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The Unfaithful Chronicler: On Writing about the Dictator in Henri Lopès's *Le Pleurer-rire*

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Early on in Henri Lopès's *Le Pleurer-rire* (*The Laughing Cry*, 1982) the narrator, who is unnamed, declares to the reader: "To begin with, I haven't understood a thing about our politics since independence. A swamp of crocodiles—no one who ventures there manages to stay honest" (17).[1] The statement comes as yet another coup unfolds in the narrator's country, which is also unnamed. On first reading, this insistence on political ignorance, or even apathy, serves to position our narrator as one of the large mass of people whose lives are determined by the tug-of-war of post-independence politics, although they themselves have no ideological investment in those politics. However, the critique posited in the second sentence of the quote above belies the assertion made in the first: despite his disavowal of a particular ideological commitment ("I haven't understood a thing about our politics"), our narrator proves to have a keen eye for the vicissitudes of politics and power in his recently independent country. Soon, the narrator, a *maître d'hôtel*, becomes the new ruler's butler, and the narrative of *The Laughing Cry* is presented as the report of his time in the dictator's service.

As a novel about an African dictator, Lopès's *The Laughing Cry* shares many of the observations and narrative tropes of other African dictator novels.[2] Lopès's perspective on the figure of the African dictator and on authoritarianism in post-independence Africa is similarly negative; however, the novel is equally critical of those working in opposition to the dictator. This chapter will argue that, as we see in Lopès's *The Laughing Cry*, to write about the dictator

is also to write about the writer's place in the political sphere. Lopès's novel, in turn, thematizes the difficulty of writing about the dictator by making visible the multiple perspectives and (political) interests at play: the narrator, as soon becomes clear, is not entirely reliable. In order to contextualize my argument about the dictator novel and the question of political commitment, I will begin with some reflections by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o on politically committed writing and writing about authoritarian rulers. From here, I will proceed to a reading of *The Laughing Cry* that puts the novel into dialogue with Lopès's comments on politics and literature in interviews and essays. Finally, I will show that Lopès imagines the political import of literature not as an immediate question of reference to a particular political program that the text supports, but rather as a long-term project of change whose effects remain uncertain in the present. The figure of the African dictator, therefore, is the locus around which a discourse about the making of political subjects begins to cohere.

Ngũgĩ's decision to write fiction in Gĩkũyũ stands as one of the more powerful—and notorious—statements of political commitment on the part of an African writer. The language debate, as the kernel of the definitional challenge posed by the category "African literature," rages on. I will not directly engage this debate, but gesture to it as another place in and around which conversations about the social and political role of the writer take place. For Ngũgĩ, it is the responsibility of the African writer to communicate with the people in a language that is comprehensible to them. "Language" here is both literal and figurative: the form and content must also be accessible, as Ngũgĩ makes clear in the essay, "The Language of African Fiction."[3] Here, Ngũgĩ recounts the challenges encountered in the process of writing his first Gĩkũyũ-language novel, *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ* (*Devil on the Cross*, 1980). The committed writer must not simply choose content that is familiar to his reader but also point readers to their surrounding political reality. This poses particular difficulties:

> How do you shock your readers by pointing out that these [the dictator; politicians] are mass murderers, looters, robbers, thieves, when they, the perpetrators of these anti-people crimes, are not even attempting to hide the fact? When in some cases they are actually and proudly celebrating their massacre of children, and the theft and robbery of the nation? How do you satirize their utterances and claims when their own words beat all fictional exaggerations? (80)

As Achille Mbembe illuminates so well in his theorization of the "aesthetics of vulgarity" in *On the Postcolony*, a defining characteristic of the post-independence African dictator is his embracing and foregrounding of vulgarity as a defining characteristic of his rule. This undermines the potential for critique. In the face of extreme and unmediated violence, wild bombast, shameless

exploitation, what is left for the writer to say? Within a larger framework, this question can be pushed further: What does it mean to be a committed writer in post-independence Africa? The arc of Ngũgĩ's career offers one response. Lopès and *The Laughing Cry*, I will argue, offer another.

The narrative of *The Laughing Cry* is largely retrospective, as the dictator's butler records his experiences only after going into exile. However, the novel ends with an interruption that puts the story as a whole into question: a letter from the butler's mistress, Soukali. Having read the manuscript, she accuses her lover, who she reveals is actually a doctor in a provincial town, of having spun a tall tale from the details of their quotidian lives. In a sense, Soukali's disclosure is redundant—after all, the French original opens with the standard designation *roman* (novel) on the title page—but it comes as a shock to the reader, unsettling the narrator's authority.

Soukali's intervention draws, in turn, a rebuttal from the narrator. Declaring that he has only included Soukali's "insidious and malicious" letter in the spirit of democracy, the narrator adds:

> In fact, I have borrowed nothing from reality, nor yet invented anything. Here I end the telling of a rosary of dreams and nightmares that have followed one another with the cadence of a chronicle [*à la cadence d'un feuilleton*] and from which I cannot be free [*débrasé*] until the last word is written. (258–59)

Playing with the distinction between history (reality) and fiction is a common feature of narratives about dictators. In the most immediate terms, this has to do with the dangers of writing about a present oppressive political reality. Sony Labou Tansi's opening warning in *La Vie et demie* (*Life and a Half*) is exemplary: he designates his text a fable.[4] But Lopès pushes the traffic between fiction and reality further, issuing a logical contradiction—"I have borrowed nothing from reality, nor yet invented anything"—about the novel's origins. If the text is based on nothing (neither, nor), "reality" is made relative. The narrative is then compared to both dreams and nightmares and, finally, to a *feuilleton*; it unfolds with the "cadence of a *feuilleton*." Gerald Moore's translation renders this as "chronicle." The associations of this term with historiography make it a potent choice, as it privileges the perception of the text as a continuous record of events as they occur in time. But the exposition in *The Laughing Cry* is anything but linear and, indeed, resists many of the ordering imperatives of historiography. The French term *feuilleton* points us down another interpretative path.

In the most literal sense, *feuilleton* refers to a serial or serialized narrative; it is currently used to refer to soap operas. The emphasis of the word is not so much on facticity or referentiality—as in Labou Tansi's use of the term "fable"—as on temporality and repetition. The term *feuilleton* suggests that the work of writing

about dictators extends across time and space: it has multiple and potentially infinite iterations. Iteration is also a thematic and structural concern within *The Laughing Cry*: the novel is concerned with the problem of authoritarianism as a *recurring* phenomenon—the return of the same story over and over that is the same cycle in which the narrator is caught.[5]

Accordingly, the plot of *The Laughing Cry*, properly speaking, does not end: the dictator, having survived a coup, remains in power. It is the narrator who goes into exile, not for his politics but rather to escape punishment for his affair with the dictator's wife. Composed of a series of frames and riddled with interruptions, ellipses, and abrupt breaks between segments, the novel does not allow its reader many certainties. The lack of resolution in the story points to the fact that there is another story—an argument—in the text to which we must attend. It is in the context of this conception of political authoritarianism and the place of the writer that Lopès's novel takes up the question of literary commitment and considers what it might mean to be a committed writer. Rather than simply presenting the African dictator as a deplorable figure, Lopès's novel thematizes the challenges of writing about the dictator by making visible the multiple perspectives and (political) interests at play.

The narrator of *The Laughing Cry*, the dictator's butler, is only referred to by his professional title, *Maître d'hôtel*. The dictator dubs him Maître (Master) because the full title is too long. This winking inversion of roles—the butler as the dictator's master—is of a part with the novel's humorous tone, and it serves to characterize the dictator's own lack of sensibility for the playful potential of language: he is a clumsy and unsophisticated reader and, the narrator tells us repeatedly, a poor speaker of French. The dictator, Hannibal-Ideloy Bwakamabé Na Sakkadé, is a military man who, at the beginning of the story, removes the sitting president, PoléPolé. He is known as "Tonton," a diminutive for uncle that suggestively echoes the term used for the former French colonizers in the country: *les Oncles* ("the Uncles").[6] This is one of the novel's most explicit statements about the neocolonial entanglements on which post-independence authoritarian regimes in Africa depend for their survival. Tonton is a "little Uncle," continuing a relation of domination, violence, and denial of individual rights between the people and the state. Moore playfully renders the dictator's epithet as "Daddy," which loses the connection to the colonizers but emphasizes the ways in which Tonton, in his political discourse as well as his actions, presents himself as the father of a national "family."

While the country in which the story takes place is pointedly not named, the dictator is given a fictional ethnicity, "Djabotama," as well as that of the ethnic group against which he organizes his people, Djassikini, the ethnic group of the former dictator.[7] The politics that take shape around these markers, in their in-

tersection with French, are part of the representation of the figure of the African dictator and gesture to many possible models. Despite the coy refusal to properly name its referents, the narrative of *The Laughing Cry* is filled with references to mainstream global culture of the 1970s and 1980s.[8] The literary figure "Tonton" stands for a multitude of African dictators, both historical and textual. Tonton's politics, in turn, are a curious and shifting mix of reformism and traditionalism; his mode of rule is fundamentally charismatic with his personality filling the void of ideological consistency. Political flexibility is the trademark of the client politician dedicated to fulfilling the requests of external interests, and it allows for trenchant critique; Tonton, for example, at one point pursues a policy of "Cultural Resurrection" (*Résurrection culturelle*) and later accepts aid in exchange for support from the apartheid government of South Africa.

Maître, an outsider to political power with an insider's perspective, presents a privileged view of the dynamics of the dictatorship, as he points out to the reader. This privileged perspective is the foundation on which his authority as narrator in the novel is based. But this authority is consistently challenged. Soukali's closing letter in *The Laughing Cry* is just one of many interruptions of the narrator's story. The novel is populated with multiple and potentially competing voices, from the censorial "warning" that opens the novel to the "editor" who attempts to make adjustments to the butler's account.

The Laughing Cry opens with a disclaimer ("Be Warned") addressed to the reader by the "Inter-African Association of Francophone Censors." The censor's primary criticism of the novel is that it fails to provide the reader ("the people") either with entertainment (*littérature d'évasion*) or with a positive image of Africa; the censor calls for a literature "exalting our positive moral values and our ancestral cosmology."[9] Censorial discourse demands commitment from the writer, in this case, service to the propagandistic imperatives of the authoritarian state. The role of the writer here is to provide a celebratory or aspirational image of Africa; the writer is part of the forward movement of the continent. The introduction of the imperative to produce a "useful" literature in the voice of the state operative here codes, from the beginning of the novel, exhortations to commitment as necessarily suspect. The "warning" that opens the novel conditions the reader to be suspicious of such demands, which will be made by other characters over the course of the novel.

The text in *The Laughing Cry* is divided into segments, the different purposes of which are typographically marked: the primary narrative appears in roman type, it is inter-cut with italicized passages of interior monologue whose speaker is often unidentified and occasionally shifts, as well as by editorial interjections that are offset from the margins and in smaller type. It is in the interactions between these segments that *The Laughing Cry* illuminates and explores the

competing interests at work in writing about the figure of the dictator. Opposition here is not a guarantee, and, more importantly, the novel demonstrates the way in which the insistence on a text that opposes and critiques the dictator is itself an authoritarian imperative. The committed writer is not, therefore, *a priori* a positive figure and always risks falling into the trap of propaganda, regardless of the cause.

Maître addresses his memoirs to an ex-functionary of Tonton's government, the former Cabinet Secretary [*directeur de cabinet*].[10] It is the Directeur who makes the editorial interjections in the Maître's narrative, and the conversation that emerges is about the nature and purpose of properly politically committed (and intended) writing. The Directeur, as editor, objects to Maître's interpolation of what he deems to be extraneous and distracting material, particularly about Maître's sexual activities, which are described in exhaustive and at times comic detail. The Directeur, on the other hand, hopes that Maître's account of his time with the dictator will be a document to use in the campaign against Tonton. For his part, Maître is defiantly a-political, repeatedly reminding his reader—the Directeur as well as the audience—that he wants no part in politics: the phrase "politics and I," followed by an ellipses, is a common refrain in Maître's writing. This political ambivalence allows the text to represent more fully the attitudes of interested groups: Maître is able to take an ironic distance from Tonton's announcements, particularly his paranoid declarations about "-isms" or "ists," as well as from the imperatives that the Directeur sets for his memoir as a piece of committed writing. But for all his resistance to politics, Maître is inevitably caught up in the political tide.

The first break in Maître's narrative comes relatively early on. Following a chapter break, he announces to the reader: "Feeling some lack of confidence in myself, I have consulted a compatriot, the former Cabinet Secretary [Directeur] to Daddy [Tonton]" (33). The text that follows is an inserted letter from the Directeur, distinguished by its smaller type. The letter is initially invoked as a means to shore up the narrator's authority; the Directeur begins by confirming the precision of Maître's depiction of one of Tonton's ceremonies. In this instance, the Directeur's congratulations have a mutually benefiting effect: in confirming Maître's account, the Directeur establishes his own authority to do so. However, he quickly turns to making editorial interjections and objections to the details of Maître's account. In response to Maître's criticism of some young intellectuals, the Directeur warns, "Consider that in scoffing too much at us in the name of some undigested truth [*vérité irresponsable*] you may be playing the enemy's game. If you want to be of service to the country, make haste to offer us a positive hero [*héro positif*] in your story" (34). Much like the censor, the Directeur worries about the implications that negative representations of certain characters

will have for his political plans. Once again, the responsibility of the committed writer is to provide a positive image (the positive hero) to which the reader can aspire or which may inspire the reader to action.

The Directeur's concerns about content are repeated on the level of form; he continues:

> As for the rest, I hesitate to pronounce an opinion. Whilst reading your work, I was constantly asking myself how to classify it. Sometimes you aspire to the precision of a historian or a sociologist; sometimes you resemble more the *griots* [*ces griots*] in whom some see only dream-peddlers and entertainers, and others a key to decoding the life of the village. (34)

Classification is a central problem for the committed work of literature: the unclassifiable work is also the work that cannot be properly marshaled in support of any argument as its extra-generic excess, an uncontrollable surplus, will always be open to other interpretations. At the same time, as becomes clear over the course of the disagreements between Maître and the Directeur, a work that is too easily classified risks becoming mere propaganda and therefore suspect. In this passage, the Directeur marks the instability of the narrator's discourse as much as he outlines the requirements for the properly committed work of literature. In negative terms, the committed work of literature as defined by the Directeur must be focused, generically stable, anticipate its possible interpretations (the Directeur is particularly concerned with how he is represented in the text), and, above all, offer a positive (prescriptive) model to be followed by the reader. Maître is largely unaffected by the Directeur's concerns and simply responds, "I'll continue, all the same" (34).

In subsequent comments, the Directeur becomes increasingly and particularly concerned with Maître's focus on his sexual activities; he writes, "I ask myself whether one has any right [*si l'on a le droit*] thus to confuse [*mêler*] politics and porn [*politique et porno*], without risking that one will spoil the other?" (95). Although the Directeur has admitted that the material is riveting—he begins, "I've read your last installment in one go" (94)—it is also cause for trepidation. Rather than declaring the material inappropriate outright, he wonders whether the (committed) writer has the *right* to mix genres. The language of rights necessarily opens toward the question of who has the authority to grant such rights to the writer. In the Directeur's estimation, Maître would have no right because his writing (will) must be subsumed to a larger purpose. The term "porno" here stands for pleasure or distraction; the concern is that the one (pleasure) will spoil the other (politics). And yet the text has held the Directeur's attention. Pleasure here—and, indeed, the sexual register in general—stands in for the comic and, in particular, the critical popular humor that Lopès celebrates in the novel, but

the two are not necessarily equivalent. Rather, sex and the Directeur's reaction to sexual passages are used to point to underlying problems in his conception of politically purposeful writing.

It is in these comments that the Directeur provides the fullest articulation of committed writing in *The Laughing Cry*:

> When you first broached to me your idea of writing these satirical and critical memoirs of a slice in the life of a dictator during the last part of our century, I encouraged you, and even offered my collaboration. It's a question for me, I repeat, of contributing to the struggle against that tyrant Bwakamabé. Now, by the way the manuscript is developing, as for instance in this last installment, I fear that in yielding too much to intimate memories, you are mixing up genres and losing sight of the objective [*l'objectif fondamental*] of all committed writing [*écrit engagé*]. And the African book coming from these times, and having any respect for itself, cannot choose but be committed [*ne peut être qu'engagée*]. . . . (95)

The basis of the Directeur's thinking on commitment is expressed in the closing claim—contemporary African literature cannot but be committed—a foundational assumption for the Directeur's (standing in for the "native intellectual's") worldview. In order to be literature, it must somehow be connected to a larger political project; otherwise, it is simply entertainment or, recalling the censor, a source of confusion. The link to politics shores up the Directeur's personal motivations for participating in Maître's memoirs as editor: he hopes to contribute to the fight against the dictator. But Maître's story quickly slips from the Directeur's control. Importantly, the objective of committed writing remains grammatically unclear and effectively unsaid: "the fundamental objective" [*l'objectif fondamental*] is unqualified here and elsewhere in the novel, suggesting that the Directeur's goal of "critique" remains amorphous and undefined. Recalling the questions Ngũgĩ posed at the beginning of this chapter, Lopès here satirizes official censorial discourse, as much as the Directeur's discourse on political commitment, not through exaggeration but rather by the use of juxtaposition. In placing these two discourses together, he shows how the demand for commitment too often recalls the call to propaganda on the part of the state; both are rooted in the authoritarian imperative to control meaning-making.

In *The Laughing Cry*, the differences between Maître (the writer) and the Directeur (his editor) become the space in which the novel articulates the problematic nature of the ideal of politically committed writing. Drawing a thread between the demands made by the censor and the demands made by the Directeur on the text, the novel demonstrates the ways in which any writing that aims to be committed always risks being overly determined by external interests. Within the narrative, the journalist Aziz Sonika, the editor of the state news-

paper *Le Croix du Sud*, stands as an example of the writer whose work is entirely determined by such external interests: he is the archetypal propagandist, writing first for Polépolé and then quickly shifting his allegiance to Tonton. Maître makes frequent reference to Sonika's writing as the mouthpiece of the state. Sonika draws his authority from the fact that he is in the service of power. In their glancing similarity, Maître reserves a degree of admiration for Sonika: "I've got to admit that the man is an artist endowed with a certain talent [*certaine valeur*]. No one knew better than he how to distract attention [. . .] " (61). Even in the most flagrant collusion, there is a measure of value, indeed, of art, in the manipulation of language. But Sonika is also a figure of derision—Maître refers to his "boot-licking style"—whose writing is not taken seriously (27).

In contrast to Sonika, there is the figure of Matapalé in *The Laughing Cry*, a celebrated writer arrested by Tonton's government whose disappearance becomes a major issue in the international press. Maître is unimpressed by the coverage, commenting that the unknowns jailed by Tonton are no less important: "The European papers knew of no one but Matapalé, whom they presented moreover as a writer of genius. There, they were certainly exaggerating" (43). This is followed by Maître's carefully articulated negative evaluation of Matapalé's work. Matapalé—the author of books with titles such as *Les Légendes du Lac Eworowo* (*The Legends of Lake Eworowo*) and *Les Chants du Baobab* (*Songs of the Baobab*) —stands for the kind of "native" writer lauded by the colonizers.[11] He may represent the "local" for the Europeans, but both Maître and *The Laughing Cry* more generally privilege more popular sources. The contrasting force to the individual genius such as Matapalé or the pliability of Sonika's political allegiances is the popular consciousness embodied by what Maître calls Radio Grapevine [*radio-trottoir*]—the shared knowledge and rumors carried by the people who inhabit the working-class area of the city, Moundié.

In working through the question of committed writing in *The Laughing Cry*, it is necessary to distinguish between the kinds of "committed" texts that the censor or Directeur require and the model of commitment that a writer like Ngũgĩ articulates. We should recall that both the censor and Directeur desire clarity, which is not the same as producing a text that is accessible to the broader public with which Ngũgĩ hopes to engage. A case in point: in "The Language of African Fiction," Ngũgĩ describes his turn to oral and vernacular narrative forms for inspiration and guidance in the writing of *Devil on the Cross*. Ngũgĩ's privileging of what he conceives of as a popular critical consciousness—embodied in the vernacular tradition—has echoes in Lopès's own thinking on the question of commitment. However, we should look more closely at how Lopès himself outlines the problem. If *The Laughing Cry* stages the multiple interests

that weigh on a narrative that aims to talk about politics, what is the conception of literary commitment that his novel articulates?

In a 1982 interview with Denis de Saivre, Lopès directly addressed the relationship between the fictional world of *The Laughing Cry* and possible historical referents:

> [I]f by chance it happens that an historian, many years after I am gone, becomes interested in this work [*The Laughing Cry*], he may be able to establish a comparison between real key persons and this one that I call "Tonton." But he would soon find that I have been an unfaithful chronicler [*un chroniqueur infidèle*], that I have pushed the traits of this one here, that I have moderated those of that one there, that I have attributed the characteristics of one single man to many, in brief, that I have transformed reality. (De Saivre 121)[12]

Lopès's is "unfaithful" because his work is not in fact a history—this is where *feuilleton* rather than "chronicle" (*chronique*) becomes a useful concept in our analysis. Lopès draws a clear line between the work of historical accounting in the chronicle and the play of the novelist who creates "types" (*personnages typiques*), which recall for the reader the world in which they live. The "unfaithful chronicler" is the author of the *feuilleton*. The novel, Lopès continues, is not a report; it is a narrative. Commitment here is to a mode of representation—the play with types, critical humor—rather than to generic or topical unison or an overarching political teleology.

In an essay written a few years after the publication of *The Laughing Cry*, "My Novels, My Characters, and Myself" (1993), Lopès addresses the inspiration for his work. The essay, which begins with a comment on the frequency with which Lopès himself is compared to or confused with his narrators, is a reflection on the writer's role in society that draws on Lopès's own connection to politics.[13] Writing, in this essay, is not merely a matter of storytelling but also of invention; once again, Lopès's "chronicler" is unfaithful. According to Lopès, African literature in the post-independence period has been closely linked to politics; Lopès characterizes this as a "confusion" of the political struggle with artistic creation. "Confusion" here is also conflation, with one term ("aesthetics") being taken as co-terminal with the other ("politics"). This takes place in the postcolonial moment of national consolidation. Literature becomes—following Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ, and a whole generation of thinkers—a key part of consolidating and validating national culture. In this framework, such validation is in a feedback loop with the consolidation of the state, both within national borders and on the global stage.[14] But this fundamentally limits the writer because it determines the content and shape of his work rather than allowing him the space for invention.

The writer, in Lopès's estimation, needs to be slightly outside of this circuit of cultural and national foundation; fundamentally "unfaithful" and inventive,

he is in fact an occasional agent of productive disorder. Lopès here provides his own definition of the function of the writer in society: "As African writers, we have the duty to help the Africas [sic] of the *Le Pleurer-rire* period make the transition between the paranoia of the 1960s and the critical humor that begets democracies" (85). In *The Laughing Cry*, the model of literary commitment desired by the Directeur is that of the "faithful chronicler" invested in furthering particular political goals. Maître, in his a-political attitude, is outside of the terms of this model of commitment; put another way, in his writerly politics as much as in his sexual practice, our narrator is fundamentally unfaithful. For Lopès, the committed writer is one dedicated not so much to a particular cause or politics—this would be the kind of *a priori* external determination of the text attributed to the censor and the Directeur in *The Laughing Cry*—as to literary invention as an end in itself. The text should refer to its surrounding reality, as in the use of "types" (*personnages typiques*), but not be determined by that reality. This, in turn, engenders in the reader a particular kind of critical humor and attitude toward authority and authoritarian acts more generally. As a model, Lopès's conception here is fundamentally oriented toward the future.

Within *The Laughing Cry*, Maître's shift from resisting the Directeur's editorial remarks to rejecting his intervention marks a key turning point. Instead of including another letter from the Directeur, Maître takes it upon himself to interrupt the narrative:

> I will spare my readers the long pages of rhetoric in which my young compatriot ex-Cabinet Secretary [*mon jeune compatriote ancien directeur de cabinet*], in the name of revolutionary modesty, takes issue with exotico-pornographic writing. Some will certainly miss these pieces of eloquence, in which the pen of a gifted polemicist demolishes with implacable dialectic the depraved tendencies of a decadent bourgeoisie, which insists on contaminating a virginal Africa by the systematic export of its dissolute values. But I couldn't publish them without adding my own reflection upon these edifying lessons in morality. To his venerable and learned ethic and to my own banalities and platitudes, each in turn ridiculous in their conviction of revealing new truths, I have preferred the forgotten voice of the good Diderot. (209)

In the inserted quote from *Jacques le fataliste et son Maître* (*Jacques the Fatalist and his Master*) which follows this introduction, the narrator upbraids notions of propriety in regards to sex and, in particular, to writing about sexual matters; it is clearly pointed at the Directeur.

Diderot's novel is an important intertext for *The Laughing Cry*: particularly in its articulation of the relationship between servant and master, it serves as a palimpsest for Lopès's novel. In this scene, the choice of passage marks a clear distinction between the Maître and the Directeur and constitutes the break

between them. The turn to Diderot marks the end of Maître's dependence on the Directeur to buttress his authority, and the act of substitution itself points to the authorizing function that the Directeur served all along. Here Maître himself assumes the editorial function, pushing the Directeur out of the narrative. But this turn also marks the moment in which Maître is pushed into exile in the story, bringing about a fundamental narrative shift: the text begins to lose its segmented structure as the italicized reminiscences become increasingly melancholy and the order of the structure begins to unravel.

While the discussion to this point has depended on the distinctions drawn by the separations between sections, as *The Laughing Cry* progresses, the apparent order instituted by the segmentation of the text comes apart. If initially the novel set up a series of opposing pairs, the most central of which is Maître (writer) and the Directeur (editor), by the point at which Diderot is invoked, these symmetries no longer hold. The breaks and interruptions between sections are no longer absolute, and voices, themes, and issues begin to overflow their boundaries. From this later perspective, it is clear that the initial segmentation of the narration in Lopès's novel expresses the wish for an order that cannot be maintained; but this is only perhaps the case from an editor's perspective. Our narrator, as has been made clear, is fundamentally unfaithful. Our author, too, has identified himself as an unfaithful chronicler. It is in the break with the Directeur/editor and the rupture of the order which had previously disciplined the narrative that *The Laughing Cry* leaps toward critical humor and, most importantly, toward invention.

At the beginning of this chapter, Soukali's interruption at the close of *The Laughing Cry* was presented as an act that radically undermined the status of the narrative in the novel by exposing it as a fiction. It functioned as a way, to recall Ngũgĩ's comments on writing about authoritarian rulers, to shock and unsettle the reader. But the break that Soukali's letter represents also has rich potential for our interpretation of Lopès's perspective on the question of what it means to be a committed writer. In the context of this argument, Soukali's letter becomes the key moment in the novel precisely because it celebrates literature not just as storytelling but also as *invention*. What seems to be a rebuttal to the narrative in fact proves to be the antidote to the censorial warning that opens *The Laughing Cry*. Soukali's description of what the narrator has done echoes Lopès's comments on the "types" (*personnages typiques*) above:

> Despite a few transpositions, your friends will have no difficulty in recognizing every one of the actors under their masks [*sous leurs grimaces*]. Daddy [Tonton] is obviously the celebrated prefect of a certain province, which was inhabited for three years by a young heart specialist, then fresh from university in Europe, to whom I now entrust the care of my health. I easily recognize him, even if he defends himself by taking the precaution (while remaining grossly obvious) of shuffling the cards, borrowing a trait here and there from one of his relatives, not the *maître d'hôtel* at the *Relais Aériens*, but bouncer at a fashionable nightclub. (257)

Soukali reveals to the reader that what we thought was testimony is in fact fiction. The types described are recognizable, but much has been changed: the small stories of provincial drama are recast as the grand narrative of the *roman du dictateur* (dictator novel). Soukali confirms for the reader that the narrator of *The Laughing Cry* has in fact transformed reality, just as Lopès has done in writing the novel. The reality transformed within the world of *The Laughing Cry* and in Lopès's writing of the novel are very different, but the fundamental dynamic of invention and transformation through writing begins the same way. In this sense, Soukali reveals to the reader the extent to which the novel stages its production for the reader.

Soukali then goes on to give an evaluation of the narrative as an aesthetic object; she points out the parts she thinks are excessive and admits that she does not think it is particularly strong as a work of art. Nevertheless, and perhaps despite the identifiability of its source material, she treats the narrative as art:

> But the magic and teaching power of art [*puissance pédagogique*], isn't it less to resemble reality than to lend to reality the colors of the painter's heart? If that is your aim, your bleeding vision [*rêve débridé*] is certainly more acceptable than the prissy and edifying images demanded by the young compatriot Cabinet Secretary. (258)

"To lend to reality the colors of the painter's heart" is the transformative function of art. In the voice of Soukali, Lopès offers the most cogent definition of another model of literary commitment, beyond those demanded by the Directeur or by the Censor. In this model, the author's commitment emerges in the nature of the aesthetic object itself ("the colors of the painter's heart") rather than in the political purposes to which it can be put. The "magic"—or, more programmatically, the instructive potential—of art lies in its difference from reality, that is, in its excess. If the narrative in *The Laughing Cry* represents the resistance of the writer to a variety of political imperatives, Soukali's letter effectively frees Maître's story, allowing it to be the author's invention. The capacity for invention, in turn, represents the writer's greatest potential for resistance to the monologic utterances of the state.

Although *The Laughing Cry* stages the work of writing about the dictator, it is anchored by its representation of real political dynamics—both in the dictator's government as well as between those who might possibly form an opposition. The literary text isolates and illuminates these dynamics for the reader; it does not propose a solution but rather gives the reader the means with which to recognize these dynamics as they operate in the real world. This is the primary

intent of Lopès's novel: to provide a critical lens—what Lopès in the essay "My Novels, My Characters, Myself" calls, "the critical humor that begets democracies" (85)—through which to view the dictator. It is also what Lopès conceives of as the social and political role of the writer. Writing that is too ascetic in its commitment to externally determined political goals ceases to be writing of interest; it risks, as always, being reduced to the propaganda to which it so often responds. "Commitment" here is not programmatic so much as revelatory, and its politics is experiential.

There remains, in our discussion of Lopès's conception of commitment, the question of time. While the model of commitment put forward by the Directeur in *The Laughing Cry* is rooted in the political present, Lopès's conception of the potential of literature is fundamentally oriented toward the future. In the interview with De Saivre, he states, "The political project of this book is not to bring down [*faire tomber*] this or that regime. This is not what interests me and I don't think that a novel can do that [. . .]" (83). Instead, the potential of literature lies in the ways in which it can transform the reader's perspective, with the potential for change being displaced toward the future.[15] Lopès's "long term" perspective on literary commitment complicates the incorporation of the writer into any political program—such as the Directeur tries to do in the novel—by pointing to the incommensurability between the teleology of political programs in relation to real social change.

A final consideration: in 2006, Lopès took over the editorship of the journal *African Geopolitics*. In the editor's note that opens his first issue, he writes:

> Africa has undoubtedly had her fair share of visionaries (Nkrumah, Sekou Touré, Lumumba, Ben Bella, Frantz Fanon, even Chiekh Anta Diop) but perhaps their dreams were too much inspired by intuition, too closely linked to ancient principles and based on a gamble. In their day, such inspiration had the power to stir and sway the crowds. But the orator's day has passed. The crowds they used to harangue and which chanted simple beliefs at their behest have matured, aged, and are no longer willing to accept flights of lyricism as common currency. Today's African man and woman in the street want to form their judgment on the basis of actual evidence. (7–8)

The day of the orator as the authoritative speaker—and of oration as the rhetorical or argumentative mode of the authoritarian ruler—has passed. In his place is a mass of critical subjects no longer amenable to being swayed by visionary discourse. This is a hefty declaration and no doubt more of a hopeful expression than measurable fact. But, three decades after *The Laughing Cry*, we can read in this declaration the desire to assert that the vision of literary commitment articulated therein has indeed borne fruit. We can read in Lopès the fervent wish for the perceived or desired political relevance of literature to be substantiated in

real social change, specifically, to break out of the cycle of repetition—*la cadence d'un feuilleton*—and, finally, to achieve the potential of freedom. Here we have, then, a realization of the democratic potential represented in the critical humor through which Lopès hoped to instruct his reader.

However, the novel *The Laughing Cry* and the editor's note to *African Geopolitics* are two disjointed statements that cannot be read on the same discursive plane. As Soukali makes clear at the close of *The Laughing Cry*, the novel (the aesthetic object) colors reality with another brush. While in the 1982 interview with Denise de Saivre (quoted above) Lopès presents literature as representing a popular reality (*realité populaire*) different from the official story, thereby opening up its readers to new modes of thinking, in this same interview he raises the possibility of the *chroniqueur infidèle*, which, Soukali's intervention shows us, is not limited to the writer's relation to official accounts but, rather, to the writer's relation to reality as a whole. This infidelity to, or in, the moment has the effect of opening up possible futures. What is important, therefore, is not what the text represents—its historical referents, its facticity—but *how* and with what effects. Commitment, such as it is conceived by Lopès, lies not in the political argument in which the writer immediately hopes to intervene but in the futures that the text aims to make possible.

Notes

1. English quotations are from Gerald Moore's translation, *The Laughing Cry: An African Cock and Bull Story* (1987). The subtitle of the translation serves a similar function to the *roman* on the title page of the French edition; however, "cock and bull" here carries further implications, designating the novel as a whole as a "tall tale."
2. Specifically, I have in mind Sony Lab'ou Tansi's *La Vie et demie* (1979), Ousmane Sembène's *Le Dernier de l'Empire* (1981), Henri Lopès's *Le Pleurer-rire* (1982), Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), and Aminata Sow Fall's *L'Ex-père de la nation* (1987), all of which are roughly contemporary to *The Laughing Cry*; as well as Ahmadou Kourouma's *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2004–2007).
3. "The Language of African Fiction" appears in the seminal collection *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). The first essay in the collection, "The Language of African Literature," outlines Ngũgĩ's philosophical position while subsequent essays explore its implications; "The Language of African Literature" and the "Language of African Fiction" should be read as a complementary pair.
4. "*Life and a Half* becomes this *fable* that sees tomorrow through today's eyes" (3).
5. This is emphasized at the conclusion of the narrative, prior to Soukali's letter, as Maître observes: "It is a story told only in scrupulously closed venues, or on certain evenings of a wake where those gathered in mourning are quite homogenous. It's like those songs of which no one knows the composer, but which everyone learns without a false note, from generation to generation, from century to century. Soundiata Keïta, Almamy Touré, Chaka, Bouéta Bongo, Mabiala Maganga, Roland at Roncevalles, the Emir Abd-el-Kader . . . and others, many others" (256).

6. Tonton's full title is "President of the Republic, Head of State, President of the Patriotic Council of National Resurrection, President of the Council of Ministers, President of the Supreme Council of the Magistrature, Minister of many departments, intellectual author of the policy of national cultural resurrection" (191).
7. For further information on the connotations of these fictional names, see T. Zezeze Kalonji's "Eléments pour une analyse plurielle du *Pleurer-Rire* de Henri Lopès."
8. The narrator references everything from the Brazilian football player Pelé to Abba's "Fernando." References are also made to Latin American revolutionary politics and Ché Guevarra in particular; toward the end of the story, the narrator reports the rumor that a certain "Tché" or "Chez" has infiltrated the politics of the country and is organizing the opposition to Tonton.
9. These pages are unnumbered in Moore's translation.
10. *Directeur de Cabinet* is generally translated as "Chief of Staff;" although Moore chooses the term "Cabinet Secretary." I maintain the French *directeur* for consistency with the use of "Maître."
11. Maître declares: "They [Matapalé's works] offer nothing of the marvelous or the fantastic, no real fire, and what magic there is, is displayed with great clumsiness. The *Grand Prix* of the French Union which we won proves nothing, if not that in those days other blacks wrote no better and that the Uncles stood astounded, as at a marvel, before even twenty pages written by a negro" (43).
12. Translation mine, with thanks to Katharina Piechocki for help with revisions.
13. Lopès has had a long and distinguished career in politics, holding several ministerial posts under a series of presidents and was Prime Minister from 1972 to 1975. His involvement with politics has drawn criticism; most notably, from David N'Zitoukoulou in a critical review of *Le Pleurer-rire*. In the 1980s, Lopès's relationship with politics and politicians began to shift; in 1981, Lopès left his post in government and went to work for UNESCO; later, he served as the Congolese ambassador to France. For a more complete biography of Lopès, refer to Apollinaire Singou-Basseha's "Chronologie de la vie et de l' ouvre de Henri Lopès" in *Henri Lopès: Une écriture d'enracinement et d'universalité*.
14. Lopès writes: "[M]any of our authors have become accustomed to confusing the political struggle with artistic creation. Thus, they set out to defend and to illustrate our cultural identities, but they foundered on a sort of nationalism which, when we encounter it in other people, seems anti-humanistic. In actual fact, true literary creators are never chauvinists or lackeys" (84).
15. Lopès states, "The greatest [*le plus grand*] political effect [*action politique*] that a writer can hope to have on his reader is, let's say, that he [*the reader*] is if not transformed at the end of the work, at least that he does not have the same [self-assurance] [or certainty] [as he did before] when he finds himself in the face of certain situations" (83).

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