Chapter Four


In Legson Kayira’s *The Detainee* (1974; Malawi), an old man attempts to make his way to the city for medical treatment; but the buses do not run, party membership cards are mandatory, and everywhere are members of the Young Brigade demanding allegiance to the dictator, Sir Zaddock Mlingo, Doctor of Laws and Africa’s Greatest Son. Eventually, the old man is placed in a prison camp, escapes, and, mistaken for dead, is taken to the morgue. The novel ends with the man regaining consciousness and fleeing into the forest. The novel is notable for its attention to the protagonist’s conversations with his fellow travelers, in which they discuss the proliferation of draconian laws and violence. These are contrasted to life before independence; or, as one character puts it, “Independence? What independence?”¹ Written almost two decades later, Wahome Mutahi’s *Three Days on the Cross* (1991; Kenya) similarly charts the injustices and paranoia of life under dictatorship, where security forces carry out kidnappings and violence in the name of the “Illustrious One.”² At issue in both novels is the descent into factionalism that has forestalled national consolidation and the creation of
democratic institutions. Neither novel is properly speaking a dictator novel, as the dictator remains too far outside the narrative frame. But they are representative of the literature of political disillusionment and the larger, volatile body of material out of which the African dictator novel coalesced.

Frantz Fanon anticipated many of the challenges that newly independent African nations would face in *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961). In the chapter “Mésaventures de la conscience nationale”—translated as “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” (Constance Farrington, 1965) or “The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness” (Richard Philcox, 2004)—he identified as a central concern the unpreparedness of the national bourgeoisie as well as the lack of practical ties between that small élite and the masses. Under such conditions, the élite would align themselves with foreign interests, becoming agents of neocolonialism. In the face of rising dissatisfaction, the dictator would emerge as a tool for mollifying or, together with the army and on the advice of foreign experts, silencing opposition. These possible outcomes are what Fanon terms the “mésaventures tragiques” or “tragically bad outcomes” of independence. The term “mésaventures” has proven elusive in translation. The English “misadventure” and its correlates “misfortune” (as in “trials and tribulations”) or “mishap” (as in “pitfalls”) seem unsuited to the gravity of Fanon’s subject; here the older “mésavenir”—to turn out badly—seems appropriate. Yet “mésaventures” and the implication of “adventure” contained therein are crucial to Fanon’s argument: prescience was not prescription. What Fanon described was one potential series of events within a much broader understanding of the possibilities for decolonization. Like an adventure, it was an undertaking whose outcome was uncertain; hence Fanon’s call to action. I take the un-translated term as the title in that same spirit, preferring its capaciousness to the teleological arc of disillusionment. The
African dictator novel is both a literary response to the *mésaventures* of independence and itself a deviation (with unexpected results) when viewed within the framework of the dictator novel.

This chapter traces the emergence of the dictator novel in West and Central African literatures in the decades following independence. The dictator novel is here one idiom (amongst many) through which writers explored the frustrated promise—or, to quote Josaphat Kubayanda, the “unfinished business”—of decolonization. These are what I will call the “local” or autochthonous origins of the dictator novel in African literatures. I distinguish the African dictator novel from the broader literature of political disillusionment, including the novel of dictatorship, for its focus on the dictator. To recall Ángel Rama on the Latin American dictator novel, here too writers enter the presidential palace, sniff around its corners, and even invade the dictator’s consciousness. This shift to focus on the dictator raised formal, thematic, and political questions that required elaboration of a new literary language, which both recalls and departs from its Latin American counterpart. The problem (dictatorship) is roughly the same, but the conversations that unfold around the figure of the dictator open new critical trajectories. The Anglophone and Francophone works I discuss have their own histories not reducible to typology in the name of facilitating comparative analogy. It is in reading for the differences as much as the similarities that theorization of the dictator novel as a transcontinental generic series becomes possible.

Accordingly, I look at Ousmane Sembène and Chinua Achebe’s respective dictator novels, *Le Dernier de l’Empire* (*The Last of the Empire*, 1981) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), first, as part of an evolving concern with political disillusionment in each writer’s oeuvre, where each is part of a series of works dealing with these questions; and, second, as dictator novels. The shift from generalized social critique to focus on the dictator modifies the
critical language and concerns of the earlier works. Having established this development (as an unfolding rather than evolution) in postcolonial African literatures, I locate the African dictator novel within the larger constellation gathered in this book. Here, the Latin American dictator novel—and, specifically, Gabriel García Márquez’s *El otoño del patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch*, 1975)—makes an appearance. But it is not a template for writers to follow so much as a specimen that is disassembled; its components then become part of the larger body of raw material out of which individual dictator novels take shape. Focusing on works by three Francophone African writers, I highlight the ways in which Aminata Sow Fall, in *L’Ex-père de la nation* (“The Ex-Father of the Nation,” 1987), Henri Lopès, in *Le Pleurer-rire* (*The Laughing Cry*, 1982), and Sony Labou Tansi, in *L’État honteux* (*The Shameful State*, 1981) and *La Vie et demie* (*Life and a Half*, 1979), bring to the dictator novel new critical concerns as well as innovations in literary form.

In these early African dictator novels, the dictator is placed alongside the larger complex of issues facing newly independent nations. He is the product of the debates and blunders that characterized decolonization, rather than an aberrant individual or mere puppet for foreign powers. While focus on the dictator remains a defining feature of these works, the overarching interest tends to be in exploring the perspective of those close to or around the dictator, whose participation makes dictatorship possible. Complicity, particularly in the sense of collaboration, is explicitly a topic of concern, as is the ambivalent position of the writer within the class structure of postcolonial society. Writing and the work of fiction itself are submitted to interrogation, where critical self-reflexivity is part of a larger impulse toward experimentation with narrative and novelistic form. In political terms, these novels are concerned not just with the dictator but with dictatorship itself as a recurring phenomenon. They register the global
dynamics of power that shaped dictatorships on the continent during the Cold War, offering a much wider frame within to grasp current political realities. In ascribing these features to the African dictator novel, I do not mean that they are absent from the Latin American works; much of what I describe are features analyzed in the previous chapters. But these aspects predominate in the African dictator novel, such that the African examples have inflected my readings of the Latin American works, just at the critical tradition of the Latin American dictator novel provides a frame within which to identify the African dictator novel. Read together with the materials discussed in the preceding chapters, these novels offer new configurations for the representative grammar and vocabulary that comprise the dictator novel as a genre.

The *Mésaventures of Independence, the Literature of Disillusionment, and the Dictator Novel: Ousmane Sembène and Chinua Achebe*

The year 1960 is the historical benchmark for this chapter, as it was then that the three countries to which I refer gained independence from Great Britain (Nigeria) and France (Senegal and the Republic of Congo). Within a decade, new governments were either unseated by coup, as in Nigeria and the Republic of Congo, or transformed into one-party states, as was the case with Léopold Sédar Senghor’s government in Senegal.⁵ Fledging nation-states confronted a variety of neocolonial entanglements, ranging from the continuing involvement of former colonial powers to interference from the United States and Soviet Union. National economies, too, remained dependent on the export of primary materials and vulnerable to price fluctuations. Despite a period of development-driven growth in the 1950s and 1960s, the global economic crises of the 1970s debilitated many nation-states. Governments sought increased international lending; but
loans came with requirements for “structural adjustment” policies that would further diminish state services and hobble economies in the long term.  

Cold War-era interventionism on the African continent not only made individual countries proxies for the larger global conflict, it brought flows of capital those in power could redirect for their benefit, propagating predatory states. For those with access, involvement with the postcolonial state facilitated personal enrichment, activated and maintained through complex patronage networks that produced a system of “big” and “little” men. This is what Jean-François Bayart evocatively describes as the “politics of the belly” (*la politique du ventre*), a metaphor for diverse forms of corruption and a mode of governmentality in which everyone who can must “eat” their fill. In many cases, the kleptocratic state was also “ethnicized,” with select groups receiving exclusive access to employment, contracts, and income. These are all features of what Achille Mbembe has termed the “postcolony.” As discussed in chapter one, the term refers to societies emerging from colonial domination. It is, in this sense, a temporality, although time is neither linear nor homogeneous. To quote Mbembe, the postcolony “encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: [it is] an *entanglement*.”

This historical précis is fitting of the term “disillusionment.” However, the very tenacity of the “triumph and failure” narrative in discussions of decolonization, whether at the continental, regional, or national levels, requires caution. While this narrative provides a useful arc within which to frame the novels discussed in this and the following chapter, I aim to trouble the teleological assumptions that underlie such succinct formulations. Scholars tend to emphasize the legacies of colonization, pointing to the often-arbitrary contours of current nation-states—where, for instance, Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba people are meant to share a common “Nigerian”
identity—as the root cause of political strife. But, to return to Mbembe, although the postcolony originates in the experience of colonization, it is not the persistence of colonial governmentality so much as a new dynamic produced in the interplay of internal and external factors. The state in Africa, Bayart contends, can no longer treated as merely exogenous. Arguing against the structuralist emphasis of dependency theory, Bayart maintains that Africans “have been active agents in the mise en dépendance of their societies, sometimes opposing it and at other times joining in it.”

Within this framework, corruption is a mode of social struggle embedded, or, to use Mbembe’s term “entangled,” in locally, nationally, and globally unequal circumstances. This approach stresses relationships between individuals, as the imbrication of all social actors in the operation of the system. I take this emphasis on relationships, both horizontal and vertical, as the necessary starting point for reading the African dictator novel. From a distance, it is easy to see the dictator—evidence of unsuccessful decolonization—as inevitable. But it is harder to see the (local and global) causes of dictatorship, and this is where the dictator novel intervenes.

In the previous chapter, the “Fathers of the Fatherlands” project signaled the culmination and decline of a cohesive political idealism and self-identification for writers of the Latin American boom period. The project was only conceivable from within a specific understanding of the political role of the writer, and impossible once that myth (to use a strong word) had shown its internal fissures. African writers in the era of independence had a comparable sense of shared identity and purpose. This was cultivated within the frame of earlier transnational movements such as négritude, particularly as galvanized by the journal Présence Africaine (founded in 1947); fed by the rising tide of anti-colonialism; and amplified at conferences such as the Fifth Pan-African Congress (Manchester, 1945), the first and second Congresses of Black Writers and Artists (Paris, 1956 and Rome, 1959), the Conference of African Writers of English
Expression at Makerere University (Kampala, 1962), and the First World Festival of Black Arts in 1966 (Dakar). Magazines such as Black Orpheus (1957), Transition (1962) and publishing projects such as Heinemann’s African Writers Series (1962) provided vital fora for debate and dissemination of new ideas. The mutual recognition fostered by such collaborative projects within and beyond the continent animated conception of the African writer as a key actor in decolonization. In the decades following independence, however, this optimism would sour.

The literature of political disillusionment spans sub-Saharan and North Africa. Self-rule, such works assert, had not amounted to real democratization or actual freedom for the majority. Instead, they encountered ongoing inequality, violence, corruption, economic stagnation, and general hypocrisy. These contestatory works make recourse to parody, satire, and even scatology—what Jed Esty calls “excremental postcolonialism”—to account for the realities of the postcolonial present. Some even looked beyond colonization to the pre-colonial period, counteracting the idealization of the African past associated with the earlier moment of négritude. Literary historiography generally refers to this as the “second stage” of African literatures, characterized by critique of the postcolonial state and its bourgeoisie, in contrast to earlier anti-colonial and nationalist works of the first stage. Rarely are matters neatly linear: already in 1960 African writers had begun to worry that triumphant nationalism would descend into corruption and authoritarianism. Wole Soyinka’s A Dance of the Forests (1960), a play performed at Nigeria’s independence celebrations, and Chinua Achebe’s No Longer at Ease (1960) expressed apprehension of the emerging political class on the eve of independence. These concerns developed into open critique in Soyinka’s later play, Kongi’s Harvest (1965), and first novel, The Interpreters (1965), as well as Achebe’s A Man of the People (1966). Ousmane Sembène—who earlier wrote anti-colonial works such as Les bouts de bois de Dieu (God’s Bits
of Wood, 1960), about a rail workers’ strike in 1940s Senegal—similarly explored the shortcomings of the postcolonial state in two short works of fiction, “Le Mandat” (“The Money Order,” 1965) and Xala (1973), later adapted into films (Mandabi, 1968 and Xala, 1975). Over the following decade, the wide-ranging concerns of the literature of political disillusionment began to concentrate on the dictator. Such works share much with the literature of disillusionment. However, in putting the dictator at the center of the narrative, writers were forced to consider their relationship, both as intellectuals and (even) as members of the postcolonial élite, to that figure. It is here that the self-reflexivity at the heart of the dictator novel comes to bear on disillusionment, necessitating reconsideration the political role of the writer.

In Wretched of the Earth, Fanon called for an alliance between the intellectuals, “armed with revolutionary principles,” and the masses to bar the way to the destructive national bourgeoisie. This was a vision of the writer-revolutionary to which many writers subscribed. Writing in 1965, Achebe presented the model of the “novelist as teacher,” arguing that the task of the writer was to “reeducate and regenerate” so that society may “put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement.” Just three years later and at the height of the Biafran War (1967-1970), during which Achebe served as an emissary for the secessionist Republic of Biafra, matters were more pressing: “It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant.” In public fora, lectures, and conferences, many writers called for more direct forms of action. Soyinka, to give one example, was critical of African writers for failing to take active part in political struggle. The African writer, he argued in his keynote address at the 1967 African-Scandinavian Writers Conference, had withdrawn into abstract notions of commitment. The stage of disillusionment called for examination of “what has been the failure
of the African writer, as a writer.” At stake here was not just the place of the intellectual in the political sphere, but the question of the political function of literature and, further, of what a properly committed text might look like. For instance, responding to Soyinka, Ngũgĩ called for African writers to “talk in the terms of the workers and peasants,” foregrounding the question of language in African literatures and anticipating his later commitment to writing in Gikuyu.

These debates are crucial for reading the dictator novel as an act of denunciation. Much like their Latin American counterparts, African writers were in an ambivalent position vis-a-vis the national élite. They were, with notable exceptions such as Sembène or Ngũgĩ, most often members of this class. Yet many quickly found themselves alienated from and marginalized by the governments of their new nations. The literature of political disillusionment marks the break between writers and the political class. Neil Lazarus has persuasively argued that “disillusionment” is the wrong term for this rift. Writers remained fundamentally “illusioned,” in so far as they held on to the idea of independence as a revolutionary juncture. “Expecting much too much in 1960,” Lazarus argues, “they became much too cynical in 1968.” The tenor of Lazarus’s critique softens when considered within the arc of individual writers’ work. Achebe, for one, was already apprehensive in 1960; read in series, *No Longer at Ease, A Man of the People,* and *Anthills of the Savannah* suggest a development and intensification of concerns, rather than a break. Nevertheless, taking Lazarus’s generalization as a starting point, I locate the origins of the African dictator novel post-1968 and its emergence at the cusp of the 1980s.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Sembène and Achebe strove to document the political, economic, and social transformations that followed independence; each was central to the consolidation of postcolonial Francophone and Anglophone African literatures. Sembène also moved into film,
becoming a founding figure for African cinema. Achebe, meanwhile, shaped the international image of African literatures through his role as advisory editor for the Heinemann African Writers Series. (Famously, Ngũgĩ gave Achebe the manuscript of *Weep Not, Child* [1964] at the 1962 Makerere conference). In reading Sembène and Achebe together, I aim to bridge a frequent division between their two language traditions, illuminating the parallels while also using the instructive differences between Sembène and Achebe to demonstrate the breadth of writerly response to, first, disillusionment, and, later, dictatorship. Broadly, Sembène’s focus was on large-scale social dynamics, particularly the changing relations between classes and generations; while Achebe’s was on the shifting values and increasingly compromised idealism of members of the postcolonial élite. These concerns continue into their respective dictator novels, where both look to the presidential cabinet as the locus of action, or lack thereof. In both, proximity to the dictator and specifically the materialization—as physical presence—of the dictator in the narrative modify the language and concerns of the earlier work, signaling renewed interest in the critical function of narrative form.

The plot of Sembène’s “The Money Order” centers on one man’s attempts to cash a money order sent by a nephew working in Paris. Illiterate, weak in French, and lacking the birth certificate necessary for the required identity card, Ibrahima Dieng is poorly equipped. Desperate for help navigating these hostile systems, Dieng makes recourse to a cousin recently returned from France, to little effect. After several small swindles, he loses the money order and his home to Mbaye, a local businessman and part of what the narrator calls the “‘New Africa’ generation.” Sembène’s critique extends from the cynicism of operatives such as Mbaye, to the indifference of the postcolonial state, to the haplessness of Dieng himself. The picture is bleak; as one clerk remarks when Dieng shows his voter identification card: “‘You are being fooled with your
voter’s cards,’ he said in French. ‘No one is going to be bothered about voting.’”

The story tracks the emergence of three key constituencies in the postcolony. The first is the un- or underemployed masses, many of whom must migrate to survive, as represented by Dieng’s nephew; in counterpoint to this is Dieng’s “been-to” cousin, who is prepared to take over the operations of the state but quick to disregard personal obligations; and, finally, there is the businessman Mbaye. Less well-groomed than Dieng’s cousin, he represents the rapacious and ascendant bourgeoisie.

The world of this emergent class is the subject of Xala. Set ten years after independence, the novella opens with a celebration for the first African head of Senegal’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the “last bastion” of the colonial era. One of its members, El Hadji Abdou Vader Beye, has decided to take a third wife and looks forward to the wedding night; when the moment arrives, he is suddenly impotent. El Hadji has been struck with a “xala,” and the narrative follows his attempts to discover who is behind the curse. Eventually, he makes recourse to a marabout (Muslim holy man or mystic) who offers respite. But El Hadji has neglected his affairs, bills have piled up, and banks now refuse credit; as El Hadji’s life unravels, the xala returns. The source of the curse turns out to be a beggar whom El Hadji earlier defrauded. Together with his friends, the beggar invades the house of El Hadji’s first wife. This is a parade of the downtrodden and excluded: scarred, crippled, and infected bodies that gleefully sully the finery of the house. The grotesque and excremental here illuminate the depredations of the élite and serve to magnify the horror of El Hadji and his family. To remove the curse, El Hadji submits to being spat upon three times by each of the beggars.

Xala is a satire of the postcolonial élite, inveighing against its corruption, conspicuous consumption, and hypocrisy. The plot is a narrative of revenge, but hardly celebratory in spirit.
Sembène repeatedly stages moments of incisive appraisal and criticism that are subsequently undercut. For instance, Rama, El Hadji’s eldest daughter, is fiercely critical of her father; opposed to his third marriage, she favors Wolof over French and calls for social revolution. But she finds the beggars repulsive and is reduced to tears by their invasion. Similarly, defending himself before expulsion from his Businessmen’s Group, El Hadji makes a virulent critique of their status as middlemen. His remarks are met with little interest: “We aren’t at the theatre,” one colleague observes. Even the beggars’ revenge is undermined. As they spit on El Hadji, the police lie in wait; per the closing line of the novella: “Outside, the forces of order raised their weapons into the firing position…” (I insert here the ellipses omitted in the English translation). The implication is that, regardless of what happens to El Hadji, order will return and things will remain as they were. Xala is not, then, a celebration of the seizure of power by the oppressed; it documents the increasing entrenchment of social and political inequality in the postcolony.

This reluctance to idealize acts of criticism or opposition is consistent with Sembène’s understanding of the political function of art. Asked in a 1969 interview about his move to cinema, Sembène explained that he hoped to reach a larger audience, adding:

What is interesting for me is exposing the problems my people have to face. I am not a leftist intellectual. Moreover, I am not an intellectual at all. I regard the cinema primarily as a political instrument of action. I stand, as I’ve always said, for Marxism-Leninism. I am for scientific socialism. However, as I always continue to specify, I am not for “socialist realism,” nor for a “cinema of signs” with slogans and demonstrations. For me revolutionary cinema is something else. And then I am not naive to the point that I believe that I could change Senegalese
reality with only one film. On the other hand, if we managed to set up a group of
cineastes who all make cinema directed in the same direction, I believe we could
influence a little bit of the destinies of our country. 22

Just as Sembène does not romanticize the oppressed in “The Money Order” and Xala, there is
here a refusal to celebrate commitment as an abstract ideal. Such is the kind of mistake made by
intellectuals. Instead, Sembène emphasizes the accumulated value of multiple critiques. This
tension between the work of documentation (bearing witness) and the refusal to idealize any
single constituency is a central component of his later dictator novel, where the critical potential
of narrative mechanics, particularly focalization, and self-reflexivity come to the fore.

The Last of the Empire turns on a conspicuous absence: the dictator Léon Mignane, the
“Venerable One,” has disappeared. His cabinet ministers are unsure whether this is a coup or a
trap, and the action follows the chaos resulting from the dictator’s absence. Key here is the
narrative device of omniscient narration, which moves through a succession of actors in the
novel-world, including various ministers, the French ambassador, the journalist Kad, and the
Venerable One himself. Except for Doyen Cheikh Tidine Sall, a long-time comrade and fellow
“father” of independence, the cabinet is comprised of younger bureaucrats identified as “the
second post-Independence generation” now installed in the heart of the government. Sembène’s
focus on the cabinet generates an analysis of the mechanisms that sustain authoritarian regimes
as well as of the overlapping time-scales Mbembe describes in the postcolony. While the
Venerable One makes use of the differences between generations to maintain his hold on
power—these younger ministers have no popular support of their own—the fluctuating forces
that demarcate these constituencies pose the greatest challenge to his regime. As the journalist
Kad surmises at the end of the novel, the present eventually gives way under the Venerable
One’s feet. The dictator’s staged disappearance unintentionally becomes a reality when, ostensibly responding to demonstrations by the activist youth, the army revolts and exiles the Venerable One to France, with help from its ambassador. At issue here is not just the reliance of authoritarian regimes on falsification and simulacra, but the play of representation itself.

A long-time accomplice and later opponent, Cheikh Tidiane serves as the primary vehicle for critique of the dictator, as the narrative recalls several arguments between the two men. After the Venerable One goes missing, Tidiane resigns from the cabinet and makes plans to write a memoir, which (per the closing lines of the novel) will be titled *The Last of the Empire*. Repetition of the title of the novel as that of the fictional memoir suggests an alignment of the two projects. Like the memoir, this dictator novel will serve, to quote Tidiane, as “our final statement of accounts.” But there is little actual correspondence between the novel *The Last of the Empire* and its apparent double. Although the novel contains elements of Tidiane’s story, its scope and frame are distinct from that of the imagined memoir. Nor is Tidiane a model for critical political consciousness. Tidiane does not, for instance, repudiate the idea that African heads of state can or should hold their positions for life. He also quickly comes to support the coup, arguing that a little discipline will be necessary to address the country’s problems—much to the disappointment of his interlocutor (Attorney Ndaw), through whom this scene is focalized. In the end, the novel evinces little faith in Tidiane, as his critical imagination remains bound by the limitations of class, generation, and education.

The repetition of the title *The Last of the Empire* within the text therefore serves to differentiate the work of the (imagined) memoir from that of the dictator novel. The contest is one of genre: Sembène draws a distinction between the story of an individual life, as an occasion for the drawing up of “accounts,” and the more complex vision of the novel necessary for
effectively understanding the social and political factors that bring about and sustain dictatorship. This includes the psychological legacies of colonization, reliance on violence to manufacture consent, inter-ethnic factionalism, growing inequality between classes, unfettered personal greed, and the forces of neocolonialism. Contra the memoir, which would anchor the life of the individual to that of the dictator, the dictator novel widens the perspective and therefore the critical scope of its anti-dictator project. The dictator thus becomes a symptom of the larger forces at work.

Writing and the writer are part of this larger system, and this is where the critical value of metafictional gesture comes to bear. At three separate points in The Last of the Empire characters refer to Sembène’s work as a poet and filmmaker. The allusions initially seem winking and serve to locate Sembène within the novel-world. But in each case Sembène’s work is subject to misreading. These characters may be able to quote—and even celebrate, as Tidiane does—the work but have learned little from it. The foremost example comes in a conversation between Kad and one of Tidiane’s sons, Diouldé, a businessman. Taking inspiration from the film Xala, Diouldé and his peers have taken to referring to themselves as “economic operators” (Opérateurs Économiques), missing the satire, and dismissing Sembène himself as an “idiot.”26 These self-referential moments in The Last of the Empire both name and trouble the critical project of the dictator novel. As an act of denunciation, it depends on the reader to properly interpret its message. But, to recall the scene in Alejo Carpentier’s El recurso del método (Reasons of State, 1974) where the dictator reads Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s Facundo and identifies with Sarmiento rather than the dictator, the work of art is always subject to misreading and misuse.
This observation tempers celebration of the revolutionary orientation of a new set of actors introduced toward the end of the novel: the youth, a rising “third” generation. As the narrator remarks when the youth take to the streets:

For the resignation of older people, moderate and timorous, had been replaced by a new ideal: the cult of bravery, of daring, of economic and political nationalism. Their times were rich in people’s heroes who had died fighting, exemplary of the same struggle being fought in many places: their names were Nkrumah, Sékou Touré, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Steve Biko, Che Guevara, Patrice Lumumba, Neto, Uncle Ho. Their spiritual capitals were in turn Hanoi, Havana, Accra, Conarky, Alger, Maputo, Luanda, Soweto, Dar es Salaam. They expressed themselves freely, and found themselves writers and thinkers near to hand, on African soil: Fanon, Cabral, Nkrumah, Pathé Diagne, Mongo Beti, Amedy Dieng, Nyerere, Cheikh Anta Diop.27

In part because the outcome of its actions is unresolved, treatment of this new generation remains ambivalent in the novel. Despite its title, The Last of the Empire does not imagine an end to dictatorship. The novel describes, instead, the successive transformations of systems of oppression in the decades following the end of direct colonial rule. What matters, however, is that this is not an isolated problem. As Kad argues in the epilogue, “Africa will be at stake for the remainder of this century, and for the first third of the next. The present struggle transcends our local problems.”28 His remarks are met with silence by Tidiane and his family (predictably); but they point to a possibly global political future beyond the scope of the novel. Potential for change lies not in the critical intervention of a single work or writer, but in the ability to understand that the same struggle unfolds in many places at once. Youth in and of itself does not
guarantee revolutionary change, but in building transnational networks of solidarity and opposition a new future might be possible.

In counterpoint to Sembène’s attention to large-scale dynamics, Achebe is interested in the motivations and self-justifications of the “new Africans” who took power after independence. Both No Longer at Ease and A Man of the People track the downfall of an idealistic individual as synecdoche for the making of a national bourgeoisie. No Longer at Ease opens with the conviction of its protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, for accepting bribes; set on the eve of independence, the novel anticipates the transition from colonial control to the bureaucracy of the postcolonial state. Achebe embeds this story in a longer history of interaction and collaboration with the British in Nigeria: Obi is the grandson of Okonkwo, the protagonist of Things Fall Apart (1958), who opposed the incursion of missionaries into his community in the early twentieth century. Okonkwo eventually commits suicide and his son Isaac (Obi’s father) leaves to join the mission school. Obi himself went on to study in England. On his return to Nigeria, Obi becomes one of the first Africans allowed to occupy a “European” post on the Scholarship Board. He is initially highly principled and annoyed by the petty bribery that facilitates life in Lagos. The civil service will remain corrupt, Obi thinks, “until all the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the universities.” Yet Obi quickly takes to the pleasures of his position: a new apartment, a house boy, a car, and nights out with his girlfriend, Clara. With his salary come new obligations and, pushed by the need to finance an abortion for Clara, Obi too begins to accept bribes.

Despite its arc, No Longer at Ease is not quite a moral tale. Achebe is interested instead in the ways in which Obi’s education and privilege have shaped his perspective, as a
representative for the generation of future leaders. While critical of the British, Obi is also suspicious of his fellow Nigerians and this leads to an unsettling proposition:

“Where does one begin? With the masses? Educate the masses?” He [Obi] shook his head. “Not a chance there. It would take centuries. A handful of men at the top. Or even one man with vision—an enlightened dictator. People are scared of the word nowadays. But what kind of democracy can exist side by side with so much corruption and ignorance? Perhaps a halfway house—a sort of compromise.”

In aligning this pejorative view of Nigerians with the perspective of the British colonizers, Achebe implicitly disputes Obi’s endorsement of an “enlightened dictatorship,” but the question of exactly what kind of democracy will be possible after independence remains open. The novel sounds a general caution, while pointing to future misfortunes (mésaventures tragiques). As Obi observes in a discussion of tragedy during his interview for the civil service: “Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of the emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot.”

*A Man of the People* returns to this “untidy spot,” now set in an anonymous African country. The protagonist here is a young teacher, Odili, whose school is preparing for a visit from a local politician, Chief Nanga. Odili is already suspicious of the government, but Chief Nanga is a charismatic man who entices Odili with the prospect of a scholarship for further study. The plot turns on petty interpersonal conflicts, where questions of personal pride and individual gain displace politics. Achebe uses the intimacy of first person narration to illuminate to Odili’s equivocations together with those of the larger system. While Odili sees Nanga as a
barely-literate brute—anticipating the trope of the uneducated but charismatic dictator—he goes to visit Nanga in the capital. Once Nanga sleeps with Odili’s girlfriend, however, Odili decides to take his government post (and Nanga’s girlfriend, Edna) as revenge. As Odili’s political party and the campaign descend into chaos, the military revolts against the government. Recalling Obi’s critique of corruption in *No Longer at Ease*, the young men from the universities have proven to be no better than their predecessors. But unlike in *No Longer at Ease*, where the protagonist’s downfall allows for a measure of catharsis, the (real) tragedy remains unresolved at the end of *A Man of the People*. With the coup, it has moved into a new phase.

More than two decades separate *Anthills of the Savannah* from *A Man of the People*. Published just before the 1966 coup, the earlier novel proved uncannily prescient. By contrast, *Anthills* is very much a “post-Biafra” work and marks a dramatic shift in Achebe’s thinking on writer’s role in politics as well as on the relationship between the novel and the nation. The narrative traces the experiences of three people close to the dictator of the fictional country of Kangan. The first two are childhood friends of His Excellency, Sam: Christopher Oriko, the Commissioner of Information, and Ikem Osodi, editor of the *National Gazette*. The third is Chris’s girlfriend, Beatrice Okoh, who works in the Ministry of Finance. Educated abroad, all four are part of the postcolonial élite, although as a military man Sam lags somewhat behind his former schoolmates. What began as collaboration (after taking power, Sam called on Chris and Ikem for help) curdles into discord as Sam’s grip on power begins to slip: the national economy is struggling and a drought in the north of the country causes increasing unrest. The breakdown of the postcolonial state is visible in the daily traffic jams, poor state of the roads, and lack of social services that punctuate events in the plot. There is also growing division between rich and poor, evident in the interactions of these characters with taxi drivers and other workers, as well
as in the tensions between Beatrice and her maid, Agatha, and Ikem’s arguments with his girlfriend Elewa, a shop assistant and daughter of a market woman. By the end of the novel, all three men are dead: Ikem arrested and killed by the police; Chris murdered while travelling north; and Sam unseated by coup. Only Beatrice and Elewa, now pregnant with Ikem’s child, remain.

As in *The Last of the Empire*, the dictator exerts a gravitational pull in *Anthills of the Savannah*, shifting the terms of critique associated with the earlier literature of disillusionment. While the emphasis is on those close to the dictator, Sam also enters the frame, and the novel makes use of these multiple perspectives to interrogate the work of the dictator novel itself. The narrative opens with a meeting of the Executive Council in the Presidential Palace. The scene is a cutting satire of the political class narrated from Chris’s point of view. The ministers grovel before His Excellency, to comic effect, and several have even adopted a military style of dress. “It is amazing,” Chris thinks, “how the intellectual envies the man of action.” Yet he too cowers before Sam. Achebe also registers the increasing influence of foreign interests in the country. As Chris acknowledges, the Executive Council is no longer the center of power. It is instead Beatrice who provides a view of the dictator’s new inner circle, as a guest at an exclusive dinner where the guests include the Chairman of the Kangan-American Chamber of Commerce, the director of the secret police, and an attractive American journalist. The journalist openly lectures Sam on the importance of servicing foreign debts: “What we must remember is that banks are not houses of charity,” she declares. “They’re there to lend money at a fair and reasonable profit. If you deny them their margin of profit by borrowing and not paying back they will soon have to shut down.” This attention to foreign influence is not a means for displacing responsibility. Achebe is primarily concerned with the internal causes of dictatorship, hence the
novel’s focus on those around the dictator. However, in making the dictator present, Achebe must also register the global forces for which the dictator is a conduit. Not only is Sam not omnipotent, he proves expendable. As one passerby comments to Chris when they learn of the coup, in a country like Kangan it is not hard to “go make” another president. Another proposes that the only way to stop this cycle is to “go [to] England and negotiate with IMF to bring white man back to Kangan.” More than disillusionment, Achebe here stages the final disintegration of the project of independence.

In contrast to the earlier novels, Achebe’s choice to follow multiple characters in *Anthills* coveys a broader view of the social dynamics that sustain and flow from dictatorship. This includes Chris, Ikem, and Beatrice as well as the wider cast of characters drawn from diverse social classes; these demonstrate Achebe’s attempt to open toward an expanded vision of the *demos*, even if the idea of a democracy to come itself remains in question. More challenging, however, is the novel’s revision of its structuring principles as the narrative unfolds. The narrative initially presents itself as a series of testimonies, with Chris identified as the “First Witness” in the opening chapter and Ikem as the “Second Witness.” But the second chapter, where focalization briefly shifts to Sam, punctures this conceit. Then, a third of the way through the novel, there is a break temporal progression as the narration moves forward to a future point in which Beatrice reflects back on present events: “For weeks and months after I had definitely taken on the challenge of bringing together as many broken pieces of this tragic history as I could lay my hands on,” she explains, “I still could not find a way to begin.” Beatrice, it turns out, is both the “third witness” in and compiler of the story, at least until an omniscient narrator fully takes over in the final chapters.
This formal volatility is crucial to understanding Achebe’s project in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The novel begins by staging the documentary function of the dictator novel, made possible by its attention to the testimony of those close to the dictator (the “witnesses”). But it then moves toward a self-reflexive interrogation of such testimony, putting into question the value of the first-person account. These are imperfect witnesses, in the sense that each narrator has their own agenda. Beatrice, for instance, makes clear that part of her motivation for writing is self-defense, as she wants to contravene the way in which she has been characterized in the press. Chris defends his decision to remain on the cabinet and attempts to absolve himself of responsibility by arguing: “I couldn’t be writing this if I didn’t hang around to observe it all.”

Ikem presents a more complicated case. He is in many ways an idealized example of the writer-intellectual. As the editor of the *National Gazette*, he takes pleasure in publishing crusading editorials. At the same time, the narrative notes several instances in which Ikem fails to intervene and even takes a kind of intellectual or aesthetic curiosity in watching violence unfold, as when he listens to neighbor beating his wife or watches a soldier attack a youth at the market. “There are things,” Ikem argues, echoing Chris, “which an observer can only see if he resists the temptation to jump into the fray and become an actor himself.” Achebe here illuminates that tension between observation (bearing witness) and action that had long been a topic of debate amongst writers of his generation.

Yet *Anthills* does not necessarily advocate direct action as counterpoint to detached observation. As Ikem explains in a speech to the Student Union at the University of Bassa:

I want instead to excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the condition of their lives because, as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living… As a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self-
examination. I don’t want to foreclose it with a catchy, half-baked orthodoxy. My critics say: There is no time for your beautiful educational program; the masses are ready and will be enlightened in the course of the struggle. And they quote Fanon on the sin of betraying the revolution. They do not realize that revolutions are betrayed just as much by stupidity, incompetence, impatience and precipitate action as by doing nothing at all.  

The role of the writer (as with the dictator novel) is that of careful social analysis, rather than adherence to a particular political program. Orthodoxy, as Ikem, argues to Beatrice, is the enemy of art, because it blinds the artist to the faults of the oppressed as much as to the humanity of the oppressor. It is only once the writer has shed all possible political orthodoxies that a new (political as well as aesthetic) radicalism might be possible. “Writers don’t give prescriptions,” Ikem declares in response to a question about the role of the Third World writer from the audience at the Student Union, “They give headaches!”

Such declarations read as a statement of intent; like Ikem, Achebe offers more questions than prescriptions for the problem of dictatorship. The novel further invites this parallel by mirroring Ikem’s major political awakening—his newfound appreciation for the political role of women—in the resolution of the plot. At the end of the novel, Beatrice and Elewa hold a naming ceremony for Elewa’s baby girl, where Beatrice assumes the father’s role. The gathering is also a commemoration of Chris and Ikem attended by the various taxi-drivers, student leaders, and workers encountered in the narrative. This radically heterogeneous group suggests a new vision for the nation and an alternate political future consistent with many of the values espoused by Ikem. But the community described in this closing scene is also, following Neil ten Kortenaar, a community “so imaginary that it exists nowhere outside the novel.” This closing
scene does not resolve the conflicts that ostensibly drive the plot, as the problem of dictatorship remains in place. More importantly, if this closing scene intends to idealize women as the bearers of an alternate political future, Beatrice herself contravenes such a reading from within the novel, when she critiques the role given to women in traditional society as that “of intervening only when everything else has failed.” While this final scene suggests closure and a future political community, the novel itself resists such easy conclusion.

The lack of resolution in *Anthills of the Savannah* has been a source of frustration for critics, who tend to read this as a commentary on the challenges to consolidation of the postcolonial nation state. In this register, its displacement of the political (the dictator) by the domestic (as political allegory) seems a sign of exhaustion or pessimism about the future to come. I offer an alternate interpretation: in shifting his attention to women and the domestic sphere as the site for the creation of new political communities, Achebe signals the limits of the anti-dictator project of the dictator novel, at least as imagined in continuity with the earlier literature of political disillusionment. Although the cabinet and the scheming of the dictator’s subordinates provides the initial entry into the center of power, it does not suffice for adequate analysis of dictatorship; hence the novel’s intermittent attention to the global forces that sustain dictatorship as well as its turn to alternate (if utopian) political communities. To return to my argument about the renegotiations of the structuring logic of the narrative, the apparent incongruence of the novel’s conclusion is another instance of its on-going formal mutation. For the dictator novel to provide a cogent examination of authoritarian power, Achebe suggests, it will have to look beyond the presidential palace, the simple enumeration of the dictator’s crimes, even the dictator himself, and instead turn to and push the limits of narrative form so as to account for the complex and shifting phenomena that coalesce around the dictator and make his
regime possible. And such a project will require a rethinking of the novel form, which includes a move away from singular or exemplary protagonists and toward self-reflexive interrogation of the political function of literature itself. *Anthills of the Savannah*, although perhaps not altogether successful, is an attempt to stage this kind of experimentation, and its conclusion points toward new possible paths for the literary exploration of dictatorship.

**New Vocabularies for the Dictator Novel: Aminata Sow Fall, Henri Lopès, and Sony Labou Tansi**

From the 1970s onward, dictatorship becomes a recurring theme and the dictator a pervasive figure in African novels. These works playfully invoke their historical referents, often generalizing the setting to more broadly address the problem of dictatorship. Recourse to fictionalized settings and dictators is often read as self-protection; as Dominic Thomas argues, in the face of censorship and oppression writers “resort to the veil of allegory to conceal their narratives, even if everyone sees through it and knows that the fictional state being described is in fact the real state.” Without dismissing the real dangers involved in writing under and about a present dictatorship, I posit that this move has more critical heft than allowed by the term “allegory.” The veil is very thin: paratextual devices such as the author’s forward often serve to name and puncture the illusion before the narrative itself gets underway. See, for instance, Sembène’s forward to *The Last of the Empire*, where he (sardonically) threatens legal action against anyone who insists on real-world parallels. The point is not that the world of *The Last of the Empire* is in fact Senegal or the Venerable One Léopold Sédar Senghor: Sembène reimagines transition as a failure of stagecraft quite different from Senghor’s successful transfer of power in 1981. Rather, within the frame of the dictator novel, the confusion of fact and fiction is the
metafictional gesture by which writers point to the political work of the text. At stake is not (just) a specific African dictator, but the African dictator as a composite of individual cases that makes possible an amplification of the critique from the national to the continental and even potentially global scale. As Soyinka made clear his preface to *A Play of Giants* (1984), dictatorship was not solely an African problem; and Achebe too, argued that dictatorship was not particular to the Third World.\(^48\) Once again, I am making an argument for the necessary “untimeliness” of the dictator novel, even when its historical referents seem straightforward; this opens the dictator novel to projects that extend well beyond critique of the dictator to questions of the relationship between literature and politics at large.

The ideal of the committed writer and committed writing underwent significant transformation in the two decades following independence, with many writers retreating from public declarations of commitment. The new novels, in turn, were darker, disjointed, even farcical and grotesque. Writers’ engagement with the realities of the African postcolony engendered what Pius Adesanmi calls a “radical re-invention of textual idiom.” This includes the disruption of narrative temporality (de-linearization), multiplication of narrative voices (polyphony), use of neologisms and other “syntactic transgressions,” as well as recourse to the discursive strategies of various genres of African orature.\(^49\) Discussing this same shift, Mamadou Kalidou Ba notes the influence of the French and Latin American *nouveau roman* (or, *nueva novela*); particularly in the multiplication of narratives, disruption of narrative time through devices such as analepsis and prolepsis, and a move away from realism toward metafictional reflection on the nature of writing itself. Recourse to African orature begat the use of introductory formulae, creating a rhythm of aural repetition; the direct interpellation of the reader by the narrator; and a more polemical tone in the narrative.\(^50\) Writing in 1988, Tchichellé
Tchivéla also attributed many of these features in Congolese writing to the influence of Latin American writers and specifically the Latin American “nouveau roman” (boom novel), charting a trans-Atlantic kinship (une parent outre-Atlantique).51

The textual features enumerated here name and expand upon the vocabulary (poetics) for the literary representation of the dictator elaborated in my discussions of The Last of the Empire and Anthills of the Savannah. This section reads the above observations into the generic series of the dictator novel; this is not a simple progression, but rather one in which the nascent conventions of the dictator novel cross with other genres (narrative conventions, modes, and so on) and critical concerns. My focus will be on the use of focalization and the implication of the writer in the text, which for Aminata Sow Fall facilitates a repurposing of the dictator novel to address the reception of African women’s writing; the return of questions of complicity and commitment in writing about the dictator, which are central to Henri Lopès The Laughing Cry; and the expansion and disruption of narrative time as means for thinking about the endurance of dictatorship on the continent, crucial for understanding Sony Labou Tansi’s project in both Life and a Half and The Shameful State. Lopès and Labou Tansi also register the international prominence of Latin American literature and the dictator novel in particular. In turning attention to the world literary circulations of narratives about dictators and dictatorship, they illuminate the dictator novel itself as a trans-regional phenomenon, taking apart and repurposing the features associated with their Latin American counterparts.

Published the same year as Anthills of the Savannah, Sow Fall’s L’Ex-père de la nation (1987) offers a very different approach to the role of gender in the dictator novel. Narrated in the first person, the novel presents itself as the autobiography of a recently deposed dictator,
Madiama, writing in prison. Each day, he asserts, “I, his disillusioned Excellency, will continue my explorations [je poursuivrai mes détours] in the labyrinth of my conscience.” The narrative follows Madiama’s rise and fall. Elected as the president of his unnamed country on a wave of popular support but poorly equipped to govern, Madiama quickly becomes dependent on his French advisor, Andru. He intends to be a benevolent president; to “develop” his people; and to not give in to the intoxications of power. But the country’s most important institutions remain under foreign control and there is a severe drought. As the opposition grows more vocal, Madiama decides to resign. On the day of his resignation demonstrations spread throughout the city and Madiama’s daughter is killed. Infuriated, Madiama turns on his opponents, setting off increasingly-violent cycles of “subversion-repression” until the army removes him from power.

Focalization through Madiama’s perspective allows Sow Fall to highlight the dictator’s isolation, which moves to the core of her critique of authoritarian power. As she explained in a 1988 interview, she found inspiration for the novel in a visit to another (unnamed) African country, where she was struck by the way in which those who had so recently revered the ex-head to state turned on him: “They [the dictators] are people who end up losing sight of the reality of things; and they are praised; they are flattered. So it was the hypocrisy of the people towards men of power that I wanted to analyze.” This isolation is crucial to the political imaginary that surrounds the dictator; as Andru explains to Madiama:

You think that power isolates! That may be your impression, but the reasons of state demand it, Excellency. You are not an ordinary man. You are the Leader [Chef], the cynosure [point de mire] adored by thirty million men and women […] You cannot blend into the crowd. You have to be shrouded in mystery and, slowly, the people will come to see you as a myth. A myth of power and glory.
The entire apparatus of the State is intended \([se\ detine]\) for this. A man without mystery rules with difficulty… Of course, Excellency, this mystery will also unleash the most deranged imaginations and birth tall tales that, certainly, will not all be pleasing to you. This is the more troublesome \([ennuyeux]\) side of power, incidentally easy to overcome. You simply have to close your ears when necessary. But the legend must be spun in order to maintain the mystery. The people need this, Excellency…\(^5^4\)

What Madiama, the person, experiences as a loss is vital to the creation of “Madiama,” the head of state. Only when the dictator makes himself absent from the lives of his subjects can he be invested with the surplus of meanings that sustain his dictatorship (recall here Mbembe’s observation that power in the postcolony institutionalizes itself in the form of a fetish).\(^5^5\)

Continuing from this what Sow Fall calls the “hypocrisy of the people” is a product of their entanglement in the system of signs that constitutes and sustains authoritarian power. Yet Madiama misses the true implication of Andru’s explanation: if the dictator is simply the myth of power and glory, then that myth is transferrable from one body to another.

Throughout the novel, Sow Fall makes much use of the opportunities for irony afforded by the first person, retrospective narration. Not only does Madiama anticipate the error of his past actions when recalling early episodes, the intimacy of focalization makes the reader privy to Madiama’s prevarications in the present. Foremost amongst these evasions is Madiama’s preference for narrating events from his earlier life rather than confront his abuses while in office. Recollections of childhood and youth punctuate the narration of Madiama’s time in power; these nested memories serve as counterpoint, anticipating and complicating elements in the primary narrative. But they also displace more extensive accounting or analysis of
Madiama’s transgressions. At the end of the novel, Madiama still sees himself as the victim of larger forces, an “intoxicating cycle” to which he suspects his successor will also succumb. There is no real analysis of the dictator’s conscience. What announces itself as confession becomes a project of self-justification: in emphasizing the larger structures of power that drive the successive cycles of dictatorship, Madiama attempts to absolve himself of responsibility. This is an inversion of what I have earlier described as an effective displacement of the dictator as the center around whom power is organized in the African dictator novel. By putting the argument in the dictator’s mouth, so to speak, Sow Fall points to the limits of critiques that treat the dictator as a mere puppet for foreign interests, foreclosing analysis of political or personal motivation. While the role of foreign interests is crucial to understanding dictatorship in Africa, it cannot be the sole endpoint of analysis.

Sow Fall’s occupation of the dictator’s perspective makes possible a different analysis of authoritarian power, one which marks its continuities with the logic of patriarchy. As anticipated by the novel’s title, Madiama proves an ineffective “father” of both the nation and the family. As head of state, he has very little actual power and happily grants control to others. He is similarly ineffectual within his own family. Not only does he not to prevent his daughter’s death, he fails to intervene in the conflicts between his first wife, their children, and his second wife, Yandé. She, like Andru, has a stronger grasp of the political situation than Madiama. The folding of the politics of the nation onto relations within the dictator’s family recalls the family metaphor discussed in chapter two, where the disorder of the dictator’s family stood for the disorder of the nation. In putting the dictator at the center of the narrative, however, Sow Fall collapses the distance of metaphor. The disorder of the dictator’s family is here coterminous with that of the nation, and this proximity reveals the crucial differences between family and the nation-state.
Sow Fall here unstitches the central figure of patriarchal nationalist iconography. Madiama is no more the “father of the nation” than he is the “myth of power and glory” constructed around his person, but both are fictions crucial to the operation of dictatorship.

At the metanarrative level, the conceit of the dictator’s autobiography enables a broader commentary on women’s writing and the place of women writers in this period. Sow Fall’s first novel, *Le Revenant* (“The Ghost,” 1976), was the first published in French by a West African woman. The autobiographical mode was of particular importance to women writers of Sow Fall’s generation and has often been the default (and limiting) frame for analysis of their work. Although Sow Fall’s work—in particular the novel *La Grève des battu* (*The Beggar’s Strike*, 1979)—shares the social and political concerns of writers such as Sembène, it is not exempt from this tendency. This is perhaps why, as Sow Fall explained to Mary-Kay Miller, she “welcomed the opportunity to write in the first person with impunity, knowing that no one would try to attribute to her the thoughts and deeds of a character so unlike her.” The assumption here is that the woman writer would and could not be “mistaken” for the dictator of her novel. As Miller remarks, “despite [Sow Fall’s] disavowal of any autobiographical intentions, the delight she expresses at writing in the first person invites closer scrutiny.”

With Miller’s invitation in mind, I posit that *L’Ex-père de la nation* is both autobiographical and an enfolding of autobiography for the ends of the dictator novel. By “autobiographical,” I mean that the novel is a declarative act of self-writing: in taking up the dictator, Sow Fall repudiates the narrow possibilities afforded women writers of her generation and claims the right to intervene in the larger political conversation. She capitalizes on assumptions made of woman writers as license to fully immerse herself in the dictator’s perspective and thereby more closely analyze the internal workings of authoritarian power. *L’Ex*
père is an “autobiography” that will not be read autobiographically. This frees Sow Fall to make her incursion into the dictator’s consciousness without the same concerns that wove through the novels by Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez, and Augusto Roa Bastos discussed in the previous chapter. Complicity, either as recognition of entanglement or identification with the dictator, is not here a source of anxiety. Sow Fall does not make the dictator grotesque or monstrous so as to mark his separation from both writer and reader; Madiama is shockingly ordinary. Nor does she resort to the repeated representation of sexual violence to describe what Mbembe terms the “phallocratic system.” Instead, using the very restrictions of the dictator’s perspective—his limited capacity of self-examination, also a limit of the conceit of autobiography—Sow Fall presents authoritarian power as coextensive with the patriarchal organization of society. While women play important roles in Achebe (Beatrice and Elewa) and Sembène’s (Cheik Tidiane’s wife, Dija Urmel) dictator novels, Sow Fall makes gender and gender relations the driving force in her critique of dictatorship. It is only by writing as the dictator, this novel suggests, that such an analysis is possible.

In contrast to the works discussed thus far, Henri Lopès’s The Laughing Cry (1982) is much more explicitly concerned with the question of how to write about the dictator. The narrative unfolds as a series of debates between the dictator’s erstwhile butler, known simply as “Maître” (“master”), for maître d’hôtel, and a former Cabinet Secretary (directeur de cabinet) with whom Maître shares an account of his time in the dictator’s service. The text comprises of Maître’s story, comments from the Secretary, and Maître’s descriptions of life after he goes into exile. But the relationship between these materials and the temporal sequencing itself become increasingly confused as the narrative progresses. In the final section, one of the characters in
Maître’s story writers a letter to the author (unnamed, but neither Maître nor Lopès) denouncing the entire work as fiction. The accusation mirrors a declaration made in the novel’s opening “warning” (Sérieux Avertissement), a disclaimer from the (fictional) Inter-African Association of Francophone Censors. Having decided to allow publication, the censors insist that a dictator such as that described in the novel “does not exist, cannot exist, in these days and on this continent. He is the fruit of a macabre imagination that is close to frenzy: a comic strip character!”

More than puncture the veil of allegory, Lopès here announces his novel as a work of metafiction. The Laughing Cry is therefore both a novel about dictatorship in Africa and a novel about the dictator novel as a work of politically committed literature—a premise Lopès submits to systematic interrogation.

As a dictator novel, The Laughing Cry presents a familiar picture. General Hannibal-Ideloy Bwakamabé Na Sakkadé, referred to simply as “Daddy” (Tonton), exemplifies the excesses and vulgarity of the African dictator. During a visit to an interior province, for instance, Tonton flings fistfuls of money to the waiting crowds; he carries a lion’s tail staff; he builds a village hut in the courtyard of the presidential palace; he reshuffles the presidential cabinet several times; fraternizes with fellow dictators; and initiates a series of monumental building projects financed by loans from international agencies. Maître himself is always in the room, but in the background. From this vantage point, he registers Tonton’s excesses, his missteps at public events and private meetings, and even his poor pronunciation of French. But many of these observations fall flat and suggest that Maître is simply catering to the narrative the Secretary desires. Put a little differently, Tonton’s vulgarity is beside the point; in order to present an effective critique of dictatorship, the narrative will have to look elsewhere. At the end
of the novel Tonton remains in power, while the Secretary and Maître, who begins an affair with Tonton’s wife, flee the country.

The dictator’s butler offers a perspective very different from the élite at the center of Achebe and Sembène’s dictator novels: that of the masses whose experience of post-independence transformations has been distant from the political intrigue of the presidential palace. Maître, we learn early on, is not particularly enthusiastic about his new post; he prefers to avoid politics and is suspicious of all “-isms.” This cynicism is born of the understanding that, for Maître and his community in the working-class districts of the city, daily life remains largely unchanged regardless of who is in power. Maître is not impervious to what Mbembe would call Tonton’s “majesty.” When it comes to discussing Tonton’s sexual escapades, for example, Maître intimates a parallel between the dictator’s appetites and his own, acknowledging the ways in which he too benefitted from the “gifts” proffered to the dictator. But Maître is critical of the bureaucrats and politicians that surround Tonton. Recalling one cabinet meeting, Maître remarks: “A film-maker would have loved the scene because, shot from a certain angle, it was just an array of attaché case lids, listening to the proposals of the Chief.” 63 This is a striking image of the emptying out of the state under authoritarian rule, where the object of critique is those who allow this to happen as much as the dictator himself. Such observations unsettle the Secretary, who worries that in scoffing at the cabinet Maître “may be playing the enemy’s game.” 64 Maître’s gleeful descriptions of his sexual exploits are similarly a cause of concern. The Secretary expresses concern that Maître is “mixing up genres and losing sight of the objective of all committed writing,” adding: “the African book coming from these times, and having any respect for itself, cannot choose but be committed.” 65 Underneath the Secretary’s desire for generic coherence and political clarity lies the problem of complicity. While Maître freely acknowledges
his imbrication in Tonton’s patronage network, the Secretary resists recognition of the role he played the regime. Per the Secretary, the “committed” work must focus solely on the dictator’s crimes; to expand the field of analysis (recalling Rama’s definition of the dictator novel) would implicate other social actors and (according to the Secretary) undermine its anti-dictator project.

There are here two distinct models for the dictator novel. The first, represented by the Secretary, is a narrowly defined as an attack on the dictator; while the second, Maître’s version, opens toward a broader social critique that includes the dictator’s subordinates as well as the international interests that prop up the dictatorship. Lopès’s investment is in the latter, as indicated Maître’s sly comparison of the Secretary to a censor: “all things considered,” Maître explains when he decides to elide an account of sex with Tonton’s wife, “I decided to avoid an unequal clash with the censor.”66 The term refers directly to the Secretary and, more obliquely, to the government censor. There are, Lopès suggests, instructive parallels between the demands made by the Secretary for a “disciplined” committed text and those made by the Inter-African Association of Francophone Censors whose disclaimer opens the novel. “Africa,” they write, “has need of heroes exalting our positive moral values and our ancestral cosmology.”67 The important opposition is not between the writer and a repressive government apparatus, but between the imaginative work of fiction the external demands placed upon that work.

This position is consistent with Lopès’s own statements on commitment, as in a 1977 interview where he argued that, rather than endeavor to prove that he was engagé, the writer should work to engage his audience (Il doit engager son lecteur). “The artist should not attempt to compete with the politician [le tribun] or the guerrilla with his work,” he added. “No work of art will ever replace a meeting, no work of art has ever brought down a regime.”68 Because Lopès himself held a variety of government posts in the Republic of Congo, including that of
prime minister (1973-1975), he is often taken as a difficult case in discussions of commitment. His political life, public statements, and the substance of his literary work do not always comfortably align. Rather than treat (real or perceived) divergences as a problem, I take these as a signal about the particular work of literature vis-à-vis the public statement or direct political action. Lopès is here interested in the critical potential of literary invention as retort to programmatic models of commitment, which (he maintains) foreclose actual analysis. The novel models itself as an alternate “engaging” text capable of engendering critical consciousness precisely because it is a work of fiction.

The mechanics of literary form are crucial to this project: The Laughing Cry comprises of a series of intercalated voices, textual allusions, and (fictional) paratextual frames that unsettle the principles of narrative order. For instance, having grown exasperated with the Secretary’s complaints, Maître inserts an extended quotation from Denis Diderot’s Jacques le fataliste et son Maître (Jacques the Fatalist and his Master, 1796). Here, Diderot’s narrator defends the literary value of his work and upbraids the hypocritical reader who would claim to be scandalized by the many sex scenes in the book. This is a fitting response to the Secretary, to be sure. But the quotation also functions as an announcement to the reader of Lopès’s novel. In Jacques the Fatalist, the narrative (Jacques’s story of his loves, told to his master) is repeatedly interrupted by chance events and interpolated stories. Built in dialogue with Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy (1759), Diderot’s novel is a meditation of philosophical determinism (fatalism) and the capacity of the novel to explore such topics. The Laughing Cry similarly deviates from its apparent mission (Maître’s narrative as an anti-dictator project) toward a larger meditation on writing, politics, and the dictator novel as such.
The extended quotation of Diderot marks a break with what had seemed to be organizing principles of the narrative: no longer is Maître simply a butler writing a first-person account. Having discarded this conceit, he is now free to take a more inventive approach, as he does in narrating the death of a resistance leader, Captain Yabaka, three times.\textsuperscript{71} Maître was not present for these events, but describes in detail the torture, show trial, and eventual death of Yabaka. These are scenes of grotesque violence in which Tonton rails at and then urinates into the mouth of his victim. Then Maître turns to the stories that have begun to circulate about Yabaka’s death. One describes the excess of bullets shot into Yabaka’s body. Another takes a more fantastic turn: Yabaka survives multiple salvos from the firing squad and curses Tonton; the soldiers go mad, Tonton’s face is stricken with mysterious spots that defy treatment, and Yabaka joins the pantheon of mythical heroes of the resistance. This shift is a retort to the Secretary’s demand for textual coherence and an ironic fulfillment of the censor’s request for a “positive hero.” Lopès suggests that it is only possible to proffer the latter by violating the former; and, more importantly, he highlights the importance of stories (fictions, no matter how improbable) for sustaining resistance under dictatorship.

The closing pages of the novel further foreground and celebrate the critical potential of fiction. This final break takes the form of a letter written by Soukali, Maître’s mistress, to the author of the narrative, no longer clearly Maître. Tonton, “Soukali” reveals, is actually a provincial prefect, Maître a bouncer at a local nightclub, the writer a young heart specialist recently returned from Europe, and she one of his patients. The small stories of provincial drama have been recast in the grand narrative of the dictator novel. Yet the fictional story still bears on reality, as “Soukali” writes:
There is scarcely as much difference between your story and our lives as between a Van Gogh, a Cézanne or a Modigliani and a photograph of the original model. But the magic and teaching power of art, isn’t it less to resemble reality than to lend to reality the colors of the painter’s heart? If that is your aim, your bleeding vision is certainly more acceptable than the prissy edifying images demanded by the young compatriot Cabinet Secretary.\textsuperscript{72}

In his brief response to the letter the (now unnamed) narrator insists, “in fact, I have borrowed nothing from reality, nor yet invented anything.” But what is at stake is not the distinction between fact and fiction. The author’s commitment inheres in the act of imagination and composition of the aesthetic object, rather than its use-value. The “magic”—or, more programmatically, the instructive potential—of art lies in its difference from reality; that is, its excess. If the narrative in The Laughing Cry represents the resistance of the writer (“Maître”) to a variety of political imperatives, this closing letter effectively frees Maître’s story from historical referentiality, allowing it to emerge as the author’s invention.

This final interruption also allows Lopès to make more direct commentary on the dictator novel as a genre already in international circulation. As Soukali notes, the final version of Yabaka’s death is a “metamorphosis” that has “some echo of the Latin American scene,” which she finds unsuited to “the Africa of today.” The reference is to magical realism and, implicitly, to García Márquez as the writer most directly associated with magical realism via the international success of Cien años de soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude, 1967). There is, this moment acknowledges, already an established vocabulary for writing about violence and dictatorship in Latin America, and an African novel on those same topics will likely be read in those terms. Lopès distinguishes his own novel from the Latin American model by making pointedly limited
use of its vocabulary. The change in register in the final version of Yabaka’s death demonstrates Lopès familiarity and facility with this register, without fully subscribing to it. Instead, it is one of several “versions.” Discarding the demands of political orthodoxy as well as the established model, Lopès presents his dictator novel as at a site of experimentation and excess in which different perspectives and narrative modes (tactics) are put to work, recoding and expanding the established vocabulary of the genre. In so doing, Lopès argues for the critical value of the imagination, which allows both the author and reader to look beyond the conditions of the present toward other political futures.

Dictators and dictatorship were a recurrent concern in Sony Labou Tansi’s novels and plays. Following from my analysis of The Laughing Cry, I am going to focus on Labou Tansi’s first two novels and, specifically, his use of Latin American literature. The foremost “representative” of the Latin American dictator novel here is García Márquez’s Autumn of the Patriarch, which as the follow up to One Hundred Years of Solitude went into quick international circulation and received much critical attention. The Shameful State (1981) centers on Colonel Martillimi Lopez, a figure once again familiar in his propensity to excess, lasciviousness, and penchant for violence. Lopez also bears a striking physical resemblance to García Márquez’s dictator: Lopez “came into the world holding onto his hernia [en se tenant la hernie] and exited still holding on to it.” The “hernia” refers to Lopez’s herniated testicle, which recalls the General’s herniated testicle in The Autumn of the Patriarch, a defining feature of the character and a comic motif in García Márquez’s novel. As intimated by this opening, The Shameful State reads as a parody of Autumn of the Patriarch, magnifying to the point of distortion the tropes and style of its Latin American counterpart. The dictator’s testicles are
obsessively invoked, repeatedly exposed, and come to function as metonymy for both the dictator and the nation-state. In one scene, pointing to his herniated testicle, Lopez announces: “this is where the nation begins.”75

At the end of the novel, again playing on *Autumn of the Patriarch*, Lopez has one his assistants (Vauban) killed and served as dinner at a banquet for visiting dignitaries. Unlike the members of the high command of the presidential guard to whom García Márquez’s General serves the late Rodrigo de Aguilar, however, these guests consume the body without noticing what they are eating, even as Colonel Lopez declares: “help yourselves, eat, this is Vauban.”76 Labou Tansi here elevates the transcontinental allusion from its focus on the dictator’s barbarity—the purpose of the equivalent scene in *Autumn of the Patriarch*—to a critique of the complacency of the international community. In both cases, the scene aims to describe the nature of authoritarian power, but Labou Tansi has expanded the frame of the critique to include the international forces that keep these dictators in place, emphasized by the relocation of this scene to the end of the novel.

In formal terms, the narrative voice of *The Shameful State* similarly evokes the “multiple monologue” and extended sentence structure of *Autumn of the Patriarch*. The narration shifts vertiginously between the single and plural first person as well as an omniscient third. However, this is not a confrontation between the dictator and a collective “we,” as was the case in García Márquez’s novel, but a feverish cacophony of voices from which the reader struggles to glean a succession of events. Through such exaggeration, effectively an explosion of the textual features of the Latin American precedent, Labou Tansi collapses existing tropes for the literary representation of the dictator and recasts them for use in the African context. Rather than simply assimilate the Latin American dictator novel as a model, then, Labou Tansi pushes it to the very
ends of its logic. The result is a strange and disturbing texts, which offers few of the satisfactions (such as they are) of its predecessor. In its inflation of the archetype of the African dictator, The Shameful State is also a rejoinder to the easy circulation of dictator novels—taken as evidence of the stereotyped barbarity of the African dictator—on the international literary market. As Ato Quayson observes in a discussion of Mbembe’s On the Postcolony, a crucial weakness of Mbembe’s argument is that it does not trace the history of the scatological register nor the history of how the West has deployed this as a stereotype of African politics. Critics of the Latin American dictator novel have similarly noted the ways in which writers such as Carpentier and García Márquez play into prevailing pessimism about Latin American politics, and suggest that it is because of this that their dictator novels have enjoyed success in Europe and the United States. By first linking his dictator (Lopez) to the Latin American archetype and then exaggerating both, Labou Tansi proffers a hyperbolic monster that cannot easily be read back into a specific time or place. Although a dictator novel, The Shameful State aims to make itself unreadable within the bounds of the genre (understood in relationship to the historical phenomenon of dictatorship), short-circuiting its capacity for international circulation. Despite its opening line, The Shameful State does not end with the death of the dictator; nor does it imagine an end to dictatorship. Instead, the final scene has Lopez admonishing the excesses of his predecessors, to the adoration of the crowds, who chant “Long live Lopez.”

Critics mark the publication of Labou Tansi’s first novel, Life and a Half (1979), as a turning point in the representation of dictatorship, or “power” (pouvoir), in Francophone African literature. It is also a frequent touchstone in Mbembe’s theorization of the aesthetics of vulgarity in On the Postcolony. In both the book and earlier essays, Mbembe cites Life and Half in describing the popular obsession with orifices, odors, and genital organs; the proliferation of
clientelism and rent-seeking; the use of violence, and in particular sexual violence; and the importance of spectacle and public ceremony to authoritarian regimes. But the novel itself resists the kind of exemplarity ascribed to it by Mbembe. Labou Tansi brings to the theme of dictatorship elements of the grotesque, the baroque, the absurd, and a subversive surrealism. This makes for a challenging and even claustrophobic text; one that evades ostensible historical referentiality (the claim implicit in Mbembe citations of the novel) and pointedly departs from the kinds of critical realism most immediately associated with committed literature.

*Life and a Half* tracks the violent reign of the Providential Guides in the fictional country of Katamalanasia; these are a succession of dictators “supplied” by an unnamed European power. As in later dictator novels, the regime maintains its ties to the former colonizer and relies on a variety of foreign advisors; there are also myriad references to the dictators’ sexual activities and sexual organs—their “tropicalities” (*tropicalités*)—as well as emphasis on grotesque and spectacular violence. In the opening scene, for instance, the (current) Providential Guide slits the throat of, disembowels, and cannibalizes the opposition leader, Martial. But Martial refuses to die. His voice emanates from his remains until the Providential Guide tears these apart, drinks Martial’s blood, and feeds the rest to Martial’s family. Only Martial’s daughter, Chaïdana, remains alive. When the Providential Guide attempts to take Chaïdana as a mistress, Martial’s ghost prevents him from consummating the affair. But Martial and his descendants, too, engage in acts of escalating violence. As the novel unfolds, generations of characters proliferate at a dizzying pace. Eventually, a portion of Katamalanasia secedes, setting off an arms race and subsequent atomic war that destroys the world. At the end of the novel, one character (Jean Calcium) emerges from an underground shelter to find a new political order in which people refuse to speak of the past.
As suggested by this summary, *Life and a Half* pressures, if not exceeds, the parameters I have set for the dictator novel. I take *Life and a Half* as a limit case: an extreme or marginal instance of the genre that highlights the dictator novel’s complicated engagement with questions of time, historical causality, and the relationship between fiction and the historical circumstances to which literature responds. Even as it follows successive generations of Guides and their opponents, the novel continually disrupts its temporal progression, swelling and distorting the narrative time-space, multiplying characters and voices, and disorienting the reader. Its multiplicity of generic registers has drawn comparison to everything from Latin American magical realism (Martial’s ghost, for instance) to science fiction (as in the use of the speculative technologies that result in the destruction of the world). But Labou Tansi does not entirely abandon the history of dictatorship on the continent. Instead, *Life and a Half* is an exploration of genre itself as a way of knowing the world.

Recalling several of the examples discussed thus far, Labou Tansi explicitly rejects possible historical parallels in the opening “warning” (*Avertissement*) to the novel. *Life and a Half*, he insists, is a work of invention. However, the disavowal is not entirely straightforward:

> [T]o those who love local color, who will accuse me to being savagely tropical, and of adding grist to the mill already brimming with racists, I wish to make clear that *Life and a Half* leaves only the sort of stains made by life itself. This book takes place entirely within me. Anyway, the earth is no longer round. It never will be again. *Life and a Half* becomes this *fable* that sees tomorrow through today’s eyes. No present—neither political nor human—should get mixed up in this. That would lead to confusion. The day when I’m given the chance to speak about any
present day whatsoever, I will not take a thousand paths to get there, in any case, not a path as tortuous as this fable.\textsuperscript{81}

Labou Tansi here plays with the distinction between fiction and reality; poking fun at authorities who might mistake one for the other as well as readers seeking an ideal politically committed work. The designation of the text as a fable both foregrounds its status as fiction and, following Eileen Julien, “alienates the real world” thereby making it visible.\textsuperscript{82} The association with fable also has important implications for the representation of time. This is the most unstable element in the narrative, as staged in the opening lines: “It was the year Chaïdana turned fifteen years old. But time. Time has tumbled. [\textit{Le temps est par terre}]. The sky, earth, things, everything. Totally tumbled. [\textit{Complètement par terre}].”\textsuperscript{83} What begins as a marker of specificity, recalling the introductory formulae of orature, quickly loses its thread. To borrow from the French, time is “ungrounded.” The narrator makes repeated attempts to fix events in time, but time evades such discipline. Even seemingly discrete events slip backward or forward as the narrator makes connections with past or future events. Regularly in \textit{Life and a Half}, the necessary teleological ordering of narrative and plot threaten to dissolve.

This overarching confusion is submitted to provisional order at the end of the novel, where the moment of nuclear destruction is rewritten as an origin story: “This is how the Nile, that witnessed the births of all the pharaohs, was born, along with the Nyasa, the Victoria, and the lake region.”\textsuperscript{84} Time, already distended, here becomes cyclical: a pre-historic myth in which to read the codes that govern the present. This gesture recalls the conclusion of \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude}, in which the last member of the Buendía family deciphers the prophesy of their history as Macondo is destroyed by the wind. However, this is only a momentary or provisional order, as after this Jean Calcium discovers a people who refuse to speak of the past.
The generic register of the fable does not suffice to describe *Life and a Half*; it, too, is a “law” the narrative ultimately breaks or evades. The reader is therefore left with a series of overlapping possible registers in which to read the novel: myth, magical realism, science fiction, fable, and so on. It would be a mistake to privilege any of these to the exclusion of the others. Just as this novel withholds narrative closure, it refuses generic classification, and this very poly-modality is the core of its critique of dictatorship. Rather than offer a critique or “theory” of dictatorship—or even of resistance to dictatorship—Labou Tansi models a practice of evasion.

Read within the frame of the dictator novel, *Life and a Half* offers a radical amplification and disarticulation of the principle of historical progression crucial to the representation of dictatorship; specifically, the dictator novel’s frequent narration of the rise and fall of the dictator. This is a very different approach to the problem of the endurance or repetition of dictatorship that troubles the conclusion of so many of the dictator novels discussed in this chapter and the book as a whole. Here, dictatorship is always already in repetition, as part of a serialized narrative with no foreseeable conclusion. This is, first, a critical observation about the recurrence of dictatorship on the African continent, despite the efforts of various opposition movements; and, second, a commentary on the dictator novel itself as a genre whose tropes and formulae threaten to become similarly repetitive. The only possible dictator novel, then, is one that barely functions as a novel. That is: one that refuses to idealize any of its actors, particularly the opposition, and which denies the narrative teleology of the dictator’s rise and fall. There is no clear beginning or end in the temporality of dictatorship, and this, Labou Tansi suggests, is where the analysis of the dictator should begin.
This chapter has told two stories about the dictator novel in African literatures. In the first, the dictator novel emerges from the literature of political disillusionment, as the concentration of its broad-ranging concerns into the figure of the dictator. This is a local genealogy for the African dictator novel that emphasizes its relationship to the political questions that characterized the decades following independence; the chronology moves from independence, through the era of disillusionment, to the late 1980s. The second story moved backward through time (1987-1979), emphasizing writers’ use of the dictator novel to address issues of gender, genre, political commitment, and narrative ontology. The end of this second story, which is also the earliest point in time, illuminates points of contact between the Latin American and African dictator novel, where an established tradition crosses paths with nascent conventions. Here I make a crucial distinction: writers such as Lopèès or Labou Tansi do not copy or imitate the Latin American (dictator) novel so much as register its existence and take it apart. The Latin American dictator novel is less a model or template than grist whose fragments become part of the broader constellation of tropes, themes, and motifs on which the African dictator novel will draw.

Neither of these stories deserves primacy. Juxtaposing these narratives, however, illuminates the limits of our literary-critical frameworks for understanding the literatures of the Global South. In thinking comparatively across continents, the temptation is always to fashion an evolutionary narrative (progress through time) to match movement across space. This ordering impulse—the desire to make organized “trees” out of incongruent and sometimes incommensurable agglomerations—threatens to leave out a lot of crucial information, because the search for sufficient parallels always risks the subsumption of difference. In telling the story of the emergence of the African dictator novel twice, I have endeavored to provide a more
capacious account of how a genre (or, generic series) comes together. The process is piecemeal and individual instances highly experimental; the concatenation of these instances, such as it is, is largely only visible in retrospect. The work of comparison itself, to return to my discussion in chapter one, is necessarily speculative and incomplete. Hence my recourse to the organizing figure of the constellation for this project, which allows for the play of continuity, disruption, and unexpected deviations I have traced in this chapter. The process of unfolding continues: after the 1980s—and, specifically, after the end of the Cold War—the African dictator novel will once again undergo a period of recalibration, as I discuss in the final chapter.


The Republic of Congo underwent coups in 1963, 1968, 1977, and 1979; the country’s first elected president took office in 1992. Nigeria underwent two successive coups in 1966; this led to the Biafran War, in which the eastern (Igbo) part of the country attempted to form an independent state (1967-1970). After the end of the war, Nigeria was largely ruled by a succession of juntas until the late 1990s. Senghor, a pioneer in the négritude movement, was president of Senegal until 1981 and followed by a handpicked successor who remained in office until 2000.

Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs; also Structural Adjustment Loans, SALs) were economic policies demanded in exchange for access to lending from institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Although specific requirements varied, SAPs typically called for deregulation and the privatization of public services—consistent with the global turn toward neoliberalism in the last third of the twentieth century—in order to free up funds for servicing those foreign debts.


Like *Mundo Nuevo*, magazines such as *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* received funding from the CIA’s Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). Unlike *Mundo Nuevo*, these existed prior to CCF involvement and received periodic grants rather than systematic funding; see Asha Rogers, “Black Orpheus and the African Magazines of the Congress for Cultural Freedom,” in *Campaigning Culture and the Global Cold War*, ed. Giles Scott-Smith and Charlotte A. Lerg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 243-257. The connection, however, is a useful reminder of the larger context in which conversations about national culture and liberation took place. As Ngũgĩ puts it, reflecting on evidence that the CCF financed the Makerere conference: “This secret manipulation was typical of the Cold War environment in which the conference and the decolonization of Africa took place” (2016, 139).


20 Ibid., 83-84.
21 Ibid., 103; for the original *Xala* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1973), 171.
22 “Ousmane Sembène: For Me, the Cinema is an Instrument of Political Action, But…” (1969) trans. by Anna Rimpl, in *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews*, ed. Annett Brysh and Max Annas (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2008), 12. For the original see Guy Hennebelle,

24 Ibid., 136.
25 Ibid., 221 and 231-234.
26 Ibid., 143-144.
28 Ibid., 237.
30 Ibid., 50.
31 Ibid., 45-46.
33 Imre Szeman, Zones of Instability: Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Nation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 121-126.
35 Ibid., 72.
36 Ibid., 197-198.
37 Ibid., 75.
38 Ibid., 2.
39 Ibid., 44.
40 Ibid., 145-146.
41 Ibid., 91.
44 Achebe, Anthills, 84.
50 Ba, Le roman africain francophone postcolonial, 161-174.
52 Aminata Sow Fall, L’Ex-père de la nation (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1987), 8. There is no published English translation of this novel, although William Hemminger completed a translation for a dissertation at Ohio University (1988); the translations here are my own.
54 Sow Fall, L’Ex-père, 51.
55 Mbembe, On the Postcolony, 102-103.
58 Miller, “Aminata Sow Fall’s L’Ex-père de la nation,” 100.
60 Mbembe, On the Postcolony, 110.
62 Moore translates “Tonton” as “Daddy,” an apt rendering of the paternalism of Bwakambé’s regime. But the choice in the French is purposeful: the former colonizers are referred to as “the Uncles” (les oncles) to the dictator’s “Little Uncle” (tonton).
63 Ibid., 72.
64 Ibid., 34.
65 Ibid., 95.
66 Ibid., 139.
67 Ibid., n.p.
69 Thomas, Nation-Building, 120-121; Cazenave and Célérier, Contemporary Francophone African Writers, 35-38. For more on Lopès and commitment, see Armillas-Tiseyra, “The Unfaithful Chronicler: On Writing About the Dictator in Henri Lopès’s Le Pleurer-rire,” in

70 Lopès, The Laughing Cry, 209-211.
71 Ibid., 243-256.
72 Ibid., 257-258; for the original see Le Pleurer-rire (Paris: Éditions Présence Africaine, 2003), 369-371.
74 Labou Tansi, L’État honteux (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 7. Dominic Thomasforegrounds and emphasizes this reference in his translation of the same line: Lopez “came into the world holding his big greasy herniated balls and exited still holding onto them.” The French is less straightforwardly obscene, but the reference to the dictator’s genitals is quickly clear in the variety of epithets Lopez uses for his hernia and Thomas chooses to foreground this in his translation. See The Shameful State, trans. by Dominic Thomas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).
75 Labou Tansi, The Shameful State, 8.
76 Ibid., 115-116.
81 Labou Tansi, Life and a Half, 3-4; for the original see La Vie et demie (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979), 10.
82 Julien, African Novels and the Question of Orality, 139.
83 Labou Tansi, Life and a Half, 5.
84 Ibid., 131.