

## **The space of dictatorship: Monénembo, hidden transcripts, and a metonymy of violence**

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### **Abstract**

This paper centres on the representation of dictatorship by Guinean author Tierno Monénembo and aims to elucidate his fictional writing by reading it against recent theory on violence and sovereignty. In line with Nganang's notion of *protestas*, a metonymic chain of violence emerges in a number of forms: spectacular and subtle; physical and psychological. These constitute what Scott labels a "dramaturgy of domination" (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 1990). Disparity between public and hidden transcripts perpetuates a state of tension but also reveals spaces of dissent. In texts which not only denounce the crimes of Touré's regime but critique the ongoing injustices enacted in Guinea and elsewhere, Monénembo writes resistance as a commitment to combatting this violence which is characterised by *débrouillard* practice. His fictional subjects' capacity to move between worlds responds to calls for a wider re-casting of African subjectivity.

### **Introduction**

Tierno Monénembo was born Thierno Saidou Diallo in Porédaka, in the region of Mamou, Guinea on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1947. Like many of his compatriots, he left his homeland to flee the dictatorial regime of Ahmed Sékou Touré, then president. Leaving on foot for Senegal in 1969 at the age of 22, Monénembo would only return to Guinea after Touré's death in 1984. He has published twelve texts to date, but this paper will draw on his first two: *Les Crapauds-brousse*, published in 1979, and *Les Écailles du ciel*, published in 1986. In these novels he

decries the precariousness of dictatorship and newly independent contexts, emphasising violence in particular, and the strategic use of public and hidden transcripts is revealed.

In *L'invention du Quotidien* Michel de Certeau draws a distinction between *lieu* and *espace*, describing the former (place) as a fixed physical location featuring immobile buildings and roads, and the latter (space) as an area lived in, conditioned and changed by those in and around it. “L’espace...” he says, ‘est un lieu pratiqué’ (*space is a practised place*) (173).

Thus although Monénembo addresses the very physical area of a city, he depicts it as a set of spheres conditioned by the ongoing contest for power, gradually reshaped by its inhabitants; for Certeau, and for Monénembo, the city is very much “une expérience sociale” (*a social experience*) seen through the eyes of character-observers (Certeau 155). Though in these novels these spheres may on the surface appear to be unanimously under the control of dictator figures, Monénembo reveals not only the cracks in this display but also the contest for power which occurs in hidden spaces. The author shows space to be conditioned by multiple agents, importantly not just those who lay public claim to power: indeed, interrelated covert practices of domination *and* resistance perpetually reshape the spaces inhabited by these subjects.

Achille Mbembe highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of the complex factors which affect territorialisation in the present, not neglecting the influences of colonialism but not drawing connections which are too simple either (“At the Edge” 265). In his 2010 essay *Sortir de la grande nuit* he explores the very material conditions characterising decolonisation across Africa. But rather than reiterate their negative implications, he sees them as points of departure, catalysts for creative reinventions and definitions of what Africa means today. The emphasis he places on mobility in this “nouvel âge de dispersion et de circulation” is especially helpful for examining *débrouillard* responses to sovereignty in dictatorship spaces (*Sortir*, 224). The aim here, via a detailed

reading of Monénembo's work, is thus to build understanding of what Howard Caygill calls the "complex and dynamic spatio-temporal field that manifests itself in postures of domination and defiance" (4).

This article will address domination then resistance, but are not ordered thus to suggest the former has ultimate primacy. Quite the contrary, I aim to show how cyclical and interrelated different expressions of power are and by deduction, that those localised chains of violence reflect the broader scale causal cycles of domination and resistance. Where Mbembe's pessimism in *On the Postcolony* effectively highlights the brutality and hardship of the postcolonial space, it overlooks the potential for productive resistance (108). We need a model which accounts for the complexity and dynamic practices of both resistance and dominance. Cultural patterns of domination and subordination must be understood via a dialectic of disguise and surveillance, and we will see that both parties perform wearing masks (one of unitary control, one of submissive consent) and both are working on discerning the true state of things (one of schemes of revolt, and one of cracks in the authority) (*Domination* 3). Monénembo's focus on this heeds Jean-François Bayart's call to look beneath the surface (*The State in Africa*, 220). And in this study Bayart's imagery of appetite and greed (his 'politics of the belly') brings into sharp relief these unseen movements of contested power. Dictatorship and resistance are mutually constituted in dialogic relationship to one another. I will address them each in turn here, but aim to establish the interdependence and complexity of these sets of power practices.

### **Unstable spaces**

These two novels are Monénembo's most direct indictment of Sékou Touré's reign in post-independence Guinea, written while the leader was still in power. Touré's presidency, which lasted from 1958 to 1984, began with a successful campaign for independence, and ardent

support for African unity. But in later years, and particularly after an unsuccessful invasion from then Portuguese Guinea in 1971, his domestic policies became harsher and he ruled with an iron hand. In *Les Crapauds-brousse* (henceforth *Crapauds*), a despotic regime gradually takes over physically and ideologically. Set in post-colonial Guinea, (though not named as such), the novel deals with the immediate aftermath of independence, and puts across some degree of the suffering experienced in that period. Dust and darkness seep progressively over the city as the effects of brutal dictatorship are felt. Protagonist Diouldé's tranquil existence is interrupted as government colleagues entangle him in their web of corrupt activity. They work under the unseen hand of president Sâ Matrak, abusing their victims and removing countless numbers from sight for the slightest "infringement". Where *Les Écailles du Ciel* (henceforth *Écailles*) is more symbolic in its narrative, the prevailing atmosphere is the same. Protagonist Samba is driven out of his village, and on a kind of aimless quest, ends up working in the capital city, then imprisoned, later caught up in the independence movement and imprisoned once again. Remaining mute throughout the novel, his silence conveys a definitive sense of helplessness, which is repeatedly emphasised by the meandering path along which he is propelled, and ends in a death without legacy. The recurring dictator figure in this novel is named Ndourou-Wembîdo, and is represented, as in the first novel, with a blend of horror, hyperbole, and humour. The same themes are evident in both novels: misery and corruption reign, threats of violence condition the atmosphere and what is hidden vies against what is put on show. This tension feeds a prevailing sense of instability.

It is this instability which forms the backdrop to the action of both these novels, and warrants positioning them in Patrice Nganang's category of *roman de la dictature* (dictatorship novel). These novels address the violence of past and present Africa, and pinpoint dictatorship in the postcolony as the clearest embodiment of the continent's

experience of tragedy (Nganang 200). In the same vein as Monénembo, Nganang equates the period directly after independence with dictatorship (“La Guinée”). After Mbembe, Nganang largely defines these novels as depicting the malign: they lay bare the full extent of the tragedy and oppression of dictatorships which leave little room for opposition (Nganang 203). However, the important point to draw out is that in denouncing tyranny in these dictatorship novels, the author’s demystifying aim in writing, acts in contrapuntal purpose to the mythologising language and behaviour of the dictator figure. Through this heightening of consciousness and the related call to action that the author pursues in her or his readership, both possibilities are exemplified within the text in fictional subjects who realise and apply their own agency. In a more positive reading than Nganang’s categorisation would suggest, I show that this happens in spite of the volatile circumstances imposed on them whilst maximising the in between spaces often left hidden.

Monénembo’s characters are caught in microcosmic insecurity that reflects and is linked to the larger scale instability of Guinea’s history (Auzas 31). For example when rising nationalism shakes up the country “[la vie] emporta les Bas-Fonds dans une mouvance vertigineuse dont la roue ne faisait que s’accélérer” (*life carried Bas-Fonds away in dizzying movements whose wheels only got faster*) (Écailles, 134). Or when Samba emerges from prison to find independence gone mad: “On eût dit que le cordon qui rattachait à la logique du monde avait craqué, que le bon sens était tombé en désuétude. La vie avait basculé. La terre chancelait comme sous le coup d’un malin vertige.” (*It was as if the rope linked to the world’s logic had snapped, as if common sense had become obsolete. Life had toppled over. The earth was tottering under some evil vertigo.*) (Écailles, 150). The author expertly magnifies the smaller details of these dizzying effects with a range of focalising lenses and narrative perspectives. This article will untangle just how interlinked are the emergences of instability, domination and resistance, something absent from Auzas’s motifs of “insécurité”.

The systematic interaction of these devices, as depicted by Monénembo, furthers our understanding of subjects' impact on the spaces they inhabit, and the mutual conditioning of their practices.

Across his oeuvre, a large part of Monénembo's critique comes by revealing the filth and decay of the postcolonial world. In *Écailles* the city is easily imagined with multisensory description like the following passage:

Des toits, des courettes et des ruelles s'élevaient des volutes de fumée âcre. Un territoire de gadoue, d'excréments et d'odeurs fétides; un monde de détritrus, le dépotoir de Djimméyabé. Il y avait là tout ce dont la ville ne voulait pas, tout ce qui la gênait et dérangeait son luxe tranquille.

*Rooves, yards and alleys let out rings of bitter smoke. A land of mire, excrement, and rank odours; a world of detritus, the dump of Djimméyabé. Here there was everything the town didn't want, everything that got in the way and disturbed its calm luxury. (103)*

The tendency to distinguish surface (smooth, luxurious, problem-free) from what is hidden away (rubbish, unclean) is clear from the outset. Repeatedly, Monénembo uses physical façades and backgrounds to comment on the volatility and hypocrisy of the political world he critiques. His pessimistic view of cycles of decay matches that read by Derek Wright in Kofi Awoonor's 'This Earth, My Brother', where scatology is 'used to represent the historical legacy of corruption' ("Scatology and Eschatology" 23).

Everyday instability in Monénembo's textual landscapes stems largely from the poverty experienced by his protagonists. Ousted from his village and later betrayed by those

he works with, Samba is left abandoned with no income. The number of others in the same position is signalled by the long queue which starts at dawn and winds back from Carrefour (*Écailles*, 105). Oumou describes the relentless cruelty of the city: “Cette ville ne porte rien de bon. Elle promet, elle promet, vous donne de l’envie, use vos nerfs, suce votre force, vous détruit le cœur et, pour finir, vous abandonne comme une vieille savate.” (*This town brings nothing good. It promises and promises, makes you yearn, tests your nerves, drains your strength, shatters your heart and, in the end, abandons you like an old shoe.*) (104).

Linked obviously to this economic deficiency is localised crime. Of course the lines of legality are blurred in situations where the power holder can make or break rules at his discretion. In *Écailles* the need to put hand to mouth drives everybody into the black market when Ndourou-Wembîdo closes the markets, suspicious of traitors (158). In *Crapauds* mystery shrouds multiple secret dealings, not least the murder and hasty burial of Alkali, which he witnesses, stunned: “une énigme planait dans l’air, qui étouffait Diouldé” (*an enigma soared in the air, and suffocated Diouldé*) (*Crapauds*, 102).

Jean-Francois Bayart’s influential *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* brings the unseen movements of contested power into sharp relief alongside imagery of appetite and greed. Mbembe writes at length about bodily metaphors (*On the Postcolony*) but for Monénembo this is a quite literal transcription of the Guinea he urgently indicts. I cite a passage here from Alpha-Abdoulaye Diallo’s autobiographical account of his imprisonment in Camp Boiro (a concentration camp for political dissidents) under Sékou Touré to highlight the very real desperation for food. Here he is on the *diète noire*, a fatal method of torture where victims are deprived of all food and drink.

J’ai faim — mon Dieu, que j’ai faim! ...

Que j’ai soif ! De l’eau, un peu d’eau! ...

Depuis mon arrivée ici, on ne m'a pas donné à manger et... une seule et unique fois à boire du quinquéliba. Il faut que je réussisse à tromper, à « transcender » ma faim et ma soif ! Extrêmement difficile.

*I'm hungry – my God, I'm so hungry! ...*

*I'm so thirsty! Water, a bit of water! ...*

*Since my arrival here I've been given nothing to eat and...only one time a drink of quinqueliba. I've got to trick, to 'transcend' my hunger and thirst. Extremely difficult. (81)*

Hunger is a drive for the underdogs whose precarious situation leaves them without guaranteed sustenance. The dictator simultaneously restricts their appetites whilst indulging his own, as shown below.

Alcohol is another motif of instability. Indeed, it is used to stem and escape the pain of suffering, but also to buoy the spirits of those trapped in the dictatorship's stifling space. The intensifying effect of alcohol on an already precarious stage is obvious. Drinking leads to a loss of self-control which reinforces the already uncertain and dangerous stage characters inhabit. The most explicitly violent results of drinking are seen in the deaths which occur in other novels by Monénembo, *Cinéma* (1997) and *Pelourinho* (1995). However, there is a kind of insipid violence which presents itself in the atmosphere of both *Écailles* and *Crapauds*. More subtle than Monénembo's murder episodes is the perpetual threat of danger, death, kidnap or attack that lingers around every corner of the dictatorship spaces in these two novels.

Additionally, in this novel, the everyday uncertainty is covered with a kind of phenomenological opacity. Set in an imaginary country, Samba's own dumb bemusement at



what befalls him sits in a mist also unexplained to the reader. Elements of mystery like the curse under which the protagonist is born, and the presence of Sibé hover as unsolved as the sequence of events Samba is involved in. For example, when Madame Tricochet dies it is unclear if Sibé is kindly or maliciously holding her unborn child: “Sibé tenait un enfant albinos hilare qui lui tétait la plaie...il restait debout dans un coin de la pièce et scrutait le plafond...” (*Sibé was holding a cheery albino child who was sucking at his wound...he stood in a corner of the room staring at the ceiling...*) (*Écailles* 121). With such intrusions of the supernatural Monénembo also primes his readers to question the veracity of what they read, cleverly signposting the mythologising tendencies of those in power. Looming catastrophe, unpredictable terrain, and the dangerous consequences of falling out of favour with the power holder all hang in a sense of premonition. These frames, as well as the small details narrated within the texts, all form a body of literature which embodies the unstable so prevalent in the contexts the author critiques.

These elements of everyday and metaphysical instability make very clear that static, binary concepts of ruler and ruled are too limited to account for the modes of territorialisation which occur. Such variability stands in direct opposition to the performance and illusion of stability put forward by those in power, undermining it and revealing it as only part of the picture. Monénembo’s literary representations of dictatorship convey something more mobile and comprehensive. A theoretical paradigm is required that accounts for both the dynamic nature of these power relations and the chainlike way such characteristics are linked to one another.

Patrice Nganang conceptualises dictatorship as an idea which emerges in different elements along a metonymic chain. In *Manifeste d’une Nouvelle Littérature Africaine* this is how he describes *protestas*, one form of violence which dissipates in the everyday as a dictatorship is multiplied throughout the population. This differs from *violencia*, which

Nganang defines as a kind of movement, full of potential, which leads to independence (202).

In Foucault's emphasis in *Surveiller et Punir* on one centre of power (inevitable given that the object of study is the penal system) there is a risk of neglecting the potential for resistance. Nganang's paradigm directs our attention to that very potential. Mbembe, although giving brief mention to the armies of allies used by a dictator, focusses more on the figure of the Big Man and his narcissism. Too much attention on a single figure may fuel that figure's desired monopoly of power, by corroborating the myth that s/he is the sole possessor of agency. Sadly this serves to fulfil the dictator's aims, particularly in the imposition of a certain social imaginary. What is more, too much weight is given to the exercise of power which is overt and seen. While the effectiveness of an attention-seeking central figure is not to be underestimated, the importance of power which is exercised and resisted in more subtle ways also deserves attention. Nganang's emphasis on dictatorship as an idea, an aesthetic subject, is helpful to us in being less concerned with the figure of a Big Man, than with the emerging symptoms of a space (and text) suffering under a particular kind of enacted (necro)politics ("Necropolitics" 5). The visible and invisible tactics of dictatorship reinforce one another, as state violence produces a state of violence; and for Nganang these dictatorship novels exhibit that outworked as "l'infini métonymique de la violence comme chaîne" (*the infinite metonymy of violence as a chain*) (Nganang 207). This helpfully frames the unstable stage on which Monénembo's action unfolds: both sustaining and intensifying the precarious status quo through multiple, related outworkings of violence. On this volatile stage, it is especially helpful to bear in mind the shifting patterns of foreground and background, and to pay close attention to what is performed and what is only uttered behind the scenes.

## Overt discourses

We begin with this idea of public and private transcripts. James Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* expertly explores the creative and mutually informed practices of power holders and those they dominate. Scott's analysis highlights the disparity between public and private discourse, and is thus helpful for assessing that same gap in Monénembo's representation of dictatorship. Part of the instability so inherent to these texts arises from that very discrepancy. When Ndourou-Wembîdo, elsewhere praised as "Guérisseur-Numéro-Undu-Peuple" appears benevolent, for instance, in order to disguise his design to imprison his deputies, the resultant mistrust leaves all characters on edge (*Écailles* 148, 168).

There is, on the part of the power holder, a public discourse of domination which is intentionally aligned with ideas of sovereignty as exclusive and ultimate. By fictionalising Sékou Touré, Monénembo already removes his power, making him subject to his creativity and ridicule. In his depictions of the dictator, the latter's authority is revealed as little more than a performance. Performing an exaggerated identity, the dictator figure repeats a number of trends in order to cast himself as all-powerful. First, he has a smiling face. In *Écailles* the apparently magnanimous Ndourou-Wembîdo flashes his "dents parfaitement blanches et régulièrement rangées" (*perfectly white, neatly arranged teeth*) to win over his crowd (130). This is accompanied by an ostentatious "chapeau melon, un costume prince-de-galles quelque peu élimé et une cravate de soie" (*bowler hat, a rather frayed Prince of Wales check suit and a silk tie*) (137-8). Such appearance hosts dynamic and beguiling speeches, which always seem to take centre stage. At the pro-independence demonstration, the narrator's adverb indicates that this is par for the course: "certes, les discours grandiloquents et les gestes ingénument triomphalistes étaient à l'honneur" (*of course, grandiloquent speeches and artlessly triumphant gestures took pride of place*) (140). Mbembe comments that the art of governing includes elevating the trivial into the grandiose; and this often occurs in public

speeches which need not be either as public or as long (*On the Postcolony* 117). On one occasion, Sékou Touré is reported to have spoken for over eight hours without stopping (Kaké 10).

Heralded varyingly as “Meilleur-Orateur-de-la-Terre-à-la-Lune-et-même-Au-delà” and “Leader-Bien-Aimé” (*Écailles*, 168, 144), each reference to the dictator figure is overblown with gravitas and reverence, indicated by the capitalised titles and proliferation of hyphens. In Nuruddin Farah’s *Sardines*, each school child has to learn the ninety-nine names of the General, one example of the ostentatious and blasphemous self-elevation which characterises the despot (10). Such pervasive indicators of reverence reinforce the status of the dictator since with every reference his quasi-deified position is subconsciously concretised in the public imaginary. This process is furthered by visual reminders of the dictator’s dominance. Portraits plastered around the city mean at every turn, people see the face of the power holder watching them. “Partout, des portraits de Ndourou-Wembîdo. Partout des drapeaux.” (*Portraits of Ndourou-Wembîdo everywhere. Flags everywhere.*) (*Écailles* 142). This form of silent propaganda is powerful indeed, functioning like a political marketing tool to convey a dual impression of unanimous power and ubiquitous surveillance. Its flimsiness and disposable nature, though, is underlined in real life instances of such posters being ripped down by children following Touré’s death in 1984: a signal of the thin façade all these gestures of domination constitute, which will be explored below.

Such stylistics serve to create a number of myths, namely of unanimity, stability and benevolence. These myths, central to nationalist projects, rework reality to form simplified, idealised representative narratives (Pauthier 32). As Scott assesses, a substantial part of the public transcript consists in crafting a stage presence that appears masterful and self-confident (“Prestige” 152). First, the dictator conveys that power is held and decisions are made by him and him alone, or, if there is a team, that they operate in united cohesion. No

hint of discord or diversity is advertised. Thus for example, the state-controlled radio in *Crapauds* emits the same message repeatedly:

Pendant que notre peuple entier serre les rangs derrière Sâ Matrak, notre illustre président...des individus obscurs, des créatures nées par hasard sur notre sol maternel rampant dans l'ombre, élaborent des plans machiavéliques contre notre pays, notre peuple, notre cher président.

*While our whole people closes ranks behind Sâ Matrak, our illustrious president...shady individuals, creatures born by chance in our mother land, are crawling in the dark, plotting Machiavellian schemes against our country, our people, our dear president. (115-6).*

No contradiction or mixed messages can be seen or heard from the same source, for fear of appearing disunited and therefore fallible, indeed disagreements tend to be sequestered out of sight ("Prestige" 162). Unity is paramount, and is imposed with fierce determination against the development of either division or conflict (Callaghy 34). Hence the repetition of similar vocabulary, as with the above example, terms like 'plan' and 'complot' appear frequently associated with darkness. Such unanimity is supposed to indicate strength and supremacy, covering over the contradictions and divisions of ethnic strife, for example, with a one-party state solution, and driven home with repeated plural first person pronoun. An effective façade of cohesion augments the apparent power of elites, increasing the likelihood of compliance (*Domination* 56). Next, and connected, is the sense of resolute fixity of power which is conveyed. Though he goes by many names, the dictator figure appears unwavering in his mode of leadership (including how he presents himself and the language he uses).

Homogeneity in public behaviour is meant to create an appearance of reliability and trustworthiness: something which conflicts with the reality of the precarious settings of both novels. To counter the ubiquitous instability, the dictator figure employs face-saving strategies to obscure anything about himself and his rule which might detract from this impression of stability, aiming for an impression of omnipotence (*Domination* 52). Lastly, as the grinning smile and brotherly handshakes indicate, he identifies as a benevolent sovereign, charismatically engaging with his people and providing for them out of his love for them. The fraternal exhortations he repeats along with his zealous greetings at public occasions, “avec un mouchoir aussi blanc que son sourire” (*with a handkerchief as white as his smile*) (*Écailles*, 139), are all part of his intentionally affectionate rhetoric. But of course, this attentive care is paired with strict surveillance:

Rien ne se fait sans son ordre. Aucune opération n'est engagée si elle n'a pas été prévue par lui. Le Président de la Guinée est devenu le Papa Bondieu distribuant mille francs CFA par-ci, des feuilles de tôles, un sac de ciment, une moto, un paquet de sucre par-là.

*Nothing is done without his permission. No operation is begun unless planned by him. The President of Guinea has become the Papa Bondieu giving out a thousand francs here, and sheets of metal, a bag of cement, a motorbike, a pack of sugar there.* (A. Diallo 118)

Often too quickly dismissed as vacuous, *la langue de bois* of these dictator figures is shown by Monénembo to be tactically contrived. Such public transcripts are designed to distract

from the underhand tactics which go on. Compassionate and caring on the surface, the dictator's hidden behaviour reveals polar motives.

Together the face, appearance, names, speeches and imagery of this deified persona reinforce his myth-making public discourse whilst hiding what is said and done in private. Of course this pairs with particular behaviours which drive home the dictator figure's apparent omnipotence and serve to concretise the myths of unanimity, stability and benevolence. Scott labels this behaviour the 'dramaturgy of domination', and this consists of conflicting gestures, both seen and unseen (*Domination* 45). Where the dictatorship fails is in thinking things stop with the public display, and in indeed remaining largely ignorant of the contest that happens out of sight. This is the downfall too of concepts of sovereignty that leave no room for resistance, and leads Howard Caygill, amongst others, to begin with resistance, thus transferring the focus in Agamben and Foucault on domination as the centre of political thought. Michel de Certeau too highlights the shortcomings of panoptic power, in that it does not account for those "contradictory movements" and "ruses and combinations of power" which proliferate outside its reach (*Practice* 95). Conversely, Scott centres his study behind the scenes, addressing what is ordinarily hidden from the public view of power relations to reveal hidden transcripts of domination and dissent that are more critical than a sovereign figure would perceive.

The significance of Nganang's paradigm of a metonymic chain comes precisely in how the different emergences of violence are interconnected. Just as the marks of everyday instability seen above are like links in a chain, so are the different gestures of domination. The very way they are linked (in relations of tension and opposition) results in greater instability: the dictator's methods of control vacillate between being public and unannounced and this disconcerting inconsistency perpetuates the volatility of already precarious circumstances.

Beyond the behaviour described above, the dictator also manifests his power with an exaggerated embodiment of his body. This physicality is central to what Mbembe calls the aesthetics of vulgarity. The importance of the body in any representation of *commandement* is underlined by Monénembo, who gives much more textual weight to physical depictions than to psychological descriptions or background details. His introductory description of Gnawoulata is particularly imposing: “une calvitie avait occupé le crâne de ce dernier...Deux vilaines rides menaçaient les commissures des lèvres...Les dents étaient parties...En plus, il portait l’obésité, maintenant” (*he had grown bald...Two awful lines threatened the corners of his lips...the teeth had gone...and he was obese now, too*) (*Crapauds* 67). The same kind of self-imposing physical presence is evident in *Écailles*, when the formerly grassroots nationalist Ndourou-Wembîdo gets too big for his boots and only appears before applauding crowds (137). Pauthier sets out how the myths surrounding Touré became concretised such that “la complexité des expériences vécues par les populations guinéennes est voilée par l’omniprésence de la figure de Sékou Touré” (*the complexity of what was experienced by the Guinean population is hidden by the omnipresent figure of Sékou Touré*) (44). However, Monénembo is determined to combat this and we will see that it is in relegating the dominant to the sidelines that resistance is free to manoeuvre unnoticed.

Public spectacle is simultaneously used as an opportunity to show off wealth. In order to reel in new allies, at the same time as laying material claims on them, Gnawoulata spends money like there’s no tomorrow.

Et il savait que l’essentiel n’était pas d’avoir de l’argent, mais justement de savoir utiliser cet argent, de séduire son entourage, de faire sa renommée avec. L’argent n’était-il pas l’arme la mieux élaborée, la plus fine, la clef qui ouvrait toutes les portes, le parfum qui envoûtait tous les odorats : pour corrompre les pauvres,



attirer les plus riches, se faire des liens utiles?

*And he knew that the most important thing wasn't to have money, but to know how to use it, to seduce his entourage, to make himself famous. Was money not the best weapon, the finest, indeed the key to every door, the scent which covered all other smells: to corrupt the poor, attract the rich, and secure useful ties?* (*Crapauds*, 89).

Feasting too is designed to convey the extent of the dictator's fortune. In *Crapauds*, overt excess and corrupt generosity recall the president's feasts in *Le Pleurer-Rire* by Henri Lopes (125). The general indulges in celebrations of affluence visible to the crowds, but makes rapid, volatile political decisions immediately after, under the misleading influence of too much Chivas (95). In one episode of indulgence, Diouldé witnesses Gnawoulata gorge himself into a frenzy, surrounded by his 'troupeau' of wives and children (*Crapauds* 73). As Mbembe observes, the postcolony is "a world hostile to continence, frugality, sobriety," (*On the postcolony* 110) and for Nganang, "le dictateur c'est l'homme dans l'ivresse de sa liberté", he is "celui qui mange à satiété: mais son repas est le corps des habitants du pays dont il tient le cou avec ses reines" (*the dictator is man drunk on his freedom...the one who eats his full, feasting on the bodies of those who inhabit the country he controls with reins*) (210, 218). Such performance is key to the parades of enacted power which constitute these public transcripts. Monénembo astutely contrasts these exaggerated spectacles with the ruin and destitution suffered by those not in power which are typical of the "monde de détrit" he critiques.

In the poverty-stricken streets of Monénembo's dictatorship spaces, where hunger is pervasive, dictatorial aesthetics of avarice highlight the disparity in wealth. Gnawoulata's

nose, “pris de bougeotte, éternel renifleur” (*twitching, always sniffing*), is a pointed sign to his stingy nature, further embodied by his abnormal hand “[dont les] doigts restaient crochus et empêchaient une complète ouverture de la main” (*with fingers always hooked, never completely unbended*) (*Crapauds*, 66-7). The mouth is especially significant, not only as the source of manipulative language which is used to control and to silence, but also as a vessel for avaricious consumption. Evidently, a politics of the belly is inextricably connected to the mouth.

Greed heightened by power becomes lechery to show that “the postcolony is a world of anxious virility” (*On the Postcolony* 110), and the aesthetics of vulgarity seem to multiply in the poverty-stricken city of *Écailles*. Samba’s wandering becomes a journey to sate his frustrated appetite, both with food and sex. The same villagers who welcome him, “titubant de fatigue et de faim” (*swaying tired and hungry*) later drive him away for having harmed a baby and wolfed down his food “à grandes lampées voraces” (*in great, greedy gulps*) (97, 101). The protagonist’s hunger is emblematic of the whole people’s poverty, and how their needs propel them into a perpetual moving search. On the surface, there is little suggestion of an escape from these cycles of hunger and predation. The city space seems suffocated by unrelenting mechanisms of control which provoke one another in a series of mutually sustaining links.

Lechery breeds violence in the form of rape in this same metonymic chain. It is Râhi, Diouldé’s wife, who most horrifically falls victim to the cruelty of those in authority. She is raped repeatedly by Daouda and by Laramako (*Crapauds* 139). Daouda’s quietness is typical of his reign of intimidation, which relies on silence (and silencing) as a key tool of control. As we saw above, the pervasive presence of alcohol adds another element of danger to this gorging. These texts hinge on volatile, temporary states of calm and safety.

These are more often than not punctured with violence, which is always present for Monénembo. As well as the panorama of everyday violence sketched out earlier in this paper, there are specific instances of violence in these two texts. Rape scenes are one extreme of this, but murder and death also occur. In his 2003 article ‘Necropolitics’, Mbembe suggests the conflation of politics and death is to be commonly found in situations like the postcolony:

The perception of the existence of the Other as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security—this, I suggest, is one of the many imaginaries of sovereignty characteristic of both early and late modernity itself (18).

Indeed on the pages of *Les Crapauds-brousse*, violence as defence of sovereignty is almost omnipresent. The dictator goes to extraordinary ends in order to display publicly his right to kill. Multiple arrests, mass corruption, and kidnappings all foreshadow the wave of murders which spreads through the city. The result is a fearful existence where “il fallait, avec cet homme, s’attendre à tout” (*with this man you had to be ready for anything*) (15, 57, 111). In his chapter “On Commandement” in *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe states that a trinity of violence, transfers and allocations forms the basis of postcolonial African authoritarian regimes (45). Indeed it is easy to see in Monénembo’s texts that these are interrelated on the dictatorship’s metonymic chain: threats of violence are yoked inextricably with self-invented claims on material and personal possessions, and these go in hand with the restraint and withdrawal of financial and other allocations. These elements are linked together so as to reinforce one another in a bid to instil a social imaginary of hegemony, and yet they do not deny outright the presence of hope or criticism.

What is particularly significant in rendering this trinity part of the social imaginary is the public performance of the practices I have listed. The deliberate display of power is conducted as a tactic of intimidation, intended to shock and condition particular responses (Coundouriotis 99). In order to drive home their sovereignty, power-holders insist on a sense of grandeur. Though they may remain invisible (indeed Sâ Matrak is not seen at all), their necropolitical practices often form part of a public spectacle. Manifesting the power of dictatorship in this way is a vital tactic in spreading fear and intimidation. To suppress a strike demanding higher salaries, Ndourou-Wembêdo “fit venir des bataillons de soldats et de miliciens...une centaine d’ouvriers furent fusillés et jetés dans des bacs d’acide” (*brought along battalions of soldiers and militiamen...a hundred or so workers were shot and thrown into tanks of acid*) (Écailles 168). These examples are frighteningly close to accounts given by those imprisoned in Campo Boiro during Touré’s reign. There too, a young prisoner attempting escape was made an example of for those in other cells: “Tôt repris, battu presque à mort, ligoté dans une cellule, il empêcha tout le camp de dormir, hurlant comme un chien, des heures sans discontinuer.” (*Soon caught, beaten half to death, tied up in a cell, he stopped the whole camp from sleeping, crying like a dog for hours on end*) (Alata, XIV). The ostentatious display of manpower and horrific violence stands as a quasi-ritualised warning to potential dissenters (“Provisional” 13).

### **Subtle tactics**

These instances of domination largely happen outwardly and openly, yet are paired with tactics of disappearance that are carried out in the dark. Once again the disparity between seen and unseen results in instability: where public acts of benevolence give one impression of those in power, the secret crimes betray more harmful intentions; and where public acts of violence might suggest the power holders are brash and unthinking, the wily, insidious spread

of tactics that happens beneath the surface indicates a far more intentionally constructed schematics of power. Whether the façade is one of benevolence or unanimity, the private discourse of the dictatorship reveals conscious practices that go beyond superficial behaviours designed to create limited impressions of the power holders.

In each of *Crapauds* and *Écailles* one protagonist is captured and countless others disappear without explanation. Monénembo aptly renders that ambiguity with the air of mystery which hangs over *Écailles*; the text describes a time which was “confuse, boueuse, glissante, peu propice à la fixation de la mémoire” (*confused, muddy, slippery, not suited to being remembered*) (168-9). This recalls of course the opacity surrounding details of Touré’s regime, and the mythologising which in turn sought to cover over that lack of clarity with imposed narratives of stability, unanimity, and benevolence. Moénembo pierces through such opacity in a 2009 article in *Le Monde* he decries “le fameux camp Boiro où 50 000 personnes (prêtres, marabouts, ingénieurs ou médecins pour la plupart) ont disparu dans les mains du sanguinaire Sékou Touré” (*the famous camp Boiro where 50,000 people (priests, marabouts, engineers and doctors mostly) disappeared into the hands of the bloodthirsty Sékou Touré*) (“La Guinée”). These tactics of disappearance are rife in his fiction. Kidnaps and disappearances were brutal yet calculated, often happening at night time, taken like Diouldé “par une nuit sans lune” (*on a moonless night*) (*Crapauds* 123). So the dictatorship is like a beast, but not a brainless one. The figure of an octopus which Monénembo himself uses does well to express both the hidden and the multiple nature of this exertion of power. From an early description Sâ Matrak uses to describe a supposed plot against him, we find the ideal image for the dictatorial system he heads up: “[c]’était une énorme manœuvre, une pieuvre aux tentacules infinis” (*an enormous operation, an octopus with infinite tentacles*) (*Crapauds* 119), and in *Écailles*, “une petite pieuvre qui avait graduellement étendu ses tentacules depuis les Bas-Fonds jusqu’aux recoins du pays” (*a little octopus who had steadily extended its*

*tentacles from Bas-Fonds to the far edges of the country*) (138). Space is taken over in different forms, like tentacles controlled by an unseen head, which suddenly appear one by one, out of nowhere, to violently take out their victims. Such an image matches Diouldé's disoriented confusion, "[il] ne comprenait rien à rien" (*he was utterly lost*) (*Crapauds* 109), as well as the enigmatic tone of *Écailles* in which protagonist Samba struggles to understand the mysteries of lives which are "*entraînées dans une mécanique hors de portée de notre compréhension*" (*engineered out of our understanding*) (40). It is both gradually and suddenly that these tentacles spread and snatch, and this fluctuating pace adds to the unpredictability of life under dictatorship.

The success of the dictatorship rests on instilling a fear of being watched, and conveying an impression of omniscience. In *Écailles* the marabout speaks of a divine "intraitable créancier [qui] nous guette du haut de sa tour céleste et voit tout ce que nous faisons à la lueur des astres...Il ne nous quitte jamais des yeux" (*unshifting creditor who watches us from atop his celestial tower and sees all that we do by the light of the stars...He never takes his eyes off us*) (40). The quasi-divine (or at least divinely-appointed) status of the *Responsable suprême* attributes him a similar panoramic vision, or so it seems. And this suppresses the freedom and conditions the behaviour of those under his gaze: "L'envie ne le quittait pas de mettre au moins Râhi dans son secret: le regard globuleux de Daouda, son regard de blanc d'œuf cuit l'en dissuadait" (*At every moment he wished to let Râhi in on his secret, but Daouda's gaze, those wide opened eyes, held him back*) (*Crapauds* 109). Control is exacted by multiple people, not the solitary dictator figure who claims to hold power alone. "Tout bon commerçant doit avoir une gamme d'amis bien placés, chacun à un poste vital" (*every decent businessman needs a bunch of well-placed friends, each at a vital post*) (*Crapauds* 97). Dictatorship emerges in a number of actors; it is as if the network of agents is ever sprawling wider, like the tentacles of a beast-like scheme. Sâ Matrak remains unseen

throughout the whole novel; instead, *la dictature* is represented in a web of henchmen, a kind of machine controlled by the State, designed to perpetuate a state of violence whilst increasing and perpetuating its sovereignty. A picture limited to one sovereign figure is insufficient, because the methodology of dictatorship relies on its multiple outlets, giving further utility to the multilegged octopus image. Tracing the multiplicity of this power, which contradicts its myths of unanimity and singularity, empowers underdog subjects, since they are able to respond to localised instances of domination with their own hidden tactics.

Nganang describes dictatorship as an idea, which emerges in a multitude of ways, at once revealing that an appearance of unitary control is often a mask and reducing the impact a power-holder seeks to retain by promulgating the myth that authority is exclusively his. When we consider dictatorship as “un sujet littéraire – esthétique” (*a literary, aesthetic subject*) manifest in multiple ways along Nganang’s metonymic chain, the more subtle and complex *systematic* outworkings of power and will are revealed (204). This image of a sprawling network of agents who do a dictator’s ‘leg-work’, in covert ways, is useful. They literally provide multiple physical outlets for dictatorial control, and are connected to one another in different relations of proximity and familiarity, much like the other emergences of power listed above that are mutually sustaining. Because of the volatile nature of the dictator’s preferences, those employed for particular jobs will depend on where his favour lies. In Alpha-Abdoulaye Diallo’s account of his imprisonment and torture in Camp Boiro, he describes a series of officials at that time in Sékou Touré’s trusted circle who carry out the dirty work on his behalf. In “la cabine technique” for example, “la pièce est pleine de gendarmes et de gardes” (*the technical cabin is full of police officers and guards*) (61). Clearly, delegating in this way enables the Big Man to maintain his smiling face and façade of benevolence whilst a committee pummels his desired truth out of the accused.

In order to hide temporarily from these huntsmen and the all-seeing eyes of the dictatorship, people gather in shadowy, hidden places, or retreat to their homes. Just like in Nuruddin Farah's dictatorship novels (written at a similar time), this births fear and hiding in everyday situations. So Monénembo's Samba keeps himself concealed just like Loyaan in *Sweet and sour milk* (Écailles 174, 177). And yet the extreme of the dictatorship's deviousness comes in an intrusion into domestic space. Perhaps the best illustration of where physical and psychological domination convene is the aforementioned rape. Where Sara Suleri has rightly argued that the metaphor of rape, when discussing the colonial dynamic, unhelpfully distracts from more complex and relevant gendered power contests, it is nonetheless helpful here (61). Knowing that the perpetrators of most cases of domestic violence are known to the victim, this is an instance of the up close and personal usurped and exploited. Literally Monénembo is revealing what occurs behind closed doors, and its poignancy comes in that this example is *postcolonial*, at home, treacherous and horrifically intimate. Indeed it is in domestic territory that the covert practices of dictatorship are most harrowingly deployed: public displays of authoritarianism drive people fearfully into their own homes, but there is no permanent safety there. There is a close-to-home bitterness to post-colonial dictatorship, where unlike the colonial ruler, the power-holder is home-grown, and intimately connected with the homeland and its people (though as I show below, not particularly knowledgeable about them). The dictator figure makes his rule an intricate family affair, usurping relational networks to perpetuate his dominance. Part of the dictator's public discourse will likely include severe critique of corruption, dressed up in terms like 'family loyalties' and 'protecting one's own' (Bayart 226).

Family language prevails in representations of post-independence nations. Lopes' characters must call their president "Tonton", for example (39). As Nganang describes, "il copule avec toute femme qui porte sur son corps la tenue du parti sur laquelle figure son



visage; voilà le côté le plus poussé de son intimité” (*he sleeps with each woman who wears his face on her Party outfit; this is the extreme of his intimacy*) (205). Monénembo pinpoints the tension between intimacy and adulation after independence in *Écailles* where “les femmes portaient des tembourés Indépendance, taillés dans un tissu imprimé où l’on voyait Ndourou-Wembêdo en tenue de guerrier” (*women carried Independence drums, draped in fabric printed with Ndourou-Wembêdo dressed as a warrior*) (*Écailles* 144). “Power doesn’t need invitations. They come when they please” (*Sweet and sour* 165). Hence the significance of Daouda raping Râhi and then moving in with her: the dominant and the dominated share the same space (*Crapauds* 139). This enforced conviviality is shown by rape, by the ironic use of familial vocabulary, and by a series of intimate collusions which are followed by betrayal. Whereas Mbembe argues that this enforced conviviality precludes resistance, I will show below that such proximity is turned to the advantage of wily *débrouillards* (*On the Postcolony* 104, 118). Here paternalism and authoritarianism are combined. The dangers of conviviality are made clear, for example the hypocrisy of Ndourou-Wembêdo greeting Bandiougou and Samba as brothers, when in fact he is sending them to prison. “Il lui donna une chaleureuse accolade et lui dit: ‘Au revoir, frère’ en le regardant de ses yeux clairs et veloutés” (*He gave him a warm embrace and said, ‘Goodbye, brother,’ looking at him with soft, clear eyes*) (148). This “intimate repression” (Bayart 114) is the epitome of hypocrisy. Terms of endearment, an appeal for divine protection, words of encouragement, together with Ismaël’s cheap use of “frère” and “ami” bleach such terms of authenticity and warmth, and Monénembo shows mistrust growing as the superficiality of affection and language is elucidated.

The fact of being constantly watched and this discrepancy between language of intimacy and cruel behaviour add further threats to the unstable terrain of these spaces. The coupling of physical and psychological tactics of domination in the public and private

discourses of the power holders strengthens their territorialisation of actual and conceptual space. The control exerted in this way on postcolonial space results in a highly pressurised atmosphere that is aptly conveyed by Monénembo's remarkably dense language in these two novels. Seeing this as an example of straightforward sovereignty would suggest that resistance has no room to manoeuvre and that the dictatorship is unbending and unanimous in its methodology. Yet when we frame these practices in Nganang's metonymic chain of violence we see that the dictatorship is more complicated than that former outline, and the myths it seeks to produce and promulgate about its own identity, are ephemeral. By using a clever combination of animal imagery and deliberately interconnected emergences of enacted power, Monénembo portrays the dictatorship as something at once highly complex (full of contradiction, and perpetuating instability) but also something which can be challenged and resisted, and in some ways overcome. This is a beast, yes, but one to be tamed. The various emergences of power are interconnected and mutually strengthened, but neither infallible nor completely invisible. Indeed, the grounded position and mobility of the people being dominated renders them experts in deciphering all that is supposed to be veiled from the public eye. They reveal the discrepancies between seen and unseen, and spoken and unspoken, on the part of the dominated, whilst acting out their own sly responses.

Monénembo's narratives, told from the perspective of underdogs, reveal *these* hidden transcripts as well, demonstrating two things: that domination and resistance are not as distinct as might be portrayed or conceived, and that resistance is occurring in several places. Monénembo, in emphasising what is hidden, not only shows up the dark(er) sides of dictatorship, but unveils the underground world of resistance. What transpires is that resistance is founded on spotting the hypocrisies of those in power. Thus the underdogs are able to see tactics of disappearance, spectacles of excess and violence, and veils of intimacy for what they are. They can dissimulate such awareness to feed the dominant's belief in their

ignorance, and this strengthens their power further. Moving below the surface in this way, the author works towards understanding the multiplicity of networks operating underground in the postcolonial state, heeding Bayart's call in this way to "do more than examine the institutional buds above ground" (220). Following Certeau's claim that spatial practices secretly structure the determining conditions of social life, Monénembo shows that in response to the ceaseless chain of violence, subjects are capable of eluding discipline within the very field in which it is exercised (*Practice* 96). In foregrounding imagery of shadows, clouds, and darkness he highlights the covert practices of the underdogs, as well as the dictator's hidden transcripts. Though the latter's tactics undoubtedly lead to violence, intimidation, and oppression, this does not remain unchallenged.

In *Crapauds*, the imposing wall of the *Tombeau* stands as both a very real example of the violent punishment occurring, and also as a symbolic threat. Intentionally placed in the centre of the city (much like Touré's Camp Boiro in Conakry), the walls are designed to intimidate, and exemplify the overt, physical displays enacted within the dictatorship to convey an impression of ultimate control. And yet, the *Tombeau* remains exactly that, an impression or surface. Râhi, on approaching the *Tombeau*, knows the threat the wall represents, but she is not trapped by it: Kandia takes her away from its luring intrigue (*Crapauds* 148). As a nomadic subject, literally weaving her way in secret around the streets of the city, but also psychologically dexterous and imaginative, Râhi is excellently placed to see things as they are. Monénembo's fictional exposure of the hypocrisy and flimsiness of Sékou Touré's regime is pointed and thorough, and elaborated elsewhere (*Écailles* 160). Underdog characters see the hypocrisy and mythologizing of the dictator figures as façades (or simple walls) of unity and stability, cracked by the very instability they impose. As a structure whose superficial nature is lucidly realised, the *Tombeau* also creates the very

shadows which host inconspicuous, wily resistance, to which this kind of awareness and perspicacity are vital.

## **Resistance**

As Bayart observes, “the ‘small-men’ are frequently up-to-date with the stratagems of the ‘big men’”. They follow these with sceptical attention, and demonstrate an undeniable civic knowledge which contrasts strongly with the poverty of the media (219). Their lucidity acts in opposition to the oblivious performances of the dictatorship: blind power shrouded in myth cannot dominate entirely in the face of streetwise *débrouillards*. These subjects are less socially anchored than others and have lifestyles which encourage physical mobility (*Domination* 124). Their ways of being include such extensive sidestepping and such perceptive observation of the powerholders that models based on the panopticon are insufficient. We must not overestimate the immobilising power of the dictatorship. Monénembo conveys this gathered awareness via the mobile narrative perspectives of his moving protagonists. Samba and Râhi, as wanderers of their respective local streets, piece together all they see behind the scenes to form a comprehensive consciousness that is empowering in its own right. Formed at a sceptical distance, the strength of such awareness (of the extent of the dictator’s private discourse) lies in the way it gives people the capacity to relegate claims of unanimous, stable, and benevolent sovereignty to their right status as myths or ideas, thus disempowering the sovereign who thinks this parade of power is convincing all round. This consciousness provides critical leverage against the idealised image of the power-holder (Karlström 72). In a clandestine gathering towards the end of *Crapauds*, Kandia intimates his knowledge of the authorities’ flaws, “ils sont plus experts dans la tuerie que dans le mensonge” (*they are better at murder than lies*) (179). Façades are

seen through by those nomadic subjects who move between different spaces formulating a savvy street wisdom.

The dictatorship seems heavy duty, imposing as it does its “mur de lamentations”, but is not beyond resistance. In fact its covert methodologies engender shadows which allows for resistance to thrive with its own hidden practices. There is certainly no denial of the inclemency and horror of the dictatorial oppression present in these texts, indeed it is the object of Monénembo’s strongest critique. There is no naivety in the informed awareness of the author’s protagonists: these nomadic subjects are more than streetwise underdogs, they are politically informed and engaged agents. Their wisdom draws upon an almost mystical acceptance of the miseries of the human condition in order to come to terms with the power and its wrongdoing (Bayart 249). Monénembo’s dictatorship novels are grounded in “highly specific geopolitical and historic locations” (Braidotti 10), where the most informed knowledge is possessed by those who live and move in the wings alongside staged performances. Samba’s redundancy is turned to his advantage because it leaves him the time to wander, observe, and get to know his surroundings.

Entre-temps, lui et la ville s’étaient suffisamment épiés pour se connaître davantage. Il avait occupé sa journée à l’essayer, à l’étudier, à mesurer son importance, ses atouts et ses failles.

*With time, he and the town spied on one another enough to know each other well. He’d spent his days testing it, studying it, weighing up its scale, its pros and cons (Écailles 106).*

Though banished out of his control to the backstreets and queues for casual labour, Samba maximises the opportunities this kind of existence entails, by getting in behind the scenes, like in the Tricochet house. He makes a way for himself: “Le broussard avait trouvé un créneau dans l’imbroglio de la ville, se faisait aux exigences du monde moderne, s’adaptait doucement...” (*The bushman had found his place in the confusion of the town, got used to the demands of the modern world, slowly fitted in...*) (109).

This kind of practical wisdom, gained through a *débrouillard* existence in the incertitude and brutality of the everyday, differs from a well-informed or abstractedly intelligent consciousness in that it is highly practical. Subjects learn by living through the self-perpetuating vicissitudes listed at the beginning of this article. In this way, Monénembo’s recasting of the postcolonial subject works against representations which detract from actors’ agency due to overemphasising their stark circumstances (Mamdani 225). In the midst of spirals of violence, underdogs excel at surviving. So as well as enabling a relegation of power holders’ performances and myth-making to ineffectual fiction, this shared awareness is applied as practical street-wisdom. Nomad subjects move around so that from the wings or behind the scenes they see the stage, its actors, and their public scripts for what they are, and are able to negotiate the whole space with understated alacrity.

This mindset also includes awareness of their own agency as subjects. As Braidotti describes, nomadic subjects tap into a source of productive power, embodying and enacting an affirmative capacity or *potentia*, to bring creativity and transformation to their contexts (12). A number of procedures enacted by these agents, as Certeau describes, are far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, and

have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy, developed and insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance, and combined in accord with unreadable but stable tactics to the point of constituting everyday regulations and surreptitious creativities that are merely concealed by the frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organization (*Practice* 96).

Scott details the artistic aspect of such resistance, showing how creative those practices of undisclosed resistance are which circumnavigate supposedly impenetrable domination. He describes the private discourse of resistance as a sly infrapolitics which relies on in between spaces and clandestine tactics, and helpfully articulates the “immense political terrain” which lies between quiescence and revolt (*Domination* 199). It is here that real ground is lost and gained.

Part of the sly infrapolitics of the apparently powerless includes the ability to hide and escape from the panoramic gaze of the dictator. This is temporary since, as described above, there is often intrusion into the domestic space, but there is nonetheless a readiness for furtive evasion. Central to the débrouillard mindset that Râhi, Kandia, Samba, Oumou, and others share, is a readiness to move. With an efficiency that matches (and thus undermines) the power holders’ own paths to success, Oumou’s determined pragmatism sets the rhythm of their daily life. Samba is sent out each morning to seek employment; later he comes home bringing the spoils of his well-placed resourcefulness; and Oumou’s own connectedness to a network of others in Djimméyabé serves her well, albeit largely established via prostitution (Écailles 106, 111, 108). In spite of his fate, Monénembo hints at a veiled victory for Diouldé, whose name in Peul means survivor (Keïta 18). In different ways, these characters avoid the immobilising claws of poverty and destitution.

Their escapism is not always physical though, and encompasses internal ‘flights’ which to some extent remove the character from what surrounds them. Indeed, it is consciousness-raising and the subversion of set conventions which define the nomadic state, rather than the literal act of travelling (Braidotti 26). The knowledge accumulated through their ongoing, clandestine behaviour leaves these subjects well-informed, and they are able to choose consciously to digress, distract, divert from the horrific realities of the everyday. Monénembo has these characters make empowered choices, fully aware of all that is going on around them (listed at length) and deciding to set themselves at a distance.

Nous buvions donc pour planer au-dessus des mesquineries quotidiennes :  
murmures – écoutes – dénonciations – arrestations – exécutions – acclamations  
des chauds militants – messages de félicitations des partis frères et amis. Pour  
nous, la solution était de boire et de regarder tout ça d’un œil froid. Boire au lieu  
de suivre les cours. Boire au lieu d’assister aux pendaisons publiques, boire au  
lieu d’écouter la voix de faux chanteur de blues du président, boire pour se  
moquer d’une bougresse de fille qui pleure et rit de son père pendu.

*So we drank to soar above the meanness of the everyday: rumours – intrusions –  
denunciations – arrests – executions – applause for military action –  
congratulations for brothers and friends. For us, the answer was to drink and to  
watch all of it from a distance. Drink instead of going to class. Drink instead of  
watching public hangings, drink instead of listening to the president’s fake blues  
singer, drink to laugh at the girl crying for her hung father. (Crapauds 151-2).*



Ultimately this drinking also buoys them to plan a final escape from the city. We saw earlier how alcohol feeds the precariousness and tension of the space of dictatorship, but it can also place the power back in the hands of those who are thought of as powerless victims to that volatility.

Through conscious decision-making in the face of struggle, these characters face death and violence head on. In a study of the disadvantaged inhabitants of Ibadan, Peter Gutkind argues that it is through a common struggle that common sentiments, attitudes and perceptions are produced (13). They are fully aware of the tensions and dangers which lurk around and then respond in ways which perpetuate that, furtively working to own and direct the space they inhabit. As Scott adds, “the hidden transcript is not just behind-the-scenes griping and grumbling; it is enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation” (*Domination* 188). It is often from their position on the sidelines that these subjects most lucidly see what is occurring around them. Having chosen to remove themselves from the hyped cacophony of mining which overtakes the Bas-Fonds, Monénembo’s underdogs acquire a clearer picture of what is unfolding. “Dans notre farniente salubre, nous regardions le temps passer dans la rue; un temps de plus en plus fou, de plus en plus pressé d’en découdre avec les promesses” (*In our salutary idleness, we would watch time go by in the streets, a time more and more absurd, more and more keen to tear up its own promises*) (*Écailles* 163).

To resist the insidious spread of those tentacles of violent domination described above, subjects must territorialise and reterritorialize this in between space in imaginative ways. Mikael Karlström finds this positive element of a political imaginary missing from Mbembe’s work but in Monénembo’s writing the creative aspect of resistance emerges in a number of ways (63). In *Écailles* Samba seems to inhabit more than one world, marked out since birth as somehow other worldly (36). Monénembo’s inclusion of the supernatural,

particularly via the character of Sibé, gestures to the imaginative potential embodied by nomadic subjects. Mbembe states that the discourse of power “drives [its targets] into the realms of fantasy”, but the agency Monénembo writes into his subjects has them opt for rather than retreat to these imaginative worlds (*On the Postcolony* 118). Such application of imagination reminds us of the trickster figure from traditional folk tales who employs flexibility and cunning to turn circumstances to his advantage (Bayart, Ellis & Hibou 36). For Braidotti this borrowing of energy from elsewhere can lead to an enactment of potential that makes a difference to the (politically oppressive) present. Thus we can see in characters’ use of their imagination the agency which could be used for political resistance, a hint of what the embodied self is capable of (12). Faustin in *L’Aîné* for example thrives on fabricating narratives in prison, and Leda, trapped in a disabled body in *Pelourinho* similarly exercises the reach of her mind through storytelling.

Diversion also emerges in irony. In *Crapauds* the friends who gather together speak with disparaging brevity about those in power, and observe the violence of the everyday with critical distance:

J’ai parlé, et vous vous en doutez sûrement, de notre cher président, bienfaiteur suprême de vous et de moi, ardent défenseur de la cause sacrée, notre leader bien-aimé, Sâ Matrak... Il faut tuer cette vermine, cette cohorte de sangsues, avant qu’il ne soit trop tard.

*I spoke, and I’m sure you doubt me, our dear president, reigning benefactor of us all, keen defender of the sacred cause, our beloved leader, Sâ Matrak... This vermin, this horde of leeches, must be killed before it’s too late (56-7).*

The sarcastic repetition of those same self-attributed titles mentioned above is spat out here as a vehicle for Monénembo's pointed critique:

There is no official policy which is not immediately deciphered in the back streets, no slogan which is not straightaway parodied, no speech which is not subjected to an acid bath of derision, no rally which does not resound with hollow laughter (Bayart 252).

Where Deeriye in *Close Sesame* describes Somalia as “a stage where the Grandest Actor performs in front of an applauding audience that should be booing him”, Monénembo reveals the mocking that happens behind the scenes (234). As Josaphat Kubayanda captures, “the dictator cannot afford to be laughed at, whereas the people need laughter as an antidote to the pain inflicted by the dictator” (41). Such derision continually undermines the discourse of those on stage.

Public space has to be a place of submission and accordance with the dictator, and mobile subjects who observe from the shadowy wings know best how to act and speak on that stage. These techniques of concealment require an experimental spirit and a capacity to test and exploit the loopholes, ambiguities, silences and lapses available to you:

Monénembo's subjects are experts at this. Scott lists feigning submission amongst the arts of resistance, and this can be found in the superficial deference enacted by characters seeking to placate the dictator figures and quickly divert their attention. Rather than conformity it consists of successful self-misrepresentation in a reappropriation of space and power (*Domination* 24). Bayart describes these techniques of evasion and pretence as “chameleon's footsteps” (254). These practices certainly form part of the *débrouillardise* which marks out Monénembo's underdogs.

Though their responses can be individual, the awareness (of the dominant's performances and schemes, of their own agency) is communal. In these dictatorship novels it emerges in collaborative resistance as characters work together to enact agency in resistance to the many faceted, domineering schemes of the dictatorship. Thus Oumou and Samba's relationship resists the divisive methods of the dictatorship which succeed in separating Râhi and Daouda. And in the last third of *Crapauds*, Râhi is rescued from her isolation into community with Kandia and those who gather at *Paradis*, a bar. Although weighed down by the detritus and suffering of life within the dictatorship, it is as though the energy which emerges from them being together cannot be quashed. "Ici la vie coulait sans demander son reste; qui pouvait dire si elle coulait en source joyeuse ou en égout, parfois honteux de faire surface?" (*Here life went on without further ado. Who can tell whether it stemmed from bounties of joy or from the sewers, sometimes ashamed to emerge?*) (156).

Those markers of instability listed earlier in this article become sources of solidarity. It still stands that the chain of violence is self-perpetuating, but Monénembo's underdogs meet each emergence, each strike of the octopus' tentacles, face on with awareness and agency. The shared experiences of uncertainty via poverty, hunger, thirst, violence and crime lead survivor characters to gather in particular places: seeking safety and nourishment but also strength in numbers.

### **Spaces of dissent**

It is important to note that where these forms of surreptitious resistance might be thought of as elementary, in fact they are grassroots foundations on which more elaborate political action can be established: their power comes in their being "down-to-earth" (*Domination* 201). The subjects' agency is dependent on and manifested in particular locations, "it depends in part on where it is located, how it occupies its places within specific apparatuses,

and how it moves within and between them” (Grossberg 384). Far from the lofty airs and performed quasi-divinity of the dictator figures, those who artfully enact resistance are grounded in the everyday. For Braidotti, locatedness is vital. Her interpretation of nomadic being is about enacting power right here, right now, and engaged action in particular geopolitical locations. This always requires the intervention of others (togetherness), since a location is “a collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spatiotemporal territory” (16). As Scott describes, “it is in this no-man’s-land of feints, small attacks, probings to find weaknesses, and not in the rare frontal assault, that the ordinary battlefield lies” (*Domination* 193). The strength of underdog’s awareness and *potentia* is accentuated as they meet in private spaces of dissent. Since the public space must be a place of accord with the dictator, there must be private spaces where a counter-discourse can be elaborated. The dominated subjects must to some degree lie low, and carve out their own spaces where they can experience dignity and justice (*Domination* 114). These sites are collectively inhabited, and characterised by mutuality; the hierarchy imposed on the public space does not apply here, and subjects are insulated, albeit temporarily, from control and surveillance from above (*Domination* 118). Indeed the site which recurs the most in Monénembo’s writing and that of his contemporary dictatorship novelists, and fits these criteria, is the bar.

The bar is a primary locus in many Francophone African novels, including Alain Mabanckou’s *Verre cassé*, Sony Labou Tansi’s *L’Anté-peuple*, and the aforementioned *Temps de chien* by Nganang. In the early stages of *Crapauds* Diouldé and his friends gather at *L’ombre du cocotier* where they joke around and have a good time (35). Later the meeting place is *Paradis*, an escape from the shadows of the *Tombeau* and a seat for solidarity (150). In *Écailles*, the significance of *Chez Ngaoulo* is conveyed from the start:

*Chez Ngaoulo* ne fut pas un cabaret comme un autre, mais plutôt une espèce de lieu saint plein d'ironie, passage obligé des itinéraires les plus fortuits, refuge prédestiné des âmes les plus incurablement vagabondes.

*Chez Ngaoulo wasn't like most bars. It was more a kind of holy place full of irony, a right of way for the luckiest of paths, and a predestined refuge for the ever-wandering soul* (14).

An alternative home, which the French conveys aptly with 'chez', is to be found in the bar, which becomes the point of assembly for local subordinates driven out of the oppressed public space. The bar facilitates the circulation of people and knowledge necessary for resistance, and just as the dictator exploits his intimate connections, so it is important for the dominant to know the right people. Banished though his subjects may be, Monénembo writes their resistance as contingent on this enforced alterity. It is in the homely space of N'gâ Bountou's *Paradis* that Kandia, Râhi and others establish the strong sense of togetherness which subsequently empowers them to escape the city. "Nous, nous l'appelions N'gâ, tout simplement. En contrepartie, nous étions ses enfants. Avec ou sans le rond, nous étions toujours les bienvenus" (*We would call her N'gâ. In return, we were her children. Even empty handed, we were always welcome*) (*Crapauds* 151). This reappropriation of familial vocabulary, out of the twisted clutches of the dictatorship, is powerful; and indeed it is out of this sense of family that they are able to revolt. Parental figures (Ngaoulo, N'gâ Bountou, Hélène) stand in to support and provide for vulnerable characters. This aspect of community, I would argue, is a necessary condition of hidden transcripts, which are formed dynamically and collaboratively. The bar is a place of exchange. Tongues are loosed by drink to catalyse

confessions and exchange key information. The atmosphere of generosity and joviality also makes it a place people want to be.

The potential for community and creativity is quashed at the end of *Écailles* as the bar stands empty and Koulloun lies almost lifeless in a deserted Kolisoko (193). At the conclusion of *Crapauds*, *Paradis* has been razed to the ground by the authorities (160). However, its work as a catalyst for resistance has been sufficient since the characters are outside of the city, watching the rising sun. Thus Monénembo concludes that though crucial, the bar (or any other space of dissent) need not be permanent. The *potentia* exploited and enacted by nomadic subjects is transferrable and not limited to a fixed location. Rather, the bar as a space can be a temporary means for consciousness-raising and collaboration: a private space where discourses of dissent can be formulated via storytelling emboldened by cheap or free drink. The bar's name *Paradis*, uttered with hopeful delight by those who frequent it, refers to the possibility it represents, but since that possibility is not concrete, it is difficult to quash. It is a space of rallying engagement and action, as Kandia elaborates, “ce que je voulais c'était appeler, gueuler fort pour que tous viennent unir les voix et les poings pour assommer le passé et polir l'avenir” (*I wanted to call out, shout for all to come and put voices and hands together to knock out the past and polish the future*) (159). And that space, subject to metamorphosis and mobility, will, in its temporariness, evade the schemes of domination, just like the nomad subjects who rusefully inhabit it.

In conclusion, the space depicted in Monénembo's dictatorship novels is one that is perpetually contested in practices of reterritorialisation, on the part of the dominant *and*, unbeknownst to the former, on the part of the dominated as well. The unsteady terrain of instability, characterised by violence which emerges in multiple forms, is the stage on which dictator figures parade their power, claiming to be at once omnipotent and magnanimous. The downtrodden, however, see through their myths of unity and stability, gaining lucid

awareness by being perpetually on the move, lurking in the shadows to tune in to the incongruent discourses of the dictator figures. The power of their more clandestine forms of defiance lies in their low-key nature: they effectively renegotiate power relations by remaining unobtrusive.

In this negotiation of space, mobility plays a vital role. The emergences of violent control spread like the creeping limbs of an octopus to disrupt any sense of safety or stability. Resistance, in response, consists of predicting and evading those movements, dodging their advances, and imaginatively contesting space as and when is possible. In the face of extreme oppression, and the looming threat of violence and death, the dominated apply a wily *débrouillardise* and enact their *potentia* through collaborative agency. Monénembo's protagonists territorialise in ever-mobile ways, revealing the hidden, in-between spaces of these cities in narratives which undercut the claimed authority of those in control. By relegating the importance of superficial signs of power and benevolence, these characters act as a vehicle for the author to critique the violent dictatorship of Sékou Touré. At the same time, Monénembo represents the supposed underdogs as nomad subjects who enact agency to condition and control the (hidden, changing) spaces they inhabit.

What we conclude is that dictatorship and resistance cannot be viewed separately, or as a distinct binary, since they are dynamically interdependent. As one moves, the other responds to it; as one imposes restrictions on space, the other moves around and beneath them. The art of resistance is conditioned by the practices of domination, and vice versa. Both are multiple and both are mobile, and both contribute to the dynamic formation of the state (Bayart 210). Chatterjee outlines the entanglement of elite and subaltern politics in his book *The Politics of the Governed*, arguing for a wider consideration of which arenas of political mobilisation tend to be accounted for (47). This more comprehensive focus should come through magnifying our perspective on local, specific sites. As we follow Monénembo's



underdog subjects we see them as empowered agents who shape space with their steps and diversions. Simplified notions of sovereignty can risk excluding resistance but using a framework like Nganang's metonymic chain of violence helps unravel domination as complex and multifaceted practices which can and are contested in varied, surreptitious ways. Moreover, an attention to language, aided by revealing the fluidity of and disparity between public and hidden transcripts, proves the extent to which there is room to manoeuvre.

Lastly, in seeing subjects as *débrouillard* negotiators, we become aware of how much power lies in the hands of the underdogs. Because of their shared consciousness and agency, they thrive on instability and are capable of beating the dominant at their own game, like at the end of *Crapauds* when the group "s'était glissé comme un serpent" (*had slid like a snake*) to escape (161). In imitating the creeping territorialisation of the dictator figures, the dominated reinvent the very practices aimed at controlling them. Since they are more wily and wise (indicated by Monénembo's serpent metaphor, as opposed to the octopus epithet he attributes to the dictatorship) they usurp that control and slither away to freedom. This does not mean we have a naïve or ignorant expectation for what they can achieve: I am not arguing that nomadic subjects will necessarily overthrow an autocrat, or that his inclement oppression will end. What this kind of reading does alert us to, is the perpetual interdependence of domination and resistance, and the nature of space as ongoingly negotiated and contested. Their mutual conditioning is clear: since nomad subjects form their resistance on knowledge of the dominant's practices, when he changes tactics, so will they. Monénembo's complication of the binary of domination and resistance unpicks the mythologizing performances of the dictatorship and highlights the perspicacity of those who lurk, resisting, in the wings.

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