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The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 2012 47: 145

DOI: 10.1177/0021989412447490

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The Journal of Commonwealth Literature

47(2) 145–158

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DOI: 10.1177/0021989412447490

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Abstract

This article places the Kenyan intellectual Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) in what has until now been seen as a predominantly Latin American tradition of dictator novels. Dictator novels unmask the intrinsic fallibility of power. The purported omnipotence of the dictator is undermined by dictation: that is, by his power's reliance on the shifty and ambiguous medium of language, which these novels reveal to be a medium of democratic dialogue not of dictatorial control. *Wizard of the Crow* also performs power in the sense of staging power's operations, dramatising its precariousness and exposing its crimes to censure. It also permits an understanding of the over-determined origins of dictatorship: in the legacies of colonialism, the lingering interference of Western states and corporations, and the failures of national leadership. The aims of the paper are, firstly, to demonstrate the longevity and efficacy of a decidedly topical literary tradition that has among its effects the illumination and explanation of enduring forms of colonial exploitation in Africa, and secondly to show how, especially through the reading strategies that it encourages, Ngũgĩ's novel resists this state of affairs and forecasts democratic alternatives to it.

Keywords

dictatorship, dictator novel, performance, Africa, neo-colonialism

Dictators have, regrettably, been among the few things that Africa has been proficient at manufacturing since independence, from shameless kleptocrats like Mobutu Sésé Seko of Zaire, psychopaths like Equatorial Guinea's Francisco Macías Nguema, gangsters like Liberia's Charles Taylor, military strong men like Mohamed Siad Barre of Somalia and Ethiopia's Mengistu Haile Mariam, atrocious buffoons like Idi Amin and the "Emperor" Jean-Bédél Bokassa, to slightly less appalling but still depressingly undemocratic and

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repressive ex-liberation leaders like Jomo Kenyatta and Robert Mugabe. These lords of misrule have produced fertile material for Africa's writers. This article places the Kenyan intellectual Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) in what has until now been seen as a predominantly Latin American tradition of dictator novels. As Josaphat Kubayanda says in what is still the only (alas abortive) effort to put together a comprehensive study of African dictator novels, the word is one of the most powerful tools pressed into service by dictatorships (1997: 51); the task that these novels set themselves is to contest the dictator's ownership of it. I will analyse the origins of dictatorship in Africa and hint briefly at the nature of the democratic alternatives. I will then acclaim the capacity of the African dictator novel, by virtue of its *form*, to articulate those origins and alternatives, before concluding with a rapid consideration of Ngũgĩ's novel in which I argue that *Wizard of the Crow* is not merely about dictatorship but rather enacts the dictator's power through language and imagery in order, potentially, to undermine that power's force and anticipate its dissolution.

The dictator novel commonly stretches, modifies, and even leaves behind the conventional forms of novelistic realism. Roberto González Echeverría's ingenious analysis of Latin American dictator novels in his *The Voice of the Masters* (1985: 64-85) therefore focuses not on the blood-spattered content of these works but on their form. He is concerned with their capacity to mimic or occupy the authority of the dictator and, by deconstructing that authority, which means to advertise its unreliability, eccentricity, and susceptibility to the interruptions and rejoinders of other voices, to debunk it and deprive it of its power to compel us. What is revealed by these works is the intrinsic fallibility of power. But what this account of dictator novels overlooks is their potential (by representing the fallibility of the dictator's voice and by enumerating the numerous forces that over-determine his rule), not only to provide a critique of authority, but also to formulate a democratic riposte to dictatorship. Some knowledge of the system of interests that brought the dictator to power in the first place as well as of the democratic and popular forces that could and should replace him are potential consequences of reading dictator novels. That might be a lesson worth pondering as the rest of Africa and the world watches the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa grapple with the realization that revolution requires not just the removal of a tyrant but also the dismantlement and replacement of an entire system of venal and autocratic power. The intrinsically dialogic nature of novelistic form serves both to oppose dictatorship and to foretell alternative forms of political relationship.

Wizard of the Crow is a dictator novel rather than a novel about dictatorship because it *performs* dictatorial power and does so, moreover, in such a way as to allow readers both to interpret the origins of the crime of dictatorship in a durable system of colonial power and to appreciate dictatorship's vulnerability to democratic forms of government. I will make a distinction (which is not the same thing as postulating a hierarchy) between dictator novels, which are directly concerned with the dictator and his rule, and novels that are about or set in dictatorships. Many of Ngũgĩ's African predecessors belong in the latter category, which includes, for example, the Somali Nuruddin Farah's *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* trilogy (1979-83) and Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). I hope to show that Ngũgĩ's novel belongs in the more modernistic company of Latin American dictator novels such as Gabriel García Márquez's *The*

Autumn of the Patriarch (1975), the Cuban Alejo Carpentier's *El recurso del método* (1978) and Augusto Roa Bastos's *I the Supreme* (1974).

Of course, all rulers are performers. Kenyatta and Malawi's Hastings Banda carried fly whisks as marks of authenticity and authority, while Mobutu hoped his leopardskin toque would evoke associations with the power of big cats. (Both props are among the affectations of Ngũgĩ's fictional Ruler, whose fiefdom, Aburiria, resembles his author's native Kenya, but who is a composite of Africa's many tyrants.) *Wizard of the Crow*, however, stages dictatorial power's operations in order to dramatize power's precariousness and expose it to censure and disavowal. Power is in part a performance, something to which Ngũgĩ's novel draws attention and which it therefore sets against the illusion of power's fixity and omnipotence; if power is a performance then it can be re-performed, even mocked and contested. One of the protagonists in Nuruddin's *Close Sesame* (1983), the last novel in his trilogy, denounces Somalia under the police state of Siad Barre as "a stage where the Grandest Actor performs in front of an applauding audience that should be booing him" (Nuruddin, 1992/1983: 234). Nuruddin, like Ngũgĩ, is drawing our attention to the theatrical aspect of power and, conversely, to the power of the novel's theatrical performance to dethrone the dictator. The value in his critical writing that Ngũgĩ ascribes to the performative quality of art, by which, as we shall see, he means something like art's capacity to stage its own contingency and therefore to call attention to the variety of ways in which language can be executed and construed, is inseparable from the possibility that this process can allude to the similarly (though secretly) contingent, contestable, and ultimately alterable power of the state. The postcolonial state performs power in addition to exerting power in the raw through violence and coercion.¹ It is the purpose of the dictator novel to exhibit that "performativity" and thus to remind readers that power can be performed differently.

I am painting an unapologetically totalizing picture of Africa after independence. My only defence is the observation that dictators are prevalent in African fiction because dictatorships are prevalent in Africa and dictatorships are prevalent in Africa because the colonial and neo-colonial powers have willed this to be so with a force and a persistence that have been (and still are) very difficult for Africa's peoples to withstand. In other words, the agent of generalization in my argument is not the category "Africa". Any sketch of the different manifestations of undemocratic power in Africa, of the different forms in which that power has been dramatized by Africa's writers and of the different and varying successful modes of resistance offered by Africa's peoples should be accompanied, in my view, by an equally forceful emphasis on what these manifestations, forms and modes have in common: the overbearing and implacable context of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the real agents of generalization. When it comes to postcolonial Africa then, to adapt a phrase of Fredric Jameson's, "one cannot not generalize".² "To generalize means to think", as Hegel put it (2008: 27): to place the isolated, apparently discrete phenomena of history into the larger context that shapes them, to see the trees *and* the wood.

Gopal Balakrishnan reminds us that the term "dictator" referred originally to "an extraordinary magistrate in the Roman Republic commissioned for the duration of a political emergency, usually war or sedition, to restore order by suspending normal legal procedure" (2000: 32). This is what one of dictatorship's most rigorous theorists, Carl Schmitt, understood by a "commissarial dictatorship". In a "sovereign dictatorship",

however, popular sovereignty is not merely suspended but actively negated. In his *Political Theology* of 1922 (2005), which is a critique of the liberalism of the Weimar Republic, Schmitt provides a useful definition of dictatorship, though of course he (unlike me) endorses this political form, when he describes a sovereignty that stands outside the legal system, civil society, and democratic or constitutional restraint. Why is this form of rule so prevalent in African societies? Another way of asking this question would be to ponder the reasons for the absence or at least the weakness of democratic traditions and institutions on the continent. There are three of these: the dictatorial nature of European colonial rule; the enduring interest of Western powers in discouraging and where necessary actively forestalling democratization; and the interest of African ruling classes in preventing this process. Africa has remained prey to the interference of external powers intent on perpetuating its subordination and therefore on nurturing pliant and authoritarian regimes. Near the top of this long list of intercessions would be the invasion of Egypt by Britain, Israel and France in 1956, the murder of Patrice Lumumba at the hands of the CIA and Belgian special forces, France's continuing sway over *la Françafrique* and its intercessions in Chad, Gabon, Niger, Rwanda, and the Central African Republic.³ Of course, a large part of the blame for Africa's reverses must be shouldered by Africans themselves, in particular by the continent's rulers for their cupidity, unimaginative plans for development, and inability and often unwillingness to establish democratic links with the dispossessed. For example, the pursuit of development with inept and autocratic methods even in states that professed to be "Marxist-Leninist" reached the height (or rather the depth) of folly in 1984 when Mengistu Haile Mariam had Addis Ababa bedecked with triumphal arches and posters of himself alongside Marx and Engels to celebrate the tenth anniversary of his revolution, whilst in the countryside thousands of his citizens starved to death.

But even conscientious leaders have been beset and usually overwhelmed by the Herculean task of fostering democratic institutions and popular, sustainable forms of economic development in a continent where such things have long been subordinated to the demands of Africa's peripheral role in the world market. Africa's economies were severely hobbled at independence. In the mid-1960s the assets of three US corporations (General Motors, Du Pont, and the Bank of America) exceeded the gross domestic product of the whole of Africa (Meredith, 2005: 152). At independence there were only sixteen college graduates in the Congo, not one of whom had held a senior position in the Belgian administration (Legum, 1999: 15). Few areas of modern development existed and those that did were structured for export. Many of Africa's economies relied on the export of a single commodity such as copper or cocoa for foreign exchange earnings and government revenues, making even the most prosperous countries vulnerable to fluctuations in global commodity prices. Economies were largely owned or controlled by foreign corporations and were almost wholly dependent on foreign markets and capital.

Most damaging of all to the prospects for democratization and development has been the imposition since the 1970s of so-called structural adjustment programmes and stabilization agreements by the World Bank and IMF. These have meant the suspension of the moderately successful interventionist model of development employed by African states in the years following independence. Essential loans were made conditional on cuts in government spending and social provision, the removal of subsidies and tariff

barriers, wholesale privatization and the removal of restrictions on foreign investment. John Saul goes so far as to refer to this process as the “recolonization” of Africa (2001: 25), Walden Bello as the “rollback” of independent states’ political and social achievements. Africa’s newly independent nations found themselves (and still find themselves) in a world economic system characterized by a profoundly unequal distribution of power: “underdeveloped” in Walter Rodney’s phrase (1989); “peripheralized” in Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1985). Truly, “decolonization” would be the wrong word to describe this process.

If we are to understand dictatorship’s prevalence in Africa then the pervasiveness and durability of colonialism must be where we start. Frantz Fanon’s classic *The Wretched of the Earth* (1990/1961) famously warned its readers of the danger that for the national elites elevated to power in postcolonial Africa independence entails simply “the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period” (Fanon, 1990: 122). Because it is drawn from the privileged segment of the population most favoured by the colonial regime and because it is accustomed to playing a subservient role in a dependent economy, the national middle class shows itself after independence to be incapable of bringing about economic development, let alone of redistributing wealth and power. The new leaders’ impatience for returns leads them to accept the conditions of the former colonial power and settle for dependency. They will monopolize power, retain the colonizers’ oppressive laws, waste money on expenses and grandiose construction projects, divisively favour the capital city over the rural areas, transform the ruling party into a buffer between the masses and their leaders and a device for enriching the rulers’ hangers on, and, in order to divide and rule they will encourage ethnic rivalries. The colonial state pioneered this system and we would therefore, as Neil Lazarus has written, “do best to think of [it] as a kind of dictatorship” (2004: 30). By destroying pre-colonial institutions and carefully precluding popular constraints on state power the colonial state helped produce the conditions in which dictatorship could continue to flourish in postcolonial Africa. Broadly speaking, Africa has been left with weak economies and strong states; it has been saddled or rather burdened with what Paul Nugent calls a “culture of command” (2004: 57). Thus Heidi Holland writes of “the continent-wide post-traumatic stress embodied in men like Mugabe” (Holland, 2008: 215). As Michela Wrong argues even more forcefully in her harrowing account of the career of the despicable Mobutu Sésé Seko of Zaire, the seeds of dictatorship were planted and, indeed, first reaped by that country’s vicious and larcenous colonial masters. Mobutu’s Zaire, plundered by the leader and his entourage, its institutions hollowed out by corruption and IMF-imposed “structural adjustment”, resembled nothing so much as the Congo Free State under Belgium’s King Leopold (Wrong, 2001: 57). The dearth of civic morality, the use of the state to control the populace and put down revolts, the weakness or non-existence of democratic institutions, the idea that politics is a squabble for positions of privilege, the subordination of the economy to get-rich-quick export schemes, and the manipulation of ethnic divisions: all these things are the legacies of colonial rule. In short, colonialism was a form of dictatorship, one that has not yet been brought to an end.

A qualification is in order. Africa is not a united continent in any sense. Not only its extraordinary cultural diversity but also its variety of social, economic, and political

systems must be set against the picture of uniformity I have painted so far. Corruption and power hunger are by no means universal; Tanzania's Julius Nyerere retired with nothing but a state pension and a donated bungalow (Legum, 1999: 43). But if it was possible here and there for presidents to step down when they lost an election and for African states to pursue conscientious development strategies, it was nonetheless unlikely that a democratic culture could be created overnight in a continent whose own institutions had been smashed years before to be replaced by foreign autocracies. It was also well-nigh impossible for Africa to excel in a world market in which it had not only been dealt a losing hand but in which all the cards had been marked in advance by the affluent powers. Looked at this way, the deformities that afflicted the state in Africa from the very moment of its birth were due not, as is commonly assumed, to the fact that the colonial powers left too quickly but to the fact that they left far too slowly and reluctantly and that in most cases they did not really leave at all. Instead, those powers constrained their former colonies' independence with a legacy of authoritarian institutions, with the destruction and prevention of democratic movements, and with continued relations of subordination in the economic sphere. None of this serves to exonerate the sheer venality and incompetence of Africa's ruling classes. But my point is that the avarice and lust for power of these groups cannot be understood without reference to the larger world system for which, under colonial rule and since, they have acted as intermediaries. A central premise of these reflections is the belief that Africa has not had enough independence and its relations with the rest of the world have not been conducted on terms of its own choosing.

Nor should it be forgotten for a single second that the sclerosis and authoritarianism of the African state (which is "the black man's burden" in Basil Davidson's memorable phrase [1992]) exist alongside any number of almost miraculously indomitable movements of protest. New forms of high-handed intervention and exploitation are meeting with concerted opposition. In April 2008 South African, Mozambican, and Namibian trade unionists refused to unload or transport a Chinese container ship carrying weapons for the repressive government of Zimbabwe, truly, an uplifting example of popular and trans-national resistance to dictatorship.⁴ And who could overlook the ongoing revolts of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere? This is a region in which long-standing despotisms have been aided and supported by Europe and the USA since the colonial era. If the volcanic pressures that have precipitated these revolutions are to be addressed then the revolutions' platforms will need to include more than just the eradication of the old regimes. The region cries out for liberties of expression and organization, public welfare, democratic electoral systems, as well as credible models for development and Arab solidarity against the meddlesomeness and rapacity of Western powers.⁵ Something similar, I think, can be said for sub-Saharan Africa. These processes are complicated and inconclusive of course but nobody who is familiar with the long years of tyranny and stagnation in those countries, let alone the millions who have been forced to endure them, could fail to be cheered by the spectacle of revolution and especially by the sight of diminished ex-despots made to submit themselves to the full force of the democratic and legal processes they have so shamelessly flouted. Whether it is Charles Taylor hauled before judges in The Hague to stand trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity, a sullen Hosni Mubarak wheeled into court in his pyjamas, or

a routed Gaddafi turning tail and hiding ignominiously from his victims, these cathartic images of diminished tyrants do not just testify to the waxing and waning of regimes; whatever their immediate prospects they inspire sympathy and enthusiasm, as Kant said of the French Revolution, because they point towards the possibility of freedom.⁶

Dictator novels contest the strident, monologic voice of the dictator. They “bandy words with a government loudspeaker”, as Wole Soyinka put it in *Kongi’s Harvest*, a rare dictator play (Soyinka, 1974: 62). Invariably modernistic and many-voiced, dictator novels disrupt the myth of the dictator’s omnipotence by portraying the various factors that aid the dictator’s rise and sustain him in power in addition to the diverse forces of opposition that oppose his rule and seek to supplant it. Many of these novels amplify the voices not just of the crowds who invade the despot’s palace, of the disgruntled army officers who plot his assassination and the muffled cries of his victims, but also of his flunkies’ obsequious songs of praise, of the duplicitous accents of his first-world sponsors, as well as the patronizing lectures and continuing meddlesomeness of the departing colonialists.

What is revealed by these works is the intrinsic fallibility of power. The purported omnipotence of the dictator is usually undermined by dictation: that is, by his power’s reliance on the shift, ambiguous and therefore unreliable medium of language. Importantly, the dictator is not just someone who dictates in the sense of issuing orders but also someone who dictates in the sense of issuing commands that must subsequently be written down in the form of laws, narratives, instructions, and so on. In his account of the Abyssinian monarch Haile Selassie’s final years in power Ryszard Kapuściński describes the Minister of the Pen whose job it was to take down the Emperor’s foggy mutterings (Kapuściński, 2006: 8). These acts of dictation allowed the Emperor to avoid responsibility for unsuccessful policies by placing the blame on the Minister’s deficient powers of interpretation. However, they also reveal the dictator’s reliance on (and therefore his power’s vulnerability to) a game of broken telephone or whisper down the lane in which orders get written down only to be misunderstood, misinterpreted and even disobeyed. The dictator’s dependence on writing is therefore a way of emphasizing his dependence on the subservience of his subjects, on their willingness not to realize or act upon their power over the interpretation and execution of his orders.

The same is true, I am suggesting, of Ngũgĩ’s book; it stages the precariousness of power, that is, power’s lack of control over language and events. Ngũgĩ is fascinated by what he calls “the politics of performance space” (Ngũgĩ, 1998: xi). For him, a performance is any representative action “that assumes an audience during its actualization” (5), an audience whose interpretations and responses it calls forth. The oral performance of a narrative, literary characters’ presentation and reinvention of their own being (as Ngũgĩ puts it), literature’s propensity for provocations and ambiguities rather than certainties, and its many-voicedness: these things add up to a pedagogical stress on the possibility of interpretation and innovation. Ngũgĩ’s turn away from the realist concerns of his early fiction is also a turn towards performance: that is, towards an orientation of his work in the direction of its own audience, whether in novels written in Gĩkũyũ rather than English and designed to be read aloud in social gatherings, in “open” theatrical productions that incurred the Kenyan authorities’ wrath by educating and engaging the public (such as the production of *The Trial of Dedan Kĩmathi* in Nairobi in 1976), or in his adoption of magic realist forms whose formal effects are as

much a part of his books' democratic politics as their revolutionary narratives. Oral literary traditions are crucial here, as Ngũgĩ points out (Ngũgĩ, 1998: 124). Gĩkũyũ-language novels such as *Devil on the Cross* are presented by a Gĩcandĩ performer, whose art derives, Ngũgĩ tells us, from the clever riddles narrated in poetry competitions in pre-colonial Gĩkũyũ society.⁷ With their motifs and refrains, theatrical scenes that lend themselves to dramatization, and characters' exaggerated performance of their own identities and roles, these novels are riddles without answers presented for the participation and edification of audiences. The political aspect of Ngũgĩ's work is, as he argues, something intrinsic to art itself, which uses its own performative nature to contrast the reality and possibility of change with reigning political interests' stress on the permanence of the status quo. In this way *Wizard of the Crow* seeks, to use Ngũgĩ's words, to "enact" power and "to reflect, refract, and re-evaluate reality" (1998: 31).

Wizard of the Crow is a conspicuously oral narrative, one of tall tales, unreliability and exaggeration, that shifts between third- and first-person and even first-person plural narrative voices. The plot centres on a young couple, Kamĩtĩ (an unemployed graduate whose grandfather fought against the British) and Grace (a feminist and radical who leads the Movement for the Voice of the People), and their efforts to investigate and resist the all-pervading venality and power hunger. It is Kamĩtĩ who invents the persona of the Wizard of the Crow, who dispenses aid and advice to the poor, when fleeing from the police after a political protest. In one of the only substantial analyses of *Wizard of the Crow* so far (and undoubtedly the best), Robert L. Colson argues, as I have done, that the novel presents a "discursive challenge" to the autocratic politics of the novel's dictator by contrasting his power with "pluralistic modes of community" (2011). It does so, according to Colson, through its form and principally by way of its inventive use of rumour (which is a site for the free exchange of ideas), its multiple narrators and the way the protracted, eventful narrative time of the novel defies the Ruler's efforts to suspend time in an eternal present. The five rumours listed at the start of the novel which seek to explain the Ruler's mysterious illness have the function, Colson shows, of introducing readers to the multiple and popular perspectives from which the novel purports to be written. My sense, however, is that while all of this is undoubtedly taking place in the novel, the most important and effective dialogue or community is that engineered by the novel with its readers *through* performance. It is not just, as Colson argues, the novel's multiple narrators who cast doubt on the Ruler's profession to be all-powerful and who subvert his meaning-making power. What Colson's focus on narrative form does not take into account is the relationship between the novel and its readers and the way in which the novel, like the Gĩcandĩ performer, performs power in such a way as to encourage the debunking, interpretation, and re-performance of power *outside* its pages rather than inside.

The fantastic and hyperbolic elements of the novel are in part humorous knockabout at the expense of the powerful. This is an oral narrative, designed to be read aloud in public performances, as Ngũgĩ's *Devil on the Cross* is read in bars frequented by the novel's protagonists. But *Wizard of the Crow* also contains a series of metaphors that defamiliarize the reality of dictatorship and force us to examine it more closely. Here it is worth recalling what the French philosopher of hermeneutics Paul Ricoeur has to say about living (as opposed to dead or clichéd) metaphors. They oblige us, Ricoeur argues, to rethink our habitual ways of understanding the world (Ricoeur, 1977: 247). By inviting

interpretation and by establishing inventive and original connections between the metaphor and that which the metaphor evokes or describes, metaphors potentially refresh perception and enhance understanding. Magic realism is of course a way of blurring the boundary between truth and fiction. But the fantastic or magical aspects of a magical realist novel are less pure fantasy than metaphors that beseech decipherment or interpretation and therefore rejuvenate or re-perform conventional ways of understanding and describing the problem of dictatorship. In Márquez's *Autumn of the Patriarch*, for example, the sea around the despot's Caribbean island is sold to the gringos as surety for the interest on the nation's gargantuan foreign debt (Márquez, 1996/1975: 188). The fantastic image is a figure for the intolerable sacrifices the postcolonial state is forced to make as a result of its permanent indebtedness.

With its similarly exaggerated, satirical, and frequently disconcerting performances, *Wizard of the Crow* compels the re-examination of the postcolonial state and succeeds in alerting us to its strangeness and impermanence. Hence Joseph McLaren's description of *Wizard of the Crow* as "satirical magic realism" (2008). A special chamber in the State House is built with the bones of the many citizens the Ruler has killed, symbolic reminders of a system built on violence. The official newspaper is the *Daily Parrot*, which is an overt reference to the former Kenyan president Daniel Arap Moi's call for his compatriots to "sing like parrots" in praise of official propaganda as well as a more subtle allusion to the servility of the official media in a dictatorship. The Ruler swells grotesquely and then bursts, covering the capital city in a malodorous fog before giving birth to "Baby D", a fraudulent exercise in democratic reform designed to satisfy the Ruler's PR-conscious American allies and the global financial institutions they control. Furthermore, the catalyst for the popular protests that imperil the Ruler's regime is his plan to build a kind of Tower of Babel reaching to the heavens, for which he requires the support of the "Global Bank" and which becomes a new lightning rod for the corruption rife in Aburiria. The Global Bank pays a visit to the Ruler in the company of the American ambassador Gabriel Gemstone:

We are in the post-cold war era, and our calculations are affected by the laws and needs of globalization. The history of capital can be summed up in one phrase: *in search of freedom*. Freedom to expand, and now it has a chance at the entire globe for its theater. It needs a democratic space to move as its own logic demands. So I have been sent to urge you to start thinking about turning your country into a democracy. Who knows? Maybe with your blessings, some of your ministers might even want to form opposition parties. (2006: 580)

Who knows if the principals of the world economy talk to each other in this way? But the exaggeration, here and elsewhere, serves a purpose. The cynical conspiracy to simulate democratic institutions so that handouts for the African ruler can be exchanged for the lowering of trade barriers to Western corporations and the slashing of public budgets points to (or is a kind of figure or metaphor for) a larger truth about the collusion between authoritarianism in Africa and the activities of Western-controlled financial institutions. As McLaren observes, the novel "shows that the West and global capital are implicated in the dilemmas of African leadership" (2008: 152). The Aburirian state and foreign corporations "were all united by one slogan: '*A loot-a continua*'" (201), a parody of the

motto of FRELIMO's struggle against Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique: *A luta continua* (the struggle continues). *Wizard of the Crow* incites not scepticism about truth (in the way that a kind of glib postmodernism might simply run truth and fantasy together) but scepticism about *received* truths, which it performs and invites us to question. What the novel succeeds in bringing home to its readers is similar to what occurs to Kamiti as he is introduced to the burgeoning revolutionary movement at the end of the novel:

Maybe knowledge was nothing more than the art of looking at what we already know with different eyes, and asking different questions. Knowledge is the discovery of the magic of the ordinary. (2006: 759)

Power is being performed in a way that is arresting and outlandish in order to invite the scrutiny of power, the revelation of power's origins, and the accentuation of its vulnerability to alternatives.

Wizard of the Crow is preoccupied with crime and detection. Some of the events of the novel are narrated in the ebullient voice of a Kenyan policeman: Constable and later Superintendent Arigaigai Gatherer or A.G. Many critics, from the Marxist perspective of Ernest Mandel (1984), for example, or the more Foucauldian one of D.A. Miller (1988), have perceived in the detective's decipherment of the criminal act, in his successful identification of the criminal, and in the consequent punishment imposed by the judicial system, crime fiction's predominantly disciplinary function. In other words, crime fiction dramatizes social conflicts and resolves them imaginatively by enforcing the power of law and legitimate authority. What *Wizard of the Crow* succeeds in doing, however, is to perform power in such a way as to unveil the state itself as the principal miscreant. It is the novel's main narrator, not A.G., who appears to be a kind of detective trying to piece together a coherent account of events from the numerous and conflicting accounts that have come into his hands. Fredric Jameson has shown how the ultimate objective of the detective novel and the conspiracy film is not to uncover and make known isolated acts of corruption and wrongdoing but rather to trace these particular misdeeds to their true source in a whole society (or in this case a global colonial or neo-colonial *system*) that is corrupt, unequal and unjust, the revelation of which to the reader is the novel's purpose and effect (Jameson, 1992: 9-84). Here the detective is a medium of "cognitive mapping" not an agent of state surveillance. His investigation of the crime "becomes the occasion for the indictment of a whole collectivity" (37); "society as a whole is the mystery to be solved" (39). The detective or ordinary citizen himself is then either overwhelmed by the magnitude of this revelation and succumbs to resignation or else he falls victim to the regime's violence. In such moments the inability of mere works of art to correct this state of affairs is declared and the task of practical opposition is bequeathed to the novels' readers.

Here the knowledge provided by the book is not knowledge of the criminality of isolated malefactors whose deeds can then be reprovved and chastised but knowledge of the criminality of the system of dictatorship itself. It is knowledge that the Ruler of Aburiria is also the puppet of the Global Bank as well as the product of all the colonial and neo-colonial forces that sustain him in power. Bertolt Brecht famously asked: what is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of one? What, Ngũgĩ enquires in

similar vein, is rebellion against the state compared to the larceny and murder perpetrated by the real criminals in high office? In classic crime fiction, as Caroline Reitz has shown (2004), the colonized parts of the globe appear as exotic settings and as places in which colonial authority must be exerted against the threat of disorder and illegality. A characteristically postcolonial riposte to this way of writing and thinking is to turn the conventional definitions of criminality and justice on their heads: to show, as I am claiming Ngũgĩ's novel does, that colonialism and its neo-colonial manifestations are themselves the very epitome of criminality and that justice involves resistance to that power not its assertion or endorsement.⁸

Nothing has been changed by the end of *Wizard of the Crow*, just as little has really changed in postcolonial Kenya.⁹ The corrupt businessman Titus Tajirika has just declared himself Emperor. But unless we are to grow dispirited by the fact that, like Hercules fighting the Hydra, when we cut off the system's head another one grows back in its place, then we need to acknowledge the ways in which novels like *Wizard of the Crow* do far more than bear witness to criminality; they also anticipate democratic alternatives to the various forms of authoritarianism that bedevil postcolonial Africa. Indeed, as Gerald Martin has said of the Latin American variant, the force of the dictator novel lies "in the tension between aspiration and reality" (1989: 266), between the possibility of democracy and its current paucity. *Wizard of the Crow* indicts Africa's kleptocrats whilst tracking down the origins of their felonies to the durable system of colonialism itself. In addition, there is the normative power of the dictator novel: its capacity to stage, predict and even encourage the criticism, self-criticism, and democratic exchange that promise to make dictatorship a thing of the past. The electrifying and emancipating spectacle of the dictator novel is comparable in dramatic force if not effect to the sudden revelations provided by images of a pathetic Pinochet feigning senility in order to evade justice, of a panicky Ceausescu taken aback by the jeers of the vast crowd corralled into University Square, or indeed of a startled Moi being heckled and pelted with mud in Nairobi's Uhuru Park in 2002 for trying to hand over power like an heirloom. To deprive dictatorship of its appearance of supremacy and of its air of permanence is not yet a political achievement of course. Nonetheless the literary divestment of dictatorship's clout is perhaps prefatory to the more practical and ultimately political task of setting right "a continent alienated from itself by years of alien conquests and internal despots" (Ngũgĩ, 1993: 107).

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. Achille Mbembe would be the obvious figure to mention at this point. I have decided not to use or even discuss his oft-cited and broadly Foucauldian work on autocratic power and performance in the African "postcolony" (Mbembe, 2001: 102-41) because that work strikes me, as it has struck Neil Lazarus, as a way of disembodiment or "de-actualising" violence (Lazarus, 2011: 232). In my view it also obscures the origins of violence in state power, in

the social and economic interests of Africa's ruling groups and in imperialism itself. It even makes state power appear moot and ineluctable.

2. Jameson's maxim, about the need to postulate historical narratives, is: "We cannot not periodize" (Jameson, 2002: 29).
3. Ludo de Witte's investigation into the death of Patrice Lumumba (2001) has proved once and for all the Belgian government's determination to maintain its control over the Congo and established the complicity of the CIA and the UN in Lumumba's murder.
4. Leo Zeilig (2009) and E. Osei Kwadwo Prempeh (2006) discuss the various democratic challenges to authoritarianism and neoliberal globalization in Africa.
5. On the causes and prospects of what Perry Anderson calls "the concatenation in the Arab world", see Samir Amin (2011) and Anderson (2011).
6. The subsequent lynching of Gaddafi is among developments that necessitate a sober analysis of the prospects of the Arab revolutions. Nobody could take exception to the desire of Libya's long-tyrannized people to dole out justice to the villain responsible. What must be lamented is the fact that Gaddafi's murderers were flouting the principles and procedures of justice and that the revolution was therefore contaminating itself from the outset with the lawlessness as well as the vengeance, hatred, and violence that had characterized the wicked regime it had supplanted. Yet the revolting execution of the "Brother Leader" no more invalidates the principle of revolution than *la Terreur* invalidated the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.
7. "As an event that takes place in the public square, *gĩcaandĩ* is not only a performance but a site of performance, providing a model for interpersonal and public discourse. Practically every *gĩcaandĩ* performance concludes with the formula: *Hau twacemania ũmũũthĩ, no ho tũgaacemania rũũciũ*. (We will meet again tomorrow in the same place we met today). Far from signifying changelessness, this formulaic line promises future encounters between performers in which new themes will be introduced and old ones re-examined. The public, let it not be forgotten, will be in attendance" (Gĩtĩtĩ, 1995: 124).
8. The contributors to Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen's volume *Postcolonial Postmortems* (2006) show that what distinguishes postcolonial crime fiction is its capacity to call conventional definitions of criminality and justice into question and to place particular crimes in the context of the far greater and ongoing crime of colonialism itself.
9. Michela Wrong provides a sobering analysis of the continuing corruption of the Kibaki government that succeeded the venal Moi (2009).

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