys were looking for lost goats in a forest. One of them had searched inside a donga and soon emerged screaming his lungs out, one would swear he had chanced upon the deadly mamba snake.³¹

All of this occurs on the first page of the story, with one final insistence. Sibanda's 'Since this tragedy had occurred at a royal residence, it therefore had to be investigated by senior, experienced detectives. The motives of

wakhe le eMasini ngesheya kweMkhondvo. Umtsimba wemzala wakhe utawuba mgeMgcibelo' (139).

30 Original text: 'batunywe ngumbiko wekutsi sekumenele Fabagiye kaNgwane. Njani manje umuntfu ahambe aphila lapha? Umufi utfolwa bantfwana elawini lakhe eLudzidzini ngelilanga lelilandzela lelo lekushisa umgogodla. Bantfwana bebadlala bacoshana, lomunye abone umnyango ungakavalwa kahle kulenye indlu agijime ayowungena khona, atsi ubhacela labangani bakhe. Akuphelanga namizuzu mingakhi angenile, umntfwana aphume acacamba. Wawungafunga utsi uhlangene nemamba lukhonkhotsi' (138).

31 Original text: 'batunywe ngumbiko wekutsi sekumenele Fabagiye. Njani manje umuntfu ahambe aphila lapha? Futsi nabo bamshiye aphila nasebabuya ngeliSontfo. Umufi utfolwa bafana bekwelusa ngelilanga lesine emva kwemhlambiso. Bafana bahamba vafuna timbuti lapha emahlatsini eceleni kwemfula. Munye wabo watsi asekgangene lapha esihosheni abukabuke khona ngobe lokwetimbuti kuyatitsandza tihosha. Akuphelanga mizuzu mingakhi, ashobe umfana esihosheni, wevakala acacamba. Wawungafunga utsi uhlangene nemamba lukhonkhotsi' (139-40).

the killers had to be known', is reduced to, 'Since this was a serious crime, it therefore had to be investigated by senior, experienced detectives. The ruthless killer had to be found at all costs', in the revised version.³²

Interestingly, the mysterious editor did not see fit to remove the abhorrent criminal act of medicine murder. Except for the victim, Fabagiya Mamba, all the suspects are commoners, including the murderer himself apparently, who has no known links to royalty. But, like in the original story, the precise motive for the killing and dismemberment is not revealed; the emphasis instead is placed on the sagila. Even this object, however, is neutralized in the revised version. Whereas in Sibanda's story the club would be associated with the Swazi regiments whose loyalty to the king is in part represented by these traditional knobkerries or war clubs, in the revised version it seems merely to be one of the accoutrements for full traditional regalia. The revised version does describe Fabagiye as 'a senior warrior initiated under the Inyatsi regiment',³³ one of the nation-wide formations whose principle objective is to protect kingship,³⁴ but it obfuscates the cultural value of the sagila during an exchange between the detectives and a herd boy who is the son of Bhodlijingi, one of the murders:

'What does your father know about such things since he is always with his regiment?'

'Then you really do not know him. Nobody can compete with him in this area. The club that he is carrying these days is awe-inspiring.'

'A club? Where does your father get one from since he no longer herds cattle?'³⁵

32 Original texts: 'Njengoba lendzaba yenteke emtini webuKhosi, kufanele iphatfwe bofokisi labavutsiwe. Kufanele kutsi jakutfungatswa luhala kutfolakale kutsi ngabe lowo lombulele bekafunani' and 'Njengobe lendzaba yimbi kakhulu kufanele iphatfwe bofokisi labavutsiwe. Nakanjani lolobulele umntfwana Mamba ngesibulawela lesingaka kufuneka atfolakale' (140).

33 Original text: 'Libutfo lakhe bekuyiNyatsi yaMswati' (140).

34 Following a period of training and upon graduating into a regiment, inductees utter the declaration, *tsine sigane iNkhosi* (we are married to the King) (Kumalo 88).

35 Original text:

"Suka lapha wena, abekubonaphi uyihlo kugawula tindvuku loku uhlala lena emabutweni nje. Kgutiphi ke letindvuku telikhetselo lotsi uyihlo unato?"

'Kuhleke kwemfana.

While the detective's interrogation places the herd boy on the defensive, causing him to reveal his father's secret, the dual associations of the staff with the utilitarian work of cattle herding and the ceremonial display of the king's warrior also distracts from Eric Sibanda's emphasis on the sagila's symbolic resonance. Macmillan or the National Curriculum Centre possibly felt that the story would initiate useful discussions amongst students (the target audience) over a practice that was still current in Swazi society, as the grisly Simelane case proves. Just as the sagila would simply operate as evidence, with no link to the *Ncwala*, the prescriptive practices of the state would remain outside of classroom discussions.

But while Sibanda's story was appropriated and recast to perhaps satisfy a guarded monarchist sentiment, in March 2006 'Sagila Semnikati' reappeared as 'Sagila', a drama adapted and performed on BBC radio by Sibusiso Mamba. And in this emergence onto an international platform Sibanda's original use of the *Ncwala* as setting is revitalized, its understated presence transformed during the revelatory final moments into a vexed denunciation of the constrictions placed upon the individual in the name of tradition. Whereas the economy of Sibanda's six-page narrative favours plot at the expense of character, Sibusiso Mamba's version manages to align character development with the complications of a detective drama. The disclosure in the final minutes, in which we discover that the farmer's son, Mafa, has plotted to have a traditional healer murder his father, with a reward of some of the murdered man's body parts, acts as a shocking culmination to the dark currents of superstition, jealousy, infidelity, wife-beating, and polygamy that gather and circulate during the course of the play. Siphon, the detective, asks, 'Why Mafa? Why during the Incwala?'

MAFA: You see Detective ... I hate this country. I hate all the traditions and fears and superstitions of this country ... they are the reason my mother died. Because she refused to accept them! I knew that I had to make it look like a ritual killing. Scare the whole nation! Deflect any possible suspicion from myself.

“Wo-hho-hho! Nembala awumati babe wena. Uyatati tindvuku latiphatsako kutsi tinjani? Yona lena lanayo nje kulamalanga yelikhetselo lucobo” (146).

Earlier in the play, Mamba has his character, Mafa, use voice-over to provide information on the significance of the ceremony to a foreign audience:

Incwala ... the most sacred ceremony on the calendar of the Swazi Kingdom ... thousands of young men and thousands of traditional warriors gather round the King, the most potent medicine men in the country also gather ... and the purpose? To fortify the king and the Swazi nation ... for the year to come.

Even more radically, perhaps, Mamba also has a character describe the king himself as being ‘dark as a storm-cloud’ upon hearing of the murder. The character Nkunzayi, a senator who presumably has links with the royal house, continues: “They killed your father on the day of Incwala, committed a ritual murder right on the premises of the Royal residence. It is an insult to the King and the whole nation!”³⁶ Hilda Kuper notes in her analysis of the ritual during King Sobhuza’s reign that, ‘the *Incwala* unites the people under the king, and at present there is a fairly general appreciation of its nationalizing value. “We see we are all Swazi; we are joined against outside foes.” ... The people must be united in friendship and cooperation; bloodshed at the *Incwala* is a terrible thing’. Writing for a global audience, Mamba appropriates this central narrative of the nation and translates this ‘play of kingship’ into a radio drama to expose the grip traditionalist ideology and patriarchal structures have on Swazi society.³⁷ This development of Eric Sibanda’s relatively unobtrusive use of the *Ncwala* perhaps foregrounds its unsettling potential, the troubling implications of which were recognized by the education authorities, and subsequently occluded in the revised version.

A more public debate around censorship began in 2009 following a report that an account of the country’s largest opposition party, the People’s United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO) would be introduced into the 2010–11 secondary school history curriculum.³⁸ However, Vusi Sibisi

36 All quotations Eric Sibanda, ‘Sagila Semnikati’ in Zodwa Motsa, ed., *Khulumani Sive* (Manzini: Macmillan Boleswa, 2004), 139–48, revised edition, 45; 3; 8; 8.

37 Kuper, *Aristocracy*, 224; 225.

38 Mduduzi Magagula, ‘PUDEMO in New School Syllabus’, *Times of Swaziland* <www.times.co.sz/index.php?news=11071> accessed 16 August 2017.

published a scathing article in the *Swazi Times* the following year on the government's decision to exclude any references to PUDEMO, a party that was banned practically at its inception and whose president, Mario Masuku, has been jailed on numerous occasions. Sibisi reported that Pat Muir, the Principal Secretary in the Ministry of Education and Training, claimed that the party's inclusion in the textbook 'was an oversight on their part' ostensibly because the organization did not have any material on its evolution and history that could be used by teachers and students. The underlying rationale was that this caused confusion to both pupils and teachers.³⁹ More recently, the text which caused the controversy, *Focus on Swaziland*, has apparently been grudgingly accepted after its initial rejection two years earlier. A 2014 article by Mduduzi Magagula notes that a government official 'says the book is now usable because it documented things that happened before the party was proscribed'.⁴⁰ The text documents the formation of PUDEMO in 1983 at the University of Swaziland during the turbulent interregnum following the death of Sobhuza II in which the Queen Regent, Dzeliwe, was deposed by a faction within the royal house.⁴¹

With such close regulation of educational material, it is perhaps not so surprising, then, that the kingdom's most important ritual, the *Ncwala*, is almost wholly absent in siSwati fiction, poetry, and drama. Zodwa Motsa recognizes its potential for literature in her call for Swazi writers to model their drama after its performative displays; for her, the ritual reinforces Swazi identity and is an imaginable vehicle for an original local expression separate from Western dramatic patterns.⁴² Like Motsa, in a separate arti-

39 Vusi Sibisi, 'New syllabus geared to brainwash Swazi child', *Swazi Times* <<http://www.Swazilive.com>> accessed 16 August 2017.

40 Mduduzi Magagula, 'PUDEMO AND THE ROYAL FAMILY' *Times of Swaziland* <<http://www.times.co.sz/news/96695-pudemo-and-the-royal-family.html>> accessed 16 August 2017.

41 There is some uncertainty over whether the material has in fact been included in the syllabus to date. The text in question, *Focus on Swaziland*, does not appear in any Google search. It was, however, published by Macmillan.

42 Zodwa Motsa, 'The Missing Link in siSwati Modern Drama', in Lokangaka Losambe and Devi Sarinjeive, eds, *Pre-Colonial and Post-Colonial Drama and Theatre in Africa* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2001), 32-47.

cle Patrick Ebewo (unaware of Mamba's play) wonders why Swazi writers have not incorporated elements of the ceremony into their drama, but he is more interested in the subversive potential of transforming 'the Incwala ritual performance into a revolutionary theatre with the primary purpose of empowering disadvantaged Swazi citizens in the struggle to liberate themselves from the oppressive forces of cultural conventions'.⁴³ Mamba's version of 'Sagila Semnikati' does answer Ebewo's call for writers to lay claim to and adapt elements of the ceremony as a means to expose the *commandement's* manipulation of tradition. In this, he also goes some way towards Motsa's recognition of the *Ncwala's* potential for self-representation by local writers that is free from the shackles of Western literary influences.

Ironically, however, his translation of the ritual must rely on a European platform from which to be heard. Within Swaziland itself, discussion on the workings of this 'play of kingship' is forbidden. Describing a seminar on traditional religion and culture organized by former Lecturer Joshua Mzizi at the University of Swaziland, Simangaliso Kumalo writes,

when people raised questions around the issue of *Incwala* they were warned not to discuss this because he had not sought permission from the royal elders (*labadzala*). The warning came through the then Minister of Justice who also happened to be a chief himself. The question that may be asked is why the mystery surrounding the monarchy and some of the sacred ceremonies? The answer to that question is so that it can remain mysterious. It is this mysteriousness and superstition that has sustained the continuity of the kingship.⁴⁴

Mbembe argues that in the postcolony 'the *commandement* is constantly engaged in projecting an image both of itself and the world – a fantasy that it presents to its subjects as a truth that is beyond dispute The *commandement* itself aspires to be a cosmogony'.⁴⁵ The mystification of a ritual that is the embodiment of kingship is institutionalized as the despot's

43 Patrick Ebewo, 'Swazi Incwala: The Performative and radical Poetics in a Ritual Practice', *South African Theatre Journal* 25/2 (2011), 89–100, (90).

44 Simangaliso Kumalo *Religion and Politics in Swaziland: The Contributions of Dr. J. B. Mzizi* (South Africa: Sun Press, 2013), 43–4.

45 Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes', 8.

inviolability filters down to its national university as repressed freedom of expression. More broadly, the secrecy enveloping aspects of the *Ncwala* insinuates itself into educational, literary, and media spaces. In August 2014 Minister of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT), Dumisani Ndlangamandla, announced that 'state media existed primarily to serve the interests of the state'.⁴⁶ Meanwhile in June 2015, a report tabled at the Swaziland Parliament revealed that censorship at (state-controlled) Swazi Television was so tight that every month the Swaziland government issued directives to the station about what events it should cover.⁴⁷ And as recently as January 2018 an Independent Online (IOL) article written by Mel Frykber reported that Zweli Martin Dlamini, the editor of *Swaziland Shopping*, an independent newspaper based in Swaziland, was forced to flee the country after receiving death threats from the manager of Swazi Mobile, a telecommunications company that the king and other high-ranking officials own shares in. Dlamini's paper was closed down by the government following the publication of his article, which exposed how Swazi Mobile had dislodged its rival, the parastatal company, SPTC.⁴⁸

The control of public spaces is duplicated in the censorious practices of a publishing house that employs an anonymous writer to alter a story appearing in an anthology that is included in the high school curriculum without providing acknowledgement of the changes. This elision of the site of kingly ritual mirrors the absence of the *Ncwala* in Swaziland's literary landscape more generally. Certainly, the continued rendering of this drama of kingship by Swazi writers could further test the limits of saying the unsayable in Swaziland, transforming the event into a ritual of rebellion

46 'Swaziland: No Chance of Open Broadcasts', *allAfrica* <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201708020680.html>> accessed 16 August 2017.

47 Rooney, Richard, 'NO CHANCE OF OPEN BROADCASTS', *Swazi Media Commentary* <<http://www.swazimedia.blogspot.com>> accessed 8 August 2017.

48 Frykberg, Mel. 'Swazi editor flees over story on King Mswati's "shady dealings"', *IOL Africa*, 12 January 2018. <<https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/swazi-editor-flees-over-story-on-king-mswatis-shady-dealings-12702920>> accessed 13 January 2018.

against autocratic rule and questioning the claim that one absolute, singular narrative constitutes a nation.⁴⁹

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49 The *Ncwala* was identified by South African anthropologist Max Gluckman as belonging to ancient practices that he labelled 'rituals of rebellion.' During these displays tensions are openly expressed, but rebellion is performed as a means of channeling potential hostilities and ultimately reinforcing loyalties towards the king, thus denying the possibility of social change to traditional structures.

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9 'My characters, my plots, are under my pen':
 Authority as dictatorship in King-Aribisala's *The
 Hangman's Game*

African dictator fiction places the body centre stage, spotlighting the despot as the manifestation of gross power. The dictator performs his authority through a body frequently imagined as expanding, corpulent, oversexed and, paradoxically, impotent. His is an economy of excess. This trope of the hyper-masculine dictator's body, undergirded with the apparent contradiction of virility and impotence, is deployed time and again in the genre. Writers portray the dictator as an object of fear, with the raw power over life and death written into the vast terrain of his body; and yet, satirists insistently return to the inherent comedy of that same body. The dictator's body sets him apart from lesser beings; however, it is the focus on the body that gives the genre its egalitarian impulse, for the body represents the shared experience of mortality, and thus exposes his vulnerability. The dictator rules not only through fear but also through propaganda, channelling a national script through official broadcasts, pamphleteering and the press. The national narrative sustains his power while at the same time mythologizing it.

The majority of African dictator fiction follows a real or imagined dictator in his political intrigues: prominent examples include Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et demi* (1979), Ousmane Sembène's *Le dernier de L'Empire* (1981), Henri Lopès's *Le Pleurer-rire* (1982), Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Ahmadou Kourouma's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998), and Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006; originally published in Gikũyũ as *Murogi wa Kagogo*, 2004). This chapter will discuss Karen King-Aribisala's *The Hangman's Game* (2007), a novel that, against the grain of the genre, fashions the dictator figure out of a

woman's body. This postmodern novel explores the theme of dictatorship largely through analogy, reimagining a dictator's relationship with his citizens as that between an author and her creations. Through this lens, King-Aribisala highlights the deep structural implications of authoritarian power, and the narrative product of the law as restraining the characters as imagined citizens.

It is now common to describe governance in terms of bodily metaphor: we speak of the 'head' of the country, the 'long arm' of the law, and of the citizenry as the 'body politic'. The dictator is the 'head' and he is also the first and most prominent body: constantly under surveillance, being broadcast, having his image stamped upon posters, newspapers and currency. It is through his body that the African 'Big Man' demonstrates his aesthetics of excess. Achille Mbembe explains:

To exercise authority is, [...] for the male ruler, to demonstrate publicly a certain delight in eating and drinking well, and, [...] in Labou Tansi's words, to pass most of his time in 'pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls.' The male ruler's pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, through sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, and so on.¹

The body, however, simultaneously provides the point of affinity with the despot's citizens: he exists not only as the 'head' of state, but also as one of the masses. It is this vulnerability that he seeks to cloak in endless parades of authoritarian power: it is a matter of urgency that he should project the appearance of solid immortality, denying any implications that he, like previous heads of state, may be toppled from command. Mbembe concludes that 'one should not underestimate the violence that can be set in motion to protect the vocabulary used to denote or speak of the *commandement*, and to safeguard the official fictions that underwrite the apparatus of domination'.²

The figure of the African dictator (who rose to power, in some cases, on a wave of revolutionary hope – only to prove a source of disillusionment in

1 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 110.

2 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 111.

the postcolonial state)³ took root in the cultural and administrative legacy of colonialism. In his introduction to *Unmasking the African Dictator*, Gĩchingiri Ndigĩrĩgĩ observes:

In centralized states the traditional rulers were shunted aside to make way for colonial governors who had enormous powers without corresponding accountability to the governed. The colonial state thus created the foundation for the centralized despotism of the colonial era.⁴

This ‘centralized despotism’ was shored up by the support of Western powers during the Cold War,⁵ and has resulted in ‘undermining the post-colonial compromise, emasculating the traditional instruments of state power, and bringing about a profound modification of social structures and cultural imaginations’.⁶ Under dictatorship, the ‘privatization of public violence’ is distilled into the sanctified body of the ruler, and his edicts comprise the ‘official fictions’ of the national script.⁷

The despot frequently renders himself through body language and in state-authorized texts as the ‘father figure’ of the nation, conflating the sphere of national politics with domestic space. In casting himself as the national father, the dictator adopts the ‘natural’ authority of the male head of the house,⁸ solidifying a narrative of kinship even while perpetu-

3 In examples such as Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, Guinean Sékou Touré, Libyan Colonel Gaddafi and Malawian Hastings Banda. Such leaders’ reputations often remain in dispute within and outside their country as violence is frequently perpetrated against ethnic minorities. Positive features of their government and opposition to foreign imperialism also renders criticism to their reigns contentious; criticism may be further complicated after western powers’ retractions of support after the cessation of Cold War hostilities.

4 Gĩchingiri Ndigĩrĩgĩ, *Unmasking the African Dictator: Essays on Postcolonial African Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2014), xix.

5 Ndigĩrĩgĩ, *Unmasking the African Dictator*, xxi.

6 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 57.

7 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 66.

8 Michael Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2009).

ating violence against political opponents or ethnic others on a vast scale. 'The process by which a national identity is consolidated and maintained,' Mary Poovey advises, 'is [...] one of differentiation and displacement – the differentiation of the national us from the aliens within and without, and the displacement of other interests from consciousness.'⁹ The dictator controls the state of exception and may declare who is to be excommunicated from the national family. The sovereign's body and speech are coterminous with the political space of the nation, gaining authority by association with the more local authority of the patriarchal family unit.

It is precisely this association of the paternal dictator's body with the nation that renders it an attractive target for writers. The body has long been harnessed for national allegory in African fiction,¹⁰ and almost universally this national body has been gendered as male. While '[t]he female body form, [...] that most fetishized and silent of body symbols, figures prominently in early nationalist/postcolonial representations,'¹¹ it has most often been equated with fertility and general expressions of nature, home, ethnicity, tradition and, more recently in the burgeoning field of postcolonial ecocriticism, environment. Women's bodies have been seen as the communal ground on which the masculine structures of governance may rest, whereas the authority invested in the male body has lent itself as a symbol for state-based political criticism. This position has been revised in recent decades with writers' invitations to read national symbolism in women's bodies, such as in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* (1986), and increasingly by women writers, as in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's

9 Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 55–6.

10 Here I do not mean to second Fredric Jameson's now-infamous statement that: 'All third-world texts are necessarily [...] national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel' (Jameson 69). However, even refuting this claim, it is my view that the history of the use of national allegory in relation to the body in African literatures remains a subject demanding further study.

11 Elleke Boehmer, 'Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative,' *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 26/3 (1993), 268–77 (273).

Purple Hibiscus (2003). In her compelling study of African women writers' representations of nation, Susan Andrade argues that 'earlier female writers' representations of national politics become most sharply visible through allegorical readings of familial structures and institutions' but that, 'over time, female writers have changed their writing style and now represent the national imaginary more directly'.¹²

Nonetheless, it has remained the case that the majority of African dictator fiction discussed by critics has been generated by male writers. This chapter will address an unusual contribution to the genre written by a woman. The novel aligns representations of dictatorship with structures of authority, and humorously revises the dictator's problematic body in fiction.

The Hangman's Game

The theme of postcolonial dictatorship is foregrounded in Guyanese–Nigerian writer Karen King-Aribisala's novel *The Hangman's Game*, regional winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Uppermost in this novel is the constant struggle for 'control', as emphasized in the titular 'hangman's game'. 'This is how the game is played,' (35) the unnamed narrator explains to her opponent, a young woman:

'Listen carefully. Each blank represents a letter in the alphabet and the letters together make a word.'

'What word?'

'I'm the one who knows the word.'

In spite of my pain, I somehow feel strong.

'I think I've heard of this game, Madam, but ...'

'It's my game!' I shriek, noting her pouting lips which are curved ever so prettily. (35–6)

'The hangman's game' refers to the children's game of the same title, in which the opponent is required to guess a word from a sequence of dashes on the paper, each incorrect guess resulting in a detail added to the body of

12 Susan Z. Andrade, 'Adichie's Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels', *Research in African Literatures* 42/2 (2011), 91–101 (92).

a stick-figure hanged man. The game is lost when the hanged man's portrait is complete and the spectacle of a public death is etched out in miniature. 'The public execution,' Foucault contends, 'has a juridico-political function. It is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted': an act which 'did not re-establish justice' but 'reactivated power'.¹³ The narrator's chosen solution to the game – that she plays against her live-in nurse, whom she jealously suspects of trying to seduce her husband – is, appropriately, 'control'. The narrator threatens to sack the girl if she does not take part in, and win, the hangman's game, activating political struggle along the lines of labour, social class, and gender.

The hanged man represents powerlessness at the hands of the sovereign whose authority is performed through the "political economy" of the body.¹⁴ Images of hanging proliferate throughout the novel, most notably in the death of the narrator's friend: a writer modelled on Ogoni political activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. Saro-Wiwa was arraigned before a special military tribunal and executed by hanging under Abacha's military dictatorship in 1995 (his death contributing to economic sanctions against Nigeria and its suspension from the Commonwealth). The reference to Saro-Wiwa's death paints a backdrop of authoritarian oppression and resistance in the novel, and spotlights the very real dangers for writers who criticize authoritarian governments.

In the novel, Butcher Boy is the authoritarian leader of a junta that has wrested control of Nigeria and become its president. He embodies overt themes of dictatorship. Just as the hanged writer is modelled on Saro-Wiwa, Butcher Boy is designed to resemble former Nigerian president General Sani Abacha (in power 1993–98). Butcher Boy's reign is marked by terror and lavish excess; he self-mythologizes to the populace that: 'Salvation, the nation's freedom, came from him and him alone' (19). Much of the novel follows the coups and counter-coups planned to topple him from power. Ultimately, however, the president dies under salacious circumstances – reminiscent of the rumours surrounding Abacha's death – in a bed full of

13 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1977), 48–9.

14 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25.

prostitutes on the night of a grand party. An effigy of the dead dictator is then paraded and burned through the streets as the citizens exult in the abjection of the former sovereign's sacred body.

The body of the sovereign is suspended in balance with that of the prisoner, the balance created by the authority of the law. Foucault explains the eighteenth-century reasoning that any crime, in addition to 'its immediate victim,' 'attacks the sovereign: it attacks him personally, since the law represents the will of the sovereign; it attacks him physically, since the force of the law is the force of the prince.'¹⁵ This is compounded exponentially in cases of regicide which, in some respect, is doomed always to fail. Ernst Kantorowicz explores the 'dual' body of the medieval king in political theology in *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), for 'the king is immortal because legally he can never die': he is a 'superhuman' immortal who, at the very moment of his death, lives on through the title's transfer to his heir.¹⁶ In contemporary terms, the corrupt structures of governance may live on even after the dictator's death, as the mantle of authority passes to another.

While foregrounding the theme of dictatorship in the novel, Butcher Boy forms merely one stream of its political commentary. The novel also features a covert dictator figure, but one who is key to King-Aribisala's critique of authoritarian power structures: and that is the narrator herself. In addition to the frame narrative recounting her own life, the narrator also intersperses text from a novel she is, diegetically, writing: *Three Blind Mice*. This novel-within-a-novel forms a piece of historical fiction set in Guyana (the birthplace both of the narrator and of King-Aribisala herself) during the lead-up to the Demerara slave rebellion of 1823. King-Aribisala underscores the connection between the slave revolt and 1990s Nigerian politics in order to foreground homologies around oppression and agency. Each of the characters in *Three Blind Mice* forms a counterpart to someone in the narrator's life: she sees herself in 'Mary ... my poor Mary mine' (157) who is 'rattling away in her half-demented nursery-rhyme, fairy-tale style [...] longing to gain control of her life and her husband' (8), while her husband

15 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 47.

16 Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4–5.

is likewise reflected in Mary's husband, John, and the nurse echoed in their beautiful servant Rosita. The narrator's deliberate mirroring of people in her novel reveals her desire for control: unhappy with her degree of influence in 'real life', she places the people around her into a fictional universe in which she is God. This is complicated by King-Aribisala's constant frame-breaking allusions to the fact that *The Hangman's Game*, like the *Three Blind Mice* text it contains like a nesting doll, is fiction; this neat barrier between fictive and real is in turn disturbed by the many pointed similarities between the narrator's life story and King-Aribisala's own history. She reiterates her obsession with control throughout the narrative:

'I must learn to be in control' (33);
 'As God is my witness, I was going to be in control' (13);
 'They will not take me out of control of myself' (13);
 'I must not be blind as to what will happen if I do not control them' (14);
 'I even had Auntie Lou kill the Governor by remote control' (176);
 'I'm eye-focused conscious and eye-blind unconscious, out of control and in control all at the same time' (69);

and so forth. However, in a strange twist, her mania for control is held in counterpoint with her paranoia that her characters in the fictional world of *Three Blind Mice* are trying to kill her:

All of them – Mary, Rosita, John, the Governor, Quamina and Auntie Lou and Captain McTurkeyen – wanted me dead, and would have gotten away with it if I hadn't been able to control their words, their thoughts and actions. Had I not done so I would have been dead, hanged by the neck in their hangman's game. (8)

The narrative is peppered with accusations against the characters, Iago-like muttered asides and vows for punishment. The narrator is a bully, both over her subjects in the novel and to her household staff; her erratic demands are born of feelings of helplessness both in her personal relationships and in the unstable political climate. She writes sullenly of her husband: 'I need control. He has the control' (51). Throughout the novel she displaces her own feelings of subjection and powerlessness by bullying others. Her obsession with control manifests in fantasies of dominance over those

around her, usually by choking or hanging – notably, a form of corporal punishment that inhibits speech. Just as a dictator’s performances of power mask a deep-rooted fear of assassination, so the narrator’s own fear of ‘a hanging death’ (7) is reproduced throughout the novel. She takes the greatest pleasure in planning pain for Rosita, the fictional counterpart of her child’s nurse and object of her jealousy. She decides: ‘I will hang her first’ (35), preparing to choke her in ‘a slow death with that rope of long black hair before she goes too far’ (13). Her victimization of Rosita/the nurse, apparently the least empowered in both narrative levels, commences with mind games before advancing to an affront on the body.

It is not only the dictator’s body that holds political significance, but also that of the citizen. The citizen’s body is ground zero for human rights and political expression. ‘The body,’ as Robyn Longhurst insists, ‘is as “political” as the nation-state.’¹⁷ It is against the body that crimes to torture or silence are exercised. In West Africa in recent decades, voters have been intimidated and attacked if suspected of voting for the ‘wrong’ party; in Sierra Leone in the 1990s voters’ hands were notoriously amputated by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Amputations, rape and other forms of torture have been used by militia as weapons against the citizen. ‘[T]he body itself,’ Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton remind us,

has been and remains a zone of management, containment, regulation, conformity, and resistance as well as of contact tout court. Under a variety of social, economic, and political constraints it has exhibited a remarkable flexibility and resilience as both a category and as the matériel of history, even while it has also been the site of suffering, the subject of humanitarian intervention and military invasion, and the object of violence and trauma.¹⁸

- 17 Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 134.
- 18 Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, ‘Postscript: Bodies, Genders, Empires: Reimagining World Histories,’ in Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds, *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 405–23 (407).

It is the narrator's encroachments upon the nurse's body that fan the flames of her rebellion. Threatened by her young employee's beauty, the narrator has her fictional counterpart in *Three Blind Mice* shorn of her hair. Mary, the narrator's equivalent, forces Rosita (her slave) to remove her clothes. Mary is a white English foreigner to Guyana, whereas the narrator, her counterpart, is a black immigrant from Guyana to Nigeria. When Rosita asks if she has incurred her displeasure, Mary responds, 'Your body is your offence' (111). In a pointed power play,

Mary moved closer to Rosita, still holding the scissors. Then with quiet deliberation she pointed them at Rosita's neck. The girl screamed as the beaks of silver touched her skin, then the blades were opened and were grinding and snipping through the girl's tresses. (111)

Although a stated motivation for the narrator writing her novel is to reflect on the horrors of slavery, in this scene she appears to take pleasure from describing Rosita's symbolic castration. She describes the 'grinding' act with almost sexual pleasure, as though co-opting the imagined sexual mastery of her husband. The success of this fictional show of authority gives her the confidence to have the same degradation inflicted in real life, wheeling with the nurse's fiancé: 'It's essential to my life, to my emotional well-being ... actually it's spiritual ... You are more or less married to her. Tell her she's got lice ... anything' (118). After exacting his promise, she returns to the nurse and takes 'a long look at her head, which I have no doubt whatsoever will soon be quite shaved. I almost begin to like her' (118). The narrator imagines the head shorn of hair and physically marked as a prisoner: she has transformed the nurse's body into her own territory. After the nurse's hair has been hacked off, the narrator sits in front of her and brushes her own hair 'till it gleams', musing with satisfaction on 'its blackness, its silky sheen' (126).

However, the narrator has lulled herself into a false sense of security in her relationship with those around her, mistaking agents in her life for those in her book. The narrator repeatedly refers to characters by the wrong names: that is, confusing characters at different narrative levels. The nurse responds to her provocation not with compliance, but by threatening the narrator with scissors – suggestively, also a weapon that could destroy the

narrator's unfinished novel, which the nurse has discovered and started reading. 'Did you really think,' the nurse asks in rage, "I am one of the characters in your book, Madam? Did you really believe that you can continue to terrorize me? You piece of shit"(127). Shocked, the narrator is:

so frightened I cannot speak. I cannot even pretend courage when I see the malice in her eyes.

'It isn't a game when the shoe is placed on the other foot is it, Madam?'

'Shoe?' I repeat stupidly. (127)

The narrator is rendered mute by the nurse's act of terrorism, reduced to 'stupidly' repeating one whom she regards as her own creature, having confused her with her fictional counterpart. The nurse concludes the ordeal by spitting: "Madam, I am not a character in your book" (129). She denies the narrator's authority over her, claiming her status as a real rather than imagined citizen. This insubordination reminds the narrator that she is not outside society but in it. Like the dictator, she has perpetuated the myth of sovereign exception, in which 'the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law'.¹⁹ The dictator pretends to be immortal but is made vulnerable by his body. In the same way the narrator has imagined herself as being outside of the narrative, and is therefore staggered when the nurse makes clear that she is not exempt from the physics contained in that narrative frame, over which she enjoys less control than she had imagined. This episode fans the narrator's ever escalating paranoia.

Despite her preoccupation with control, the novel showcases the narrator gradually losing the plot. Her loss of control is signalled first in the release of information. Descriptions and events shift from appearing first in the frame narrative and then in *Three Blind Mice*, to appearing *first* in the actions and mouths of her characters and then as an echo in her own life. For example, at the funeral of the hanged writer, the narrator observes 'the coffin, roughly hacked and put together with bright round tops of nails on

19 Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Homo Sacer: Il Potere Sovrano E La Nuda Vita)*, trans. Heller-Roazen, Daniel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15.

the planks' (16). Later, in the *Three Blind Mice* narrative, she consciously harvests that description for John's coffin, writing that it was 'a rectangular wooden box of planks hurriedly hammered together with bright nails. The tops of the nails are round silver disks which shine in the darkness' (22). She also puts her own words into the mouths of the characters, such as the first words of the novel, 'They wanted me dead' (7), being reproduced as the first words of *Three Blind Mice* in Mary's speech: 'They wanted my John hanged. They wanted to see him dead' (21). As the narrative progresses the temporal causality becomes broken, with control of the timeline originating in the 'embedded narrative' rather than with the narrator.²⁰ Instead of writing the script of the characters, it appears as though the imagined citizens are controlling her. Mélanie Joseph-Vilain points out that 'the polysemous verb "plot" is explicitly used: "Only God knows what they are plotting for me" (41) – as if she was being written by her novel instead of writing it.'²¹ Further, rather than a clean schism between the *Three Blind Mice* narrative and the frame narrative, the novel-within-a-novel starts to bleed into her own narration as well as she extends the embedded narrative's events within her own story frame. The narrator starts to fetishize the act of writing itself as a means of controlling her own universe, increasingly viewing the text of *Three Blind Mice* as a semi-autonomous parallel world to which she is in thrall. Fearing a political coup at an event she is to attend, she scrawls hurriedly: 'IF I HAVE WRITTEN ANYTHING ABOUT THE GOVERNOR BEING MURDERED AT DINNER, I HEREBY EXPUNGE IT' (131) on her way out of the house.

The narrator also appears increasingly ignorant of what her characters are 'up to' (101), interrupting her own narration to question:

What's John up to in my novel? The runaway slave has been caught by McTurkeyen. Mary and Gruegel and Parsons are making their way back to Georgetown and from there they'll go to their respective plantations. But what has John been doing with himself? (101)

20 Monika Fludernik, *Towards a Natural Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996).

21 Mélanie Joseph-Vilain, "The Hangman's Game": Karen King-Aribisala's "Diary of Creation". *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 31.1 (2008), 80–92 (85).

By airing the narrator's obsessions and fears alongside the career of Butcher Boy, King-Aribisala invites us to read her narrator as a dictatorial figure, drawing confidently on the structural analogy between authorship and authoritarianism. The author-narrator is functionally a dictator in this postmodern narrative, writing a script to which she expects her characters to conform. Narrative takes the place of the law, and the rebelling citizens who diverge from her script may expect to be punished by hanging – the capital punishment of which the narrator is so fond. Foucault observes that 'by breaking the law' – that is, by contradicting the sovereign's will – 'the offender has touched the very person of the prince.'²² The narrator's urge to violence against those who she views as transgressing the 'law' of her narrative constitutes 'the reply of the sovereign to those who attacked his will, his law, or his person.'²³ Authorship in this context is cast as ontological violence against imagined citizens. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's formulation of 'imagined communities', the concept of 'imagined citizens' must have implications for citizens living under dictatorial regimes. The term implies that such citizens are not 'real' in the sense of being flesh and blood: they are the subjects of an authority that imagines them to be disposable, whose lives may be written or overwritten (or expunged) with a magisterial decree or an amendment to the law. These citizens are merely characters in the national narrative, and remain imagined because the dictator, who writes the script that runs their lives, is unlikely to meet his 'subjects' in the flesh: theirs is always a compromised freedom.²⁴ In this narrative, characters fill the function of imagined citizens while the narrator is determined to exert her authority at all costs: 'The plot was mine but my characters were intent on out-plotting me. As God is my witness,

22 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 49.

23 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), 137–8.

24 Obviously the difference between ontological violence against fictional characters and the very real violence levelled against political dissidents today is total. By suggesting that King-Aribisala has mobilized a political agenda through this structural allegory using 'imagined citizens', I have no desire to diminish the real effects of politically motivated violence as some kind of 'imagined suffering'.

I was going to be in control whether they liked it or not – or kill them off’ (King-Aribisala 13). Her rambling, repetitive prose returns obsessively to the problem of mastery and the divine right of her rulership. Just as the sovereign’s body is coterminous with the nation-state, so too is it overlaid with the narrative product of the law that both creates the space and conditions of statehood and sustains it with fictions (harmless or otherwise). The sovereign’s ‘embodied equivalence with the country extends beyond the semantic to the rhetorical register as well.’²⁵ ‘The address to nation as narration,’ Homi Bhabha writes, ‘stresses the insistence of political power and cultural authority in what Derrida describes as the “irreducible excess of the syntactic over the semantic”.’²⁶

In *The Hangman’s Game*, the text itself is imagined as a body that bleeds, leaks and becomes increasingly deformed in its narrative coherence. The text is both held up as powerful and sacred, while at the same time articulating deep ambivalence about the authority with which it is invested – interrogating authority while also perpetuating it. The implications of this conceptual movement are suggested in, but never quite confronted by, the actual sacred text in the novel, the Bible. The conclusion of the novel leaves ‘control’ in the hands of God. Operating as a literal *deus ex machina*, the narrator’s reliance upon religious salvation reads as allegorical postmodern comedy until the author’s statements in interview are taken into account. In interview with Ronnie Uzoigwe, King-Aribisala has declared her own perception of Nigerian politics as constituting a ‘spiritual problem’ to be reconciled through ‘[p]rayer and just giving the control back to God, to handle it’, suggesting a passivity that tends to undermine the struggle for postcolonial power articulated in the novel.²⁷ The text raises the spectre of

25 Robert L. Colson, ‘Diagnosing Dictatorship: Illness, Medicine, and the Critique of Sovereignty in *Wizard of the Crow*’, in Gichingiri Ndigirigi, ed., *Unmasking the African Dictator: Essays on Postcolonial African Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 167–81 (168).

26 Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Introduction: Narrating the Nation’, in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 1–7 (4).

27 Karen King-Aribisala, ‘Conversation with Karen Ann King-Aribisala’, by Ronnie Uzoigwe, *Nigerians in America*. Nigerians in America, 2003. Web. 4 March 2014.

this extra rung of authority, but never fully mobilizes the allegory – across the extra leap between character, narrator, dictator, *deity* – suggested by the plentiful Christian religious allusions in the text.

Ultimately, the narrator proves impotent as a dictator, unable to control the characters who are her subjects (in both senses of the word). The characters as unwilling citizens resist her authority by erupting through the borders of the postmodernist frame narrative and behaving in unexpected ways, acting outside of the total jurisdiction she had sought to claim over their lives. We can read the characters' refusal to be contained alongside the rioting in the streets following Butcher Boy's death. Their success over the failed dictator may be read as a politically activated 'saturation of content in form',²⁸ because the collective impulse has wrested control and agency from the singular sovereign, contributing to the recent drive towards what Bill Ashcroft has described as 'the emerging genre of post-colonial utopianism'.²⁹

The elision of boundaries is also facilitated by the conscious similarities between the narrator and King-Aribisala, reflecting the postmodernist affection for destabilizing reality. Both are female writers originally from Guyana having settled in Nigeria after marrying a Nigerian citizen.³⁰

28 Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 124.

29 Ashcroft contends that the genre is 'nearly always at least an implicit critique of state oppression of one kind or another' despite its different forms. He goes on to conclude that 'for most contemporary utopian theory Utopia is no longer a place but the spirit of hope itself.' Bill Ashcroft, 'Post-Colonial Utopianism: The Utility of Hope', in Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio, eds, *Locating Postcolonial Narrative Genres* (New York: Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2013), 27–43 (28–9).

30 King-Aribisala has written in a recent article that she felt claimed by Nigeria after her collection of short stories was published:

'I was now a bona fide African representing Africa, even though I was Guyanese; an individual had represented a group, a continent, and this particular irony was not lost on me. I was moved by the Nigerian reception of this collection of stories – some stories caustic in their appraisal of Nigeria, bitter, some not. In a sense, through my writings I had "come home." I had become in a way "wedded," "married" to Africa in a more profound manner than ever before, even more so than my actual marriage to

Furthermore, King-Aribisala has stated in interview of the texts she has written that ‘all of them are like my children’ and that she writes in order to ‘get some control over my existence and of the things that happen around me.’³¹ As Joseph-Vilain has described it:

The relationship between reality and fiction in *The Hangman’s Game* is all the more complex as the ‘real’ Nigeria is itself fictional, while the ‘fictional’ facts in *Three Blind Mice* are based on historical events, which means that the novel does not stage the resurgence of fiction into reality, but the resurgence of fiction into (realistic, historically-based) fiction.³²

Throughout, the narrator refers to herself not only as the ‘author’ of the characters but also as their ‘mother’:

Indeed, in a way, the seven are all my children, deviant as they are. I must be firm. I must make them do what I want. I must not be blind as to what will happen if I do not control them. (13–14)

Her self-positioning as the mother of the characters who are, in every sense, her subjects provides an interesting twist on the dictator-as-patriarch trope. She assumes a local analogy of authority. King-Aribisala replaces the paternal dictator with the (increasingly unstable) mother’s body, providing the unusual analogy of the pregnant narrator as dictator.³³ Throughout the novel there is a strong triangulation between the unborn child, the unfinished novel, and the dream of a democratic Nigeria imagined as a foetus to be born: ‘Their stories I birthed with my own words’ (13). The pregnant body exceeds its bounds, is generative, and promises future hope and citizenship; the woman’s body becomes the fertile ground of the nation.

Femi.’ Karen King-Aribisala ‘What is Africa to Me Now?: The Sweet, The Bitter ...’ *Research in African Literatures* 46/4 (2015), 15–25 (17).

31 King-Aribisala, ‘Conversation’.

32 Joseph-Vilain, ‘The Hangman’s Game’, 86.

33 King-Aribisala’s novel was interestingly published closely after Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s English translation of *Murogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*), also featuring a pregnant dictator – albeit a male one, whose performances of masculine power are destabilized by his increasingly feminine body.

However, the pregnant body is also placed in a history of representation that conceives of women as objects. Longhurst explains that while men 'are often understood to have secure (autonomous) bodily boundaries – bodies that are "in control"', women by contrast 'are often understood to be in possession of insecure (leaking, seeping) bodily boundaries [...] not to be trusted in the public spheres of Rational Man.'³⁴ This is compounded in the case of pregnant bodies, which

can be seen to occupy a borderline state that disturbs identity, system and order by not respecting borders, positions and rules. [...] It is a body that is considered dangerous and to be feared. It is also considered to be a body that needs to be *controlled*.³⁵

It is precisely these 'leaking, seeping' boundaries – between levels of narration, between the text and the connected bodies of mother and unborn child, between narrative and the law, between King-Aribisala and her narrator, and so on – that have been deployed in this narrative. Pregnancy, which highlights and exaggerates the physical differences between men and women, at times serves as a catalyst to renew discourses around man as a rational creature and woman as flesh.³⁶ King-Aribisala exploits these associations through her pregnant narrator's utter loss of control. Her madness and hospitalisation are marked as being triggered by her pregnancy, and her increasingly erratic behaviour is blamed on the conveniently pseudoscientific understanding that her 'pregnancy hormones are skidaddling all over the place' (68–9). Such a construction relies on age-old renditions of the female body as having control over the weak female mind.³⁷ King-

34 Longhurst, *Bodies*, 2.

35 Longhurst, *Bodies*, 6 (my emphasis).

36 In popular culture a pregnant woman's tiredness is commonly interpreted as 'baby brain' (eerily similar to bygone medical linkages between 'hysteria' and 'wandering womb'), while bodily impulses and cravings are seen to suggest that women's minds are controlled by the demands of their bodies.

37 Men have been traditionally aligned with the mind and the imperial, whereas women, as has been endlessly shown, have been equated with the bodily sphere and colonized space. Huggan and Tiffin explain that:

'Indeed, it is now commonplace to suggest that women and colonized subjects have been identified with the body and the animalistic, while the "natural" supremacy

Aribisala has replaced the paranoia of the dictator, who sees a coup around every corner, with the paranoid woman who believes fictional characters are out to kill her and that a member of her household staff is trying to 'steal' her husband. Despite her clear attempt to reframe women as possessing a subversive agency through the characters of Mary, Rosita, Aunt Lou and the Deaconness, King-Aribisala's project is marred by her reliance on a gendered madness that positions the female mind as in thrall to its extravagant, border-destabilizing body. In so doing she tacitly authorizes representations of authority that see men as in control of the power they wield, but women as merely cracked vessels into which power is poured.

Despite these concerns, the use of the narrator as a formal dictator represents an fascinating inversion for dictator fiction. Where most novels in the genre address dictatorship thematically, King-Aribisala's novel also activates a merger between content and form. However, recent criticism leans away from the academy's privileging of 'what we might call pomo-postcolonialist reading ("pomo" as in "postmodernist")'.³⁸ Neil Lazarus states his 'conviction that we ought, today, to begin to redress a long-standing imbalance in postcolonial studies by focusing anew on realist writing', while Eli Park Sorensen similarly rankles under what he views 'as a "tacit", allegorizing leap, and by which I refer to the uncritical *assumption* that a set

of men – and, by extension, male colonisers – is evidenced by their apparent transcendence of the body.' Graham Huggan, and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 158.

- 38 Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 25. Strong arguments against the general privileging of the 'pomo-postcolonialist' texts include that it is to the detriment of the real political work of realist and social realist texts, that it creates and sustains a parasitic market based on one style of writing, that it misreads any aesthetic moves towards hybridity as political, that it is blindly critical of the national, and that it feeds a fetish for 'the postcolonial exotic' (Huggan). There are also sensitivities around reading the post-modern postcolonial text as political *tout court*. 'The anxieties about authenticity and resistance that surround the postcolonial text,' Bahri explains, 'arise from an awareness of its commodity value in the global information loop where Western control of the technologies of representation is still seen as dominant.' Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 160.

of politically subversive concepts corresponds to formal disruption, meta-fictional strategies and labyrinths of narrative structures.³⁹ While Deepika Bahri similarly argues against the reactive labelling of postmodernist strategies as political, she nonetheless argues for ‘a reanimation of the aesthetic dimension as a crucial category in the assessment of the social content of postcolonial literature’, suggesting that we may construe ‘the aesthetic as political and moral without surrendering it to a transparent and reductive purpose.’⁴⁰ While I agree with those arguing for a renewed critical interest in the social and literary project of realism, in this case I argue that the subversive aesthetics in King-Aribisala’s novel are politically motivated, flagged by her consistent interrogation of dictatorship and economies of power. King-Aribisala’s novel is an example of ‘the postcolonial text that imagines justice through aesthetic modes more fictional than functional.’⁴¹

The Hangman’s Game allies the postmodernist focus on destabilizing narrative with postcolonialism’s rejection of authoritarian power. In this highly self-referential work, King-Aribisala highlights the structural analogy between authorship and authoritarianism by linking the nation, the narrative, and the body. King-Aribisala ascribes hope to the future of Nigeria even while criticizing the devastating effects of authoritarian control. Ndígíříří has identified work that is ‘devoted specifically to the interrogation of the ways women writers have fictionalized dictatorships [as] a gap that future scholarship should attempt to fill.’⁴² King-Aribisala’s fictionalizing of dictatorship through the formal relationship between an author and her imagined characters renders this a text worthy of study. Despite its troubling reliance upon irrational womanhood, the charting of political space across the pregnant narrator’s expanding body and the focus on nationhood as a script through which characters burst forth in a regenerative claiming of agency secures *The Hangman’s Game* as a provocative addition to the corpus.

39 Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 82; Sorensen, 10.

40 Bahri, 6; 4.

41 Bahri, *Native Intelligence*, 99.

42 Ndígíříří, *Unmasking*, xxii–xxiii.

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