

## Room to Manoeuvre: Moving beyond the Grotesque in **Tierno** Monénembo's Convivial Space

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### *Introduction*

In Patrice Nganang's *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine*, he describes dictatorship novels as those that identify dictatorship as Africa's clearest experience of tragedy, and cites works by Sony Labou Tansi, Ahmadou Kourouma and Sami Tchak as falling within that category. For Nganang, common trends in these novels are that violence is inevitable and epidemic (in both state and individuals); that the dictator figure embodies the state of exception; that there is a focus less on daily life than on the contest for life and death; and that satire is rife.<sup>1</sup> Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence*, according to Nganang, weighs heavily with the tragedy that is dictatorship: 'chacune des phrases de son roman unique a la lourdeur annonciatrice de notre monde fracturé' (*M* 226). While the aesthetics of the obscene and the grotesque frame a number of *romans de la désillusion* within dictatorship novels, Nganang is clear that authors' degrees of engagement with the grotesque diverge and that it need not be centred on the figure of the dictator himself. Where Tierno Monénembo certainly sits alongside his contemporaries in laying bare the tragedy and violence of autocracy, he is far less invested than they are in those stylistics of power. His dictatorship-novels are neither dominated by the buffoonery of corrupt rulers, nor do they make an overt critique of

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1. Patrice Nganang, *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine: pour une littérature préemptive* (Paris: Homnisphères, 2007), pp. 98–225, hereafter *M* in the body of the text.

the latter their primary focus.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the author deliberately shifts attention away from staged performances of sovereignty, and looks instead to what Achille Mbembe terms the ‘modes of validation of conscious existence’ that take place as those who are ruled negotiate convivial space, that is, the space they share intimately with those who rule.<sup>3</sup> Monénembo’s aesthetics of mutedness and instability constitute a double dismantling of the dictator’s staged power in these fictional worlds through reducing the presence of the dictator figure and accentuating the evidence of his failures. By drawing our attention to subtlety and insecurity, these novels demonstrate the limitations and failures of a grotesque stylistics of power.

Thierno Saïdou Diallo, Francophone Guinean novelist who has been writing under the pen-name Tierno Monénembo since he first published in 1979, continues to gain recognition, at least in the Francophone world, and was awarded the Grand Prix de la Francophonie in 2017 by the Académie française. *Les Crapauds-brousse* and *Les Écailles du ciel*, Monénembo’s first two novels, constitute a fierce indictment of colonial and postcolonial autocracy.<sup>4</sup> Published just before and just after the death of then president of Guinea Ahmed Sékou Touré (though written while the leader was in power), both novels display a fictional country which clearly evokes

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2. For this reason, I place them in the broader category of ‘dictatorship-novels’ as opposed to ‘dictator-novels’, following the distinction made by Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra. The former focus on the social, interpersonal, and psychological consequences of living under dictatorship whereas the latter pay attention to the dictator as a character from whose perspective the text is often narrated, who is defined by his barbarity, and who is central to the novel. Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, ‘Representing Dictatorship in the Global South’, *Global South Studies: A Collective Publication with The Global South*, 30 July (2019), <<https://globalsouthstudies.as.virginia.edu/key-issues/representing-dictatorship-global-south>> [last accessed 2 August 2019].
  3. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 17, hereafter *OTP* in the body of the text. Though this article refers to Mbembe’s book throughout, I use the 1992 version of Mbembe’s essay, in line with the other contributors to this issue. For further discussion of the genealogy of Mbembe’s text, see the Introduction to this thematic issue.
  4. Tierno Monénembo, *Les Crapauds-brousse* (Paris: Seuil, 1979); *Les Écailles du ciel* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), hereafter *LCB* and *LEC* in the body of the text.

Guinea under Touré's oppressive reign from 1958 to 1984.<sup>5</sup> As I will illustrate, the fictional worlds Monénembo brings to life strain under the obligation and reciprocity that Mbembe describes as conditioning the authoritarian political order in his 'postcolony', tying people into debts of material and moral coercion (*OTP* 46). And yet where that reciprocity elsewhere is extended to practices of obscene and grotesque mimicry (as in the work of Sony Labou Tansi and Henri Lopes), in Monénembo they are consciously muted.<sup>6</sup>

In 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', Mbembe, following Mikhail Bakhtin, identifies the grotesque and the obscene as characteristic elements of rule and refuge in the 'postcolony', which he uses as a spatially undefined reference point to refer to a set of conditions he sees as defining the neo-colonial state.<sup>7</sup> The postcolony, at once a historical trajectory and a specific system of signs, 'is characterised by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion as well as by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation' (*PN* 4). For Mbembe, the purest expression of *commandement* — the structure of power and coercion that is the authoritarian modality *par excellence* — is conveyed by a total lack of restraint where '[d]ebauchery and buffoonery readily go hand in hand' (*PN* 7). Mbembe's analysis of the buffoonery and the simulacra of the postcolony provides rich avenues for exploring fictional enactments of *commandement*, namely in the novels of Sony Labou Tansi, Nuruddin Farah, and Alain Mabanckou, not least because his conceptualisation of the postcolony is so

5. *Les Écailles du ciel* was written in 1980 and 1981, but only published after Touré's death in 1984.

6. Though evidently writing in the very different context of the Republic of the Congo, these authors provide relevant counterpoints to Monénembo for their differing engagement with the grotesque, their writing during the same period, and their influence on the writing of Achille Mbembe. For a discussion of how other Guinean authors have engaged with dictatorship, see Charlotte Baker, 'Necropolitical Violence and post-independence Guinean Literature', *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 17.3 (2014), 305–26.

7. Achille Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 62.1 (1992), 3–37, hereafter *PN* in the body of the text.

influenced by their fiction (*PN* 3, 6–7, 13).<sup>8</sup> And yet the novels written by Monénembo at the beginning of his writing career do not reflect this conceptual framework. As such they sit apart from contemporary novels mentioned in ‘Provisional Notes on the Postcolony’. Where Mbembe, drawing heavily on the fictional universe of Sony Labou Tansi, cites the postcolony’s ‘unusual and grotesque art of representation, its taste for the theatrical and its violent pursuit of wrongdoing to the point of shamelessness’, where obscenity was ‘an integral part of the stylistics of power’ (*PN* 14), it is in fact restraint when it comes to depicting the dictator that sets Monénembo apart. This article demonstrates how Monénembo’s texts mute the grotesque, creating a literary ‘site of playful contestation’ in which the supremacy of the fictional ruler is destabilized by revealing his limits and failures.<sup>9</sup> Through his aesthetics of mutedness and instability, Monénembo goes beyond the grotesque to bring the fictional state’s failures to the fore.

Mbembe defines the postcolony not as a simple sequence of time, but as a timescape of entanglement where multiple traces of colonization and its violence overlap in an interlocking of presents, pasts and futures that bear on and alter one another (*OTP* 16). This composite image is certainly evident in Monénembo’s depiction of failed space, as my reading of colonial continuities in *Les Écailles du ciel* will demonstrate. However, I also show that this presents a challenge to Mbembe’s logic of ‘mutual zombification’ between ruler and ruled. If Mbembe argues that the familiarity and domesticity of the ruler-ruled relationship results in a ‘zombification’ whereby ‘each [has] robbed the other of vitality and has left them both impotent’ (*PN* 4), Monénembo’s convivial space reveals fault lines that point less to an unconscious imitation of ruler by ruled, than to a dictator who fails by re-enacting a form of colonial *commandement*. In this article, I

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8. See Cécile Bishop on how Mbembe deliberately oscillates between genres and their expectations in describing the postcolony. Cécile Bishop, ‘Achille Mbembe and the Disorder of Discourse’, in *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship: The Aesthetics of Tyranny* (London: Legenda, 2014), pp. 79–104.

9. Bishop, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 12.

identify that pattern of repetition as undermining the sovereignty Monénembo's fictional dictators seek to establish.

*Muted grotesque*

Sony Labou Tansi and Henri Lopes are more forceful than their Guinean counterpart in their presentation of sexuality, cruelty and violence, and in their exaggerated portrayals of uncouth and undignified leaders. The frenzy of brand-new independence is successfully embodied by the fictional dictator as overblown clown on stage with big band and banners. In Sony Labou Tansi's *L'État honteux* this portrayal is so exaggerated that it protrudes beyond the president's body in an odorous hernia that weighs three kilograms.<sup>10</sup> Equally in *Le Pleurer-rire*, Lopes writes scenes of feasting where the inebriated ruler is volatile and excessive in his commands.<sup>11</sup> Such representative tropes, themselves exaggerations of motifs from Latin American dictator novels,<sup>12</sup> create an experience of reading that is overwhelmed by grotesque and spectacular aesthetics. As readers, we cannot but engage with the buffoonery of dictators that is imposed on these texts, observing too the pervasive reach of their vulgarity. In these novels, the wider populations' participation in such performances of power (making it properly 'vulgar', as in *of the people*) is indicative of the ubiquity of the grotesque in what Mbembe describes as banal power.

By banality of power, Mbembe means the elements of the obscene and grotesque that are intrinsic to systems of domination and the highly visible ways those systems are confirmed. He writes, 'the postcolony is a particularly revealing (and rather dramatic) stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary,

10. Sony Labou Tansi, *L'État honteux* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

11. Henry Lopes, *Le Pleurer-rire* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982).

12. Armillas-Tiseyra cites the example of Sony Labou Tansi, who includes parodied elements of Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* in *L'État honteux*, in her discussion of the dictator novel as a trans-regional genre. Armillas-Tiseyra, 'Representing Dictatorship'.

discipline.’ (PN 3) Part of this relies on the ubiquity of the ruler’s body, and in its absence, his image:

It is [...] not unusual to find the effigy of the head of state in or around people’s houses. It is a part of the furniture as well as a decorative object. It is found in offices, along avenues, in airport terminals, in police stations and in places of torture. It is always nearby. You wear it. It is on people’s bodies, as in the case of women who wear the party’s cloths. In this way, and with great attention to detail, the apparatus of state finds ways of getting into its subjects’ most intimate spaces. (PN 19)

This highly visual reproduction of government-sanctioned images of the ruler seeks to consolidate certain myths around his status, namely as unique, unchanging and reliable, the ever-present father of the nation. Each of these repetitions acts as a brick in the ostentatious building of myths around his power: ‘The body of the despot, his frowns and smiles, his decrees and commands, the public notices and communiqués repeated over and over again: these are the primary signifiers, it is these that have force, that get interpreted and reinterpreted, and feed back further significance into the system’ (PN 7–8). Mbembe’s description suggests this highly performative and visual expression of banal power is ubiquitous in the postcolony.

And yet, in the fictional worlds of Monénembo’s texts, the grotesque is deliberately muted and the (supposedly) hyperbolic, self-aggrandizing dictator remains largely out of sight. There are hints of the grotesque in Monénembo’s work. Yet these remain hushed, and are relegated, as I will explain, to third-person reports within the texts’ narrative framing. Rather than the permanent openness that Bakhtin defines as a symptom of the grotesque body, Monénembo’s novels work to restrain and mute, thus closing down and silencing the dictator’s presence in the text. The atmosphere of hush that permeates *Les Écailles du ciel* is illustrative of this aesthetics. Samba, the novel’s protagonist, remains mute throughout the novel. An outsider since birth, he is exiled from his village and once in the slum of Leydi-Bondi,

remains understated and inconspicuous. He is viewed with suspicion and carries an air of mystery with him, seeing visions in the dark and occupying hidden corners of les Bas-Fonds. But Samba's subtlety and lack of speech extend to the wider text. Within this atmosphere of eerie quiet — the opposite of frenzy — the authority figures themselves (colonial and post-colonial, as I will show) are muted. In both novels, where there is no fanfare celebrating his achievements, the dictator's failures are left quietly, but clearly, to emerge. The texts destabilize performances of sovereignty precisely by muting them through specific narrative structures and the recurrence of absence and silence. I turn now to outline how this aesthetics of restraint appears in both *Les Crapauds-brousse* and *Les Écailles du ciel*, through the noticeable absence of the dictator figure, and of his silencing within three narrative perspectives.

In dictator-novels such as Lopes' *Le Pleurer-rire*, the president regularly puts his wealth on display at indulgent feasts and uses the table as his stage for a performance of power, but that physicality is restrained in Monénembo's texts.<sup>13</sup> The fictional ruler, named Sâ Matrak in *Les Crapauds-brousse* and Ndourou-Wembîdo in *Les Écailles du ciel*, remains in the background. The physical body of the dictator figure is absent from almost every scene and the occasional parade of power is recounted only long after it has taken place. The texts' restraint thus denies the totality of the dictator's power by denying its visibility. Where Mbembe maintains that the dictator's signs and narratives have a surplus of meanings that one cannot depart from, challenge, or negotiate, Monénembo's noticeable absencing of those signs is an undeniable departure at a textual level (*PN* 9–10). Where a grotesque aesthetics would rely upon the dictator taking centre stage, this does not happen here, either visibly or audibly. The text's restraint impedes the dictator's status as role model, surrounded by a sense of grandeur, since nothing of substance appears in either his body, character or behaviour. If he is notable at all, it is for his absence; and little of the obsession that accompanies the ubiquitous presence of

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13. See Lopes, *Le Pleurer-rire*, pp. 95 and 125.

a dictator is to be noted. One exception comes in the presence of heroized images described in the immediate aftermath of independence in *Les Écailles du ciel*: ‘Leurs toits étaient pavoisés de la cocarde nationale. Partout, des portraits de Ndourou-Wembôdo. Partout des drapeaux’ (LEC 42). However, when ‘un tableau gigantesque et laudatif’ is displayed after the dictator’s death, the insubstantial and fragile nature of those very images is emphatically expressed: ‘une balle perdue...atteignit l’image du Leader-Bien-Aimé en plein milieu du front’ (LEC 185).

What is more, Sâ Matrak has no dialogue in the whole of *Les Crapauds-brousse*. Here, again, Monénembo’s writing diverts from Mbembe’s aesthetics in its use of voice and narrative framing. Mbembe comments that the art of governing includes elevating the trivial into the grandiose; and this often occurs in overly long public speeches where excess and disproportion aim ‘to captivate the mind’s eye (*l’imaginaire*) with a Gulliverian vision of the *commandement*’s deeds’ (PN 16). Refusing to mimic the historical referent of his novel, Sékou Touré — who is once reported to have spoken for eight hours without stopping — Monénembo decides not to imitate such rhetoric within his fictions, and thus creates a quite deliberate departure from the narratives constructed by the dictator.<sup>14</sup> As a result, as well as a visual absence, there is a silencing of the fictional ruler. In *Les Écailles du ciel*, Ndourou-Wembôdo has a total of ten lines of direct speech in the 193-page novel. The peak of this ironic muting comes when he dies choking on a fishbone during an official dinner, literally silenced for good (LEC 178). Lydie Moudileno and Francis Higginson argue of Sony Labou Tansi’s *La Vie et demie* that displacing a real-life tyrant

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14. ‘La lecture interminable de ses rapports à la tribune des congrès représente une performance qui fait sa réputation auprès des journalistes étrangers. Un record, semble-t-il, est battu en septembre 1959, où il parle huit à dix heures de suite.’ Ibrahima Kaké, *Sékou Touré: le héros et le tyran* (Paris: Groupe Jeune Afrique, 1987), p. 101. Sâ Matrak is the fictional equivalent of Sékou Touré. See, for example, Elsa Costero, ‘Le roman mis en question’, in *Tierno Monénembo et le roman: Histoire, exil, écriture*, ed. by Bernard De Meyer and Papa Samba Diop (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2014), pp. 83–98 (p. 86).



into the narrative space of the novel removes the exclusiveness of his authority by making him subject to the whims of the author's imagination.<sup>15</sup> However, in *Les Crapauds-brousse* and *Les Écailles du ciel*, it is not whimsical performance or play, but restraint in the aesthetics of these texts that destabilizes the dictator figures within fictional space (whether or not that does anything to destabilize real life power or convey opposition on the author's part). These texts' denial of first-person narrative stifles the ego-centrism that lies at the heart of staged performances of power, and de-stabilizes the tyrant's hold on fictional space by narrating that space from alternative perspectives. And if the tragedy of dictatorship comes in its repetition throughout history (M 206), then such muting curbs the longevity of a regime's violence by silencing its echoes in literary texts.

In the face of the strategic myth-construction of dictator as divine, omnipresent, and omniscient, the texts' muting destabilizes those myths and accompanying status through absence and silence. The dictator is neither seen nor heard. His relative nonappearance in the texts demonstrates the very failure of such construction and begs the question of how we are to respond to Mbembe's suggestion that we analyse the specific ways state power offers ceremonial displays as spectacles (PN 4). It is characteristic of Monénembo's writing to place in the background the subject that usually commands attention.<sup>16</sup> In so doing, he suggests the possibility of similar silencing and destabilizing beyond these fictional worlds. His two *romans de la dictature* present alternatives to the overt ridicule of the impotent and incontinent président-dictateur found for example in Sony Labou Tansi's *L'État honteux*. Through the absence of the dictator's physicality and performance, his integrity, his hold on power, and his political agenda are all destabilized. Ultimately, the absence of the dictator's first-person narrative mutes the ego-centric performance of his power, and

15. Lydie Moudileno and Francis Higginson, 'Labou Tansi's *La Vie et demie*, or the Tortuous Path of the Fable', *Research in African Literatures*, 29.3 (1998), 21–33 (p. 23).

16. See for example in *L'Ainé des Orphelins* where the subject of the genocide in Rwanda is placed in the background of the novel. Tierno Monénembo, *L'Ainé des Orphelins* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

points to the way narrative framing pushes him further and further from the centre of the text.

Where the dictator and his ‘langue de bois’ are muted, other ordinarily marginalized voices narrate with an omniscient perspective. In this way, Monénembo’s texts are framed to shift attention away from the hyperbole of performed power and are recounted by lesser-seen spokesmen. In *Les Crapauds-brousse*, it is a madman on the edges of the city, and in *Les Écailles du ciel*, the griot Kolloun who narrates the whole novel. Their voices emerge as counterparts to the ineffective, muted dictator as they bring momentum to each story. Powerful in his discreetness, the madman establishes himself in the city almost without being noticed: ‘une fois-là, personne non plus ne s’était étonné de sa présence. Et personne ne semblait s’en soucier’ (*LCB* 81). His bare, ailing body resists a heavily policed practice of clothing, as well as embodying simplicity next to the costumes designed to enhance a president’s performances. Where his behaviour may imitate some of the excess of Sâ Matrak, he simultaneously departs from the latter’s narratives. The old madman speaks more straightforwardly than most others in the novel and, though mad, contrasts the opacity of the political *langue de bois* which surrounds him: ‘Il appelait un chat un chat. Ignorant hypocrisie et flagornerie, il suivait irascible l’élan impétueux de son propre jugement’ (*LCB* 87–88). His discernment and clairvoyance underscore the lack of substance of those in power.<sup>17</sup> This juxtaposition also occurs in *Les Écailles du ciel*.

Koulloun is the griot narrator of *Les Écailles du ciel*, and he occupies a similar, marginal position as he narrates from his barstool at Chez Ngando. From there he describes the catastrophic failures of over-spending and under-thinking that have left the country in ruins: ‘Les potences furent enguirlandées et ornées de lumignons polychromes. Les cadavres des suppliciés furent recouverts de serpentins et de confettis. Un déodorant subtilement élaboré fut répandu par fûts entiers sur les eaux croupies des ornières’ (*LEC* 160).

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17. See similar examples in Malick Fall *La Plaie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1967) and Chigozie Obioma *The Fisherman* (London: One, 2015).

Where this omniscient griot could have commented on an omniscient ruler, instead his protagonist is a village reject. The mouths that voice these novels, vulgar as they may be, are not used in the same way Mbembe describes, alongside the belly and the phallus, as the central focus of the idioms and symbols of the grotesque (*PN* 6–7). Unlike the gorging and self-congratulating noise of the Mbembian grotesque ruler, the mouths of these marginal figures are used as structuring voices and mouthpieces for critique, rather than any imitation of his spectacle.

Indeed, as well as the lack of first-person speech, there is no dialogue in which the dictator figure is directly addressed, and this serves the specific purpose of muting his status. In other texts, exaggerated lists of titles are an ego-centric way of performing power, and their repetition by others are part of what feeds it.<sup>18</sup> This naming is one example of the self-elevation which characterises the despot's performance. Meant to reinforce the status of the dictator and with every utterance to concretise his quasi-deified position in the public's imaginary, these signifiers are rendered ineffective when not used to address him in the second-person. Such is the case in Monénembo's texts, where this absence of praise reduces the dictator's publicity and in turn his myth-making and power. The dictator feeds on adulation and the narcissistic satisfaction of seeing himself mirrored in and called on by his people (as with Lopes's 'Tonton' and in Sony Labou Tansi's 'Providential Guide'), so a refusal to repeat his titles destabilizes his power.<sup>19</sup> Instead of mimicking him with words that indulge his narcissism, it is a determined rejection of being captivated by the image and performance of the ruler, which is an inherent part of Mbembe's 'mutual zombification' that I discuss below. We know the names of Sâ

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18. See for example *Sardines* by Nuruddin Farah, where each school child has to learn the ninety-nine names of the General, or *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* where the names given to the president are enumerated, 'le Président-soleil, le Génie du Grand Fleuve, le Stratège, le Sauveur, le Père de la nation, l'Unificateur, le Pacificateur'. Nuruddin Farah, *Sardines* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1992), p. 10; Ahmadou Kourouma, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), p. 243.

19. Lopes, *Le Pleurer-rire*, p. 39; Sony Labou Tansi, *La Vie et demie* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

Matrak and Ndourou-Wembêdo, but the fact that they are seldom addressed in the novel means their power is subtly destabilized as it is reliant on publicity (staged violence, repeated rituals) to drive home fear.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, there is a veiled victory for Diouldé in *Les Crapauds-brousse*, who as the novel's protagonist (and whose other name Woûri in Peul means survivor), appears with far greater frequency and takes centre stage in the plot.<sup>21</sup> Purposefully muting the dictator by not addressing him (in these or any terms) is part of a subtle textual challenge in the use of names and titles.<sup>22</sup> Further, the words and stage on which he builds his power are destabilized by the use of third-person narrative perspective.

When titles are repeated it is with a tone of disdain *and in the third person*. In *Les Crapauds-brousse*, the friends who gather speak with disparaging brevity about those in power. The sarcastic repetition of self-attributed titles is spat out here as a vehicle for critique: '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' (*LCB* 56–57). Rather than being uttered on the lips of doting subjects, the ruler's titles are mocked by the narrator: 'la somptueuse collection de titres s'enrichissait sans cesse de nouveaux bijoux...Galleries de perles gracieusement mises à la disposition des militants en mal d'inspiration' (*LEC* 157). Where this derision allows for distance between the

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20. One example of this is Sékou Touré's stage presence at, and in publicity for, the National Cultural Festivals in Guinea in the 1970s, where the portrait of him appearing on stage ironically highlighted the performative essence of his power. See Angie Epifano, 'The Image of Sékou Touré: Art and the Making of Postcolonial Guinea', in *Fictions of African Dictatorship: Cultural Representations of Postcolonial Power*, ed. by Charlotte Baker and Hannah Grayson (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), pp. 13–36 (p. 22).

21. Mohamed Keïta, *Tierno Monénembo: une approche psychocritique de l'œuvre romanesque* (Paris: Harmattan, 2014), p. 18.

22. This is a distinctly different approach from novels such as *La vie et demie* and *En attendant la vote des bêtes sauvages*, which face the dictator head-on in the form of satire. For Nganang these novels work to 'adresser le dictateur en plein visage: et le croquer féroce.' (*M* 222).

underdog figure and the dictator, that distance allows them to 'regain possession of self'.<sup>23</sup> These texts deliberately mute the personality cult that takes centre stage in contemporary dictator-novels; it is less about a 'face-off' with the dictator, and more about restraining his presence and reach in the fictional space. By referring to him primarily in the third person, the text's narrative frame moves further away from ego-centric, grotesque performances of power in the first person.

Rather than defining himself in the first person, Sâ Matrak is only described in the third person by those he supposedly controls, who describe his last public speech as resembling the desperate rasping breaths of a dying animal, or a 'torrent de salive' (*LCB* 57). When Ndourou-Wembêdo is described as giving a speech in *Les Écailles du ciel*, it is recounted with disdain by Kolloun in a list of vacuous terms:

Il parlait dans de longues dissertations sur la paléontologie, l'ornithologie, l'héraldique, la topographie, l'histoire de la philosophie et le sport. Il parlait d'espace et de temps, de mnémotechnique. Il persiflait la maïeutique, démontait les mécanismes dangereux du syllogisme, s'en prenait à l'épistémologie et fulminait contre des individus aux noms étranges. (*LEC* 151)

That *langue de bois* is silenced by dissidents who cry, 'Y en a marre des discours!' and its vacuous nature is called out when it is re-told derisively in the third person. Earlier on, when he is reported as recounting the journey to independence, Ndourou-Wembêdo's words are cut down to, 'C'est ainsi, mon vieux...', reducing his tale of heroism to four empty words (*LEC* 146 and 143). What is more, the narrator's story is being told years later, after Ndourou-Wembêdo's death, and thus marks the finality of his silencing. This strategy equally denies any effort to memorialise such loud, bombastic dictatorship as something that might echo through the literary text into the present. In these ways, the text reduces the supposedly grandiose to the trivial, a

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23. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, 'Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis', *Public Culture*, 7.2 (1995), 323–52 (p. 352).

reversal of Mbembe's grotesque, and such muting at a textual level reverberates in growing cynicism towards and distrust of those in power.

If the body, as the substance of power, needs to be both venerated and fed, then texts that refuse to stage the body of the dictator threaten its 'virile strength'.<sup>24</sup> Far from physicality being the embodiment of power for Sâ Matrak, his overly substantial weight is a subject of disdain for those he rules: 'Vous avez vu sa masse? La graisse doit lui écraser le cœur comme un poids-lourd sur un moineau' (*LCB* 55). Since a repertoire of absolute power is fundamental to its success, the texts' muting and absenting thwarts the dictator's basic goal, which is to 'bring a specific political consciousness into being [and] to make it effective' (*PN* 4). Being denied speech and address, whilst also being spoken *about* in these terms, he loses the battle to establish this political consciousness and instead appears only in reported speech marked by disenchantment.

I have shown above how the aesthetics of restraint in Monénembo's dictatorship-novels divert from Mbembe's description of the 'postcolony'. By rendering him absent and silent, and using narrative perspective to distance him, the power and status of the fictional dictator is destabilized. In his 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', Mbembe analyses what occurs when the 'Big Man' takes centre stage and remains there, yet he does not attend to a form of writing that is consciously more restrained. Monénembo, rather than echoing the dictator's grotesque performance, relegates off the page/stage that very body that is supposed to be 'the principle locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power' (*OTP* 7). If 'the purest expression of *commandement* is conveyed by a total lack of restraint' (*PN* 7), where the over-indulgent dictator dominates the space 'dans l'ivresse de sa liberté' (*M* 210), then a text's muting of this formally destabilizes that power. This mutedness is a far cry from the 'world of anxious virility' that is supposed to pervade the postcolony,

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24. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 132.

instead revealing worlds marked by the excessive failures of those in power (PN 9).

There are moments in his essay where Mbembe hints at 'avenues of escape', but these are limited to verbal play and manipulation with official image and slogans (PN 6). Similarly, he describes a subject who is able to bargain and negotiate yet remains inescapably stuck in 'mutual zombification' with the dominant ruler (PN 4). The muting I have described comes as a formal suggestion of these 'avenues of escape', where there is a departure from grotesque dramaturgy, thus contesting the hold of 'zombification'. Without a dominant presence of the grotesque on the part of the ruler, those aesthetics are not echoed and repeated back by the ruled. These novels do not reveal an internalisation of authoritarian epistemology that is then reproduced 'in all the minor circumstances of daily life', as Mbembe writes (PN 25). Thus, rather than depicting a state of 'mutual zombification', where both ruler and subject are defined by their mutual dependence on systemic violence, Monénembo demonstrates the very limits of the grotesque by writing texts that pay it little heed.<sup>25</sup> Muting and restraint in this fictional world is his alternative to the perpetual state of paranoia that came to characterise the nation of Guinea under the weight of conspiracies about attempts on Touré's life or supposed opposition to his nation-building project.<sup>26</sup> Instead of being transfixed on the excesses of a head of state, the texts lay bare his excessive failures, including in the inevitability of destruction and in the ruin his regime has caused to the physical and social environment. These failures, which I outline below, destabilize his sovereignty further, by revealing cracks in the system through formal and descriptive attention to instability and insecurity. What is more, the structure and progression of *Les Écailles du ciel* trace these failures as direct continuities of colonial rule.

25. Michael Syrotinski, 'Genealogical Misfortunes: Achille Mbembe's (Re)Writing of Postcolonial Africa', *Paragraph*, 35.3 (2012), 407–420 (p. 415).

26. Mike McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Modern Guinea* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

*Space indicates failure*

The postcolonial space that Monénembo depicts in his two dictatorship-novels is both necropolitical and convivial. By ‘necropower’ Mbembe means a conflation of violence and politics where conducting public affairs becomes synonymous with a system of unbridled violence and coercion willing to seize power and crush any form of rebellion, and that extends to dictating who may live and who must die (*OTP* 43). But it is also convivial: while the space of the postcolony is violent and unstable, it is also intimate. Monénembo evokes relationships between the ruler and ruled which are highly complex. Through ongoing bonds of debt and dependence, 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. This differs from the filial yet distant bond that bound the colonies to the ‘protective’ and ‘benevolent’ mother country.<sup>27</sup> The dictator is a ‘fils du pays, cela personne ne pourra jamais lui enlever; il est le mari, car comment le voir autrement; il est le “père de la nation”, parce que c’est ainsi qu’il aime se faire appeler’ (*M* 204). This intimate connection blurs lines between submission, complicity, care, suffering, empathy and subversion, and amplifies necropower by extending surveillance to the most personal of details. To take an example that appears in both novels, the conflation of the necropolitical and the convivial is demonstrated when a state henchman moves into the home of a less powerful female character. In *Les Crapauds-brousse*, Daouda first visits, claiming to ‘servir en quelque sorte d’intermédiaire’ between

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27. ‘The state that flows from this sovereignty defines itself as protective. The native is its protégé. The strength of this state lies as much in the feeling that arises from the right to protect the weak as from the hard-headed quest for metropolitan profit. Its strength is a strength for good and goodness. It is also a *family state*, and to that extent a “family and filial bond binds the colonies to the mother country.” Yet the protective state could in no way look kindly on any abdication of the family guardianship over its “protégé”, the native. The same is true of its sovereignty — its moral superiority, the force for good that it brings as a gift.’ (Mbembe, *OTP* 35)



Râhi and her imprisoned husband. He then rapes her, and practically moves into her home, repeating a nightly pattern of strict surveillance and abuse: 'le repas dans la petite salle à manger, le couloir, la chambre, le lit' (*LCB* 137–39). In *Les Écailles du ciel*, it is Oumou whose attention is courted by Bandiougou (one of the aspiring president's deputies), once he has attached himself to Samba (her partner). She is charmed, 'exprimait plutôt un contentement non dépourvu de fierté', and then 'Bandiougou était fréquemment convié'. When we learn that 'Oumou-Thiaga grossissait au secret du matelas', it comes as little surprise that 'l'évènement procurait plus de plaisir à Bandiougou qu'à Samba lui-même' (*LEC* 131–36). This literal 'conviviality' illustrates the violent yet intimate nature of this fictional postcolonial world, straining under relations of obligation where 'les femmes portaient des tembourés Indépendance, taillés dans un tissu imprimé où l'on voyait Ndourou-Wembîdo en tenue de guerrier' (*LEC* 144). This is one example of how 'the apparatus of state finds ways of getting into its subjects' most intimate spaces' (*PN* 19), as the dictator consolidates myths around his status, namely as the ever-present father of the nation.

Hence when the regime of the dictator is laid bare in these texts, it is a father's failure that is being depicted. Mbembe rightly points to the intimacy of the postcolony as a reason for rejecting the too simple binary categories of resistance/passivity, but in doing so he too hastily dismisses the significance that convivial space presents. The very cohabitation that for Mbembe precludes resistance in fact renders the ruler's failures more shameful by showing that he is letting down his own people. For the critical distance that allows the cynicism cited above is held in conjunction with an intimate knowledge of the post-colonial space and of the ruler himself, as a father figure who is failing his people. As a counterpoint to Mbembe's 'illicit cohabitation', I use 'convivial space' for spaces where there are distinct practices that refute the totalising effect of an 'authoritarian epistemology' on individual and collective subjectivities (*PN* 25). In Monénembo's convivial space familiarity and domesticity still transform power play into performance, but subjects are not completely robbed of potential for resistance. If as Nganang defines it 'la ville est le lieu de définition

de la subjectivité de l'africain d'aujourd'hui' (*M* 263), then that direct link between geographical space and the people within it is clear. Diouldé expresses that up-close critique of those who share his space but none of their wealth: 'Ceux qui s'engraissent sont de beaux salauds qui mangent en surplus dans un pays où le surplus est une autre de ces choses que Dieu a cachées de notre vue depuis toujours' (*LCB* 55). It is intimacy and conviviality which distinguish this space for Mbembe in 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', but in both Monénembo's dictatorship-novels, its significance comes in revealing the state's failures to be those of a father. In turn it is a 'fils du pays' who is muted and hidden by these texts. Where this intimate repression means the ruler and ruled have to share the same living space, the fictional dictators' authority is destabilized when their own imitation of colonial autocracy is brought to the fore. This is achieved in the structure and parallels of *Les Écailles du ciel* in particular.

Koulloun's frame narrative in *Les Écailles du ciel* provides a sweeping history of the colonial encounter, independence and the dictatorship that ensues. Each stage, set out in distinct chapters, is imbued with violence, and divided into relatively short sections, without titles, thereby propelling the timeframe forwards. As these sub-sections become shorter towards the end of the novel, the chronological progression of Koulloun's narrative speeds up and there is a persistent, unstoppable sense of unravelling. In this way, the novel shows how sovereign power ensures repetitive, causal cycles of uncertainty, malaise, poverty and chaos that reproduce this state of violence.<sup>28</sup> And the emphasis comes in revealing the post-colonial power practices as reproductions: the performances, rules and punishments Ndourou-Wembêdo enacts are obvious imitations of those modelled by the 'commandant' (as clear an embodiment of Mbembe's *commandement* as possible).

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28. For more detail see Hannah Grayson, 'The Space of Dictatorship: Monénembo, Hidden Transcripts, and a Metonymy of Violence', *Research in African Literatures*, 49.3 (2018), 153–77.

In appearance and behaviour Ndourou-Wembêdo parallels the colonial commandant who rules in the first section of *Les Écailles du ciel*. Dressed in 'un chapeau melon, un costume prince-de-galles quelque peu élimé et une cravate de soie', he threatens the colonial regime even as he imitates it (*LEC* 138). Similarly, the kinds of punishments imposed by 'le commandant' are later reproduced by Ndourou-Wembêdo:

On le roua de coups et on le mit aux fers sur ordre du commandant lui-même qui jura tous ses dieux de châtier pour l'exemple cette inqualifiable offense à une institution sacrée... Six mois pendant lesquels les chaînes croquèrent les jambes du vieux... Ce calvaire ne suffit pourtant pas à calmer l'exaspération du commandant. Une fois libéré, Sibé fut frappé d'une amende d'un taureau de sept ans, et d'une mise en quarantaine ferme et dûment contrôlée par un agent spécialement désigné... (*LEC* 84–86)

The post-independence regime then uses the very same prison to detain its suspected opponents:

Pendant la fusillade, alors que la ville, saisie d'effroi, se terrait comme elle pouvait, des policiers passèrent à l'appartement de l'avenue Farnitéré pour embarquer Bandiougou et Samba... l'Histoire ramena donc nos deux héros à leur prison d'antan... de toutes les institutions laissées par la colonisation, elle était la seule à fonctionner correctement. (*LEC* 149–50)

Mbembe's pessimism effectively highlights the brutality and hardship of the postcolonial space, but it downplays the failed imitation game of dictators themselves (*PN* 4–10). The colonial continuities traced in *Les Écailles du ciel* draw attention not to any 'mutual zombification' between the ruler and those he rules, but rather to his persistent fixation on colonial modes of power. This in turn destabilizes the authority of Ndourou-Wembêdo in three ways. First, by recreating the violence of the colonial commandant he undermines his performance of

benevolence as beloved father of the nation. With conflicting performances his neo-colonial hold over the city of Djimméyabé as a necropolitical and a convivial space is undermined: he cannot convincingly act two parts. Secondly, the way the text's repetitions reveal the degree to which Ndourou-Wembôdo is mimicking the commandant highlights his own performance of power as unoriginal; he is certainly not the possessor of 'la liberté suprême', held as he is by the text in a mirroring of colonial patterns.<sup>29</sup> This constitutes what Eli Sorensen describes as the problematic of imitativeness, whereby the project of establishing an autonomous identity in the transition to decolonisation is undermined when seen as an imitation of colonial rule. Authority is destabilized by a widespread feeling of living in an unreal society, one that is imitating another discursive reality.<sup>30</sup> And, thirdly, the greatest irony in imitating the colonial *commandant* is that Ndourou-Wembôdo ultimately imitates him in meeting his end 'dans un grand embarras': 'au cours d'un dîner officiel, en mangeant du capitaine, son poisson préféré, il avait avalé une arête de travers' (*LEC* 89 and 178).

This final parallel (where the downfall of the commandant pre-emptively Ndourou-Wembôdo's own humiliating death) is illustrative of the sense of inevitable decline that permeates *Les Écailles du ciel*. Following independence, the needs to unite the nation, secure recognition internationally, rebuild infrastructure following colonial withdrawal, and balance power between competing groups all pull the postcolonial space in multiple directions that the ruler is unable to contain.<sup>31</sup> This adds to the insecurity and violence defining daily life, aggravated further by contradictions and unpredictabilities rife within a regime of strict repression. As the colonial, then post-colonial rulers

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29. Nganang describes the dictator as the one who reigns with 'le droit suprême, et donc aussi, la liberté suprême: ainsi donc il règne sur une république de mort-vivants; sur une peuplade de zombies.' (*M* 217). Ndourou-Wembôdo's symbolic and physical reliance on the colonial ruler is one way in which he is constrained by Monénembo's novels, and, as this article argues, it follows that he does not reign over a group of zombies.

30. Eli Sorensen, *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 76.

31. Mbembe, 'Figures of the Subject', p. 351.

lose their hold on power, everything unravels. In the text, this looming decline comes via repeated narrative motifs with which the narrator signals impending deterioration in characters' respective circumstances. Throughout the novel, Samba's grandfather appears to him in dreams, hovering 'à la frontière du visible et de l'invisible', and these appearances always precede a negative shift in circumstances. These warning moments are also framed by a narrative focus on the natural world, where description of changing winds or continuous waves signals a plot twist to follow: 'L'eau a pris un goût de bile. Le vent souffle la démence. La terre ne donne plus. La pluie nous boude' (LEC 93). This is underlined by the recurring *mise-en-page* of ellipses that individually create suspenseful pauses but in their cumulative nature build an expectation of repeated calamity as the reader moves through the novel. For example when Madame Tricochet's fluctuating moods build to her fateful death: 'Madame qui ne s'intéressait plus qu'à ses cures de massage réclamées plusieurs fois, de jour comme de nuit... L'air qui s'alourdissait. La mer glauque et huileuse...' (LEC 49, 114).<sup>32</sup> In these ways, a sense of inevitable downfall is written into the text, and the reader recognises the recurring patterns through Kolloun's chronological sweep of history.

Where the novel's structure demonstrates the momentum that continues through a series of chronological crumbling, the ruler's failure to ensure stability and security lead to disasters on every level. Kolloun's disdain is clear in describing the failings of the nationalist shakeup and the chaos that follows independence: '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' (LEC 150). But the convivial nature of the postcolony means the failures of the state are felt personally by each individual. When the aforementioned Oumou is killed, pregnant while protesting, the blatant symbolism for the failure of nascent independence cannot escape our attention.

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32. See also passages on pp. 101, 112, 134 and 175 for other examples where repeated ellipses signal rapid deterioration in the protagonists' circumstances.

On sait en revanche que c'est ce policier-là et pas un autre qui fourra dans son ventre la pointe acérée d'une baïonnette et que c'est à l'endroit même où elle tomba dans la flaque de son sang et...que sera aménagée plus tard la fameuse place de l'Indépendance... (LEC 140)

Small-scale downfalls abound in imprisonments, griefs and illnesses, and politicians are not spared. Koulloun ends the novel with a disparaging list of the failed successors to Ndourou-Wembîdo, all of whom die after ineffective and short terms: 'les règnes des présidents proliféraient comme des générations de mouches' (LEC 186–87).

Such decline and ruin is also evident in the decaying space that provides the setting of each novel. Where the dictator figure is largely nowhere to be seen, the destructive results of his rule are everywhere, revealing it as a sham and failure. In his bid to unpick the performance of power in the postcolony, Mbembe keeps the limelight on the 'dramaturgy of domination'.<sup>33</sup> But one danger of being absorbed in the dictator's grotesque self-congratulation is neglecting to notice the off-stage scenes where most of life happens, making space for other lives to emerge. Monénembo's muting of that grotesque undermines the dictator's power and shifts our attention to the failings of his regime, and that extends to the physical space. The unravellings described above take place in a decaying and impoverished Djimméyabé, and the nameless urban setting of *Les Crapauds-brousse* is equally stark: 'Les hommes étaient morts...Les veaux étaient morts...L'herbe était morte...Les orangers étaient morts' (LEC 191). This being so, the limelight is moved away from any ostentation or narcissism on the part of the autocrat, heeding Bayart's call to 'do more than examine the institutional buds above ground'.<sup>34</sup> Monénembo's depictions of space stand themselves as destabilising critiques of the fictional dictators, for

33. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 45.

34. Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: Politics of the Belly* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), p. 220.

it is at the hands of Ndourou-Wembêdo, or Sâ Matrak, that the post-Independence state crumbles into a state of decay.

In the aforementioned *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine*, Nganang's discussion of dictatorship novels is followed by an outline of what he terms *le roman des détrit*, at the heart of which he places the African city. His description of the instability in 'the slum novel' maps onto the novelistic worlds of Monénembo that testify so vividly to the state's failures. Nganang writes, '[le roman] suit la ville africaine dans la surprise de ses événements: dans son incomparable incertitude; il plonge dans l'inconnu serpentant de son ciel, et se réveille au soleil plombé de ses matins toujours identiquement différents' (*M* 272). Monénembo's narrators comment at length on the detritus that surrounds them, describing Djimméyabé, for example, covered with 'des venelles et des caniveaux ou croupissaient des eaux jaunâtres peuplées de têtards, de grenouilles, de larves, de cadavres de mouches et de caméléons' (*LEC* 158). Descriptions of these cities laid to waste in turn highlight the ruler's neglect: basic needs are not met as his state apparatus crumbles and the worst affected are those in the urban slum of Leydi-Bondi.<sup>35</sup> When Koulloun the narrator perceives Ndourou-Wembêdo courting foreign investment and parading around his new 'tauxite' mines with Johnny-Limited (a white investor nodding to Touré's international influences post-Independence), the ruler's authority is further destabilized by revealing his lack of autonomy.<sup>36</sup> When the market is then shut down, the narrator condemns the direct consequences on their city: 'Djimméyabé avait terminé son cycle de détérioration et de laisser-aller pour s'engager dans une véritable phase de décomposition' (*LEC* 157). Instead of mimicking any obscene buffoonery in the ruler, the focus is on his failures. The widespread

35. There is a strict distinction between the inhabitants and fates of 'En-Haut' (the city centre) and the 'Bas-Fonds' (the surrounding slum areas where most of the novel's action takes place) (see *LEC* 125).

36. For a further discussion of the external or global forces that support and benefit from the existence of dictatorial regimes, see Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019).

presence of unemployment, crime and poverty demonstrates the failings of the postcolonial autocrat, highlighting the failure to provide on the part of the ‘father of the nation’. In *Les Écailles du ciel*, this is signalled by the long queue of jobseekers which starts at dawn and winds back from Carrefour and described from that queue by those relentlessly worn out by 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’ (*LEC* 104). The excoriating critique here points to the garbage leftover after the dictatorship has run its course.

In *Les Crapauds-brousse*, the situation is similar, and the characters cynically share their lack of faith in the regime’s competence: ‘Parmi eux, aucun gestionnaire, aucun administrateur, aucun technicien. Qu’ils regagnent leur souterrain de subalternes mal parvenus et laissent la place à ceux qui peuvent. Pour bâtir, il faut des bâtisseurs, enfin’ (*LCB* 59). The fictional city of the novel is claustrophobic and precarious, with no sense of openness or freedom coming from its coastal location, but rather a progressive sense of decay: ‘Et le riz et le sel et le sucre se raréfiaient encore plus... Et les rues se crevassaient... Et les murs se fendillaient... Et les clôtures se fissaient... Et les pas s’alourdissaient’ (*LCB* 119). It is overshadowed by the *Tombeau*, Monénembo’s fictional impression of the notorious Camp Boiro (a prison at the heart of Conakry that would see almost 50,000 tortured during Touré’s reign):<sup>37</sup>

Le *Tombeau*, c’est ce morceau de la ville ceinturé par une épaisse muraille, longeant la corniche... On pouvait y deviner la muraille continuant son tour du côté de la mer, entendre la mer traîner ses eaux épaisses et clapoteuses, les casser contre la muraille, contre les rochers environnants. (*LCB* 145)

Where Monénembo explicitly lays bare these failures, there is an implicit critique of how novelists before him have failed to move

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37. Tierno Monénembo, ‘Camp Boiro: L’Auschwitz des Guinéens’, *Le Point Afrique*, 16 February 2019, <<https://bit.ly/2XArPBR>> [last accessed 26 February 2019].



beyond a grotesque stylistics that ratifies the 'regime of unreality' upon which dictators have relied for so long. The chaos of newly-independent Guinea prevails in both of Monénembo's novels and the failure of the state is evident in each spatial description we read. Repeated small-scale downfalls and descriptions of decaying space destabilize the myths and performance of authority in the novels. Where the dictator himself is seldom seen and, as I have demonstrated, is defined by restraint much more than by the grotesque, if there is any excess in these two novels it is in his failures — his trail of destruction is everywhere.

### *Conclusion*

While the theatrical stylistics of the obscene and the grotesque merit attention, alternative aesthetics in writing on dictatorship must not be overlooked. In Monénembo's dictatorship-novels, the aesthetics of muting and restraint work to destabilize authority in several ways. Both *Les Crapauds-brousse* and *Les Écailles du ciel* rely on the almost complete absence of the fictional dictator. Forms of muting the dictator range from overt (choking to death on a fishbone) to subtle (not giving him dialogue). In distancing the figure of the autocrat from the centre of both novels' action via a number of narrative voices, the texts shift attention away from his performances, and undermine any parade of absolute power. At the same time, Monénembo signals the complex blurring of public and private which is a condition of postcolonial political rule: that dangerous intimacy where the homegrown father figure is the one who 'copule avec toute femme qui porte sur son corps la tenue du parti sur laquelle figure son visage' (*M* 205). Yet Monénembo demonstrates that intimacy does not equal reciprocity, in that sharing the same space does not necessitate sharing the same practices. Where the grotesque does infiltrate the state's mechanisms for extending and maintaining its power, it does not follow that the underdog characters have to adopt the same signs and symbols. Restraining the self-inflated performances on the state stage and maintaining a focus on that state's failures in its place, these texts work

to destabilize its authority. The structure and themes of Monénembo's dictatorship novels place attention on the repeated, inevitable failures of these fictional rulers, relegating the rulers themselves to a background beyond the grotesque.

Monénembo demonstrates the potential for moving beyond the grotesque with his literary depictions of such convivial space — not limited to claustrophobia and an endless face-off with a dictator 'en perpétuelle negation de la liberté des autres' (*M* 217), but host to increasing detritus and instability on every scale. At the same time his writing brings back to life something that's been consigned to the margins, reframing decay as the excessive failure of a dictator figure, who himself is restrained by the text.<sup>38</sup> That is to say, reading these dictatorship-novels as depictions of excessive failure that destabilize authority, rather than excessive performances of power, helps unravel the complexities of convivial postcolonial space. What is more, where such failings are laid bare in these novels, and where aesthetics of restraint erase the tyrant, there is little basis for the 'mutual zombification' Mbembe describes between ruler and ruled. When in 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', Mbembe posits inescapable patterns of imitation, he implies that there is no room in which to manoeuvre around the power practices of the staged grotesque (*PN* 8). However, Monénembo's texts demonstrate the limits *of* the grotesque far more clearly than what it limits. Rulers' myths of uniqueness and autonomy (on which their authority depends) fall down, since their violence persists in a failing imitation game of colonial autocracy. *Les Écailles du ciel* in particular holds the postcolonial autocrat up as a bad actor whose own colonial continuities lead to inevitable decline. It is the dictator himself who seems caught in a state of dizzying zombification with the former coloniser, the colonial *commandant*, and those others he courts in a bid to stabilize the unravelling chaos of his postcolony.

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38. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, p. 33.