

Marvelous Autocrats

Disrupted Realisms in the Dictator Novel of the South Atlantic

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In the opening scene of Sony Labou Tansi's *La vie et demie* (*Life and a Half*, 1979) the dictator of the fictional country of Katamalanasia slits the throat of, disembowels, and cannibalizes the opposition leader, Martial. But Martial refuses to die. His voice emanates from his remains until the Providential Guide, as the dictator is called, tears them apart. Martial then haunts the Providential Guide; when he takes Martial's daughter as a mistress, Martial prevents him from consummating the affair. Yet, as the novel progresses, Martial himself becomes overbearing and violent, attempting to dictate the actions of his daughter and granddaughter, even raping the former. His descendants, too, engage in acts of extreme violence. Figuratively, Martial's ghost represents the afterlives of dictatorial oppression and the reproduction of destructive hierarchies of power in opposition to dictatorship. As a concrete presence in the text, however, his specter pushes the novel into the realm of the supernatural or fantastic, suggesting the limits of realism as a narrative mode for the depiction and critique of dictatorship.

This essay takes as its subject this and other such departures from the conventions of realism in the dictator novel, a genre that spans the South Atlantic and, in a wider frame, the Global South. At stake are questions of

classification as well as method; specifically, of how to read comparatively across Latin American and African literatures without subordinating one to the other. Taking into account the practical need for at least provisional categories for the work of literary criticism, I offer the methodological model of a constellated comparison of novels about dictators in the South Atlantic. “Constellation” here serves as a figure both for the relationship of individual texts or textual features to each other (a loose configuration or grouping) and for a mode of comparison that proceeds by juxtaposition and collage rather than more rigid hierarchical systematization. It is particularly apt for this case because, drawing on its function as both noun and transitive verb, a constellation simultaneously exists in and of itself and only exists in so far as its individual components can be drawn together into some configuration. Constellation as a figure, therefore, allows me to approach and grapple with the difficult relationship between critique and narrative form.

Dictator novels rely on reference to an empirical reality that lies beyond the text. This is the history of dictatorial regimes (and individual dictators) from which details are drawn and against which these novels are targeted.¹ Yet, if realism is the narrative mode most intimately concerned with the representation of a recognizable empirical reality and the production of what Ian Watt called “an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals” (2001, 27); and if, following from this, the capacity for exposition or disclosure is what grants realism its critical heft, raising consciousness and thereby fostering political action (Sartre 1988, 65–66); then, how should we read deviations from the precepts of realism such as those in Labou Tansi’s *Life and a Half*? Or, for that matter, those in Gabriel García Márquez’s *El otoño del patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch*, 1975), Augusto Roa Bastos’s *Yo el Supremo* (*I the Supreme*, 1974), Ahmadou Kourouma’s *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (*Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals*, 1998), or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*, 2006)?

Despite the close association of realism with the culture and writing of resistance—as per, for instance, Jean-Paul Sartre’s theorization of *littérature engagée*—recourse to the fantastic or departures from a recognizable empirical reality governed by familiar physical laws are a recurrent feature in novels about dictators and dictatorship in the South Atlantic.² These departures serve a critical function. In *Autumn of the Patriarch*, for example, the dictator is forced to sell the Caribbean to the United States; the sea is packed up and moved to Arizona. This is an expression of the dictator’s subservience to the foreign powers that sustain his regime. In *I the Supreme*,

the dictator sends his men to “capture” a meteor that has fallen from the sky. The meteor resists but is subdued, and the dictator keeps it chained to his chair as a memento of his power (1986, 98–99). In *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals*, the dictator is also in possession of a magic meteor, identified as the fetish that assures his hold on power. The novel’s dismantling of this fetish object parallels its critique of authoritarian power.³ Finally, in *Wizard of the Crow*, facing difficulty in securing funds abroad and mockery at home, the dictator swells with rage, becomes buoyant, and must be tethered so as not to float away. This comically physical manifestation of the dictator’s vanity also points to his dependence on foreign support and foreign capital.

The literary critical shorthand for the combination of the demystifying and critical functions of realism with the fantastic, the supernatural, or the nonmimetic is “magical realism.” The term is most strongly associated with Latin American literature and the novels of its international “boom” in the 1960s, although it has circulated widely since then. In its broadest sense, “magical realism” refers to the coexistence of the natural and unnatural (or, ordinary and extraordinary) and its defamiliarizing effects (Siskind 2014, 62; Zamora and Faris 1995, 5–6; Warnes 2009, 16). It combines and therefore confounds the hierarchies between the real and the fantastic, positing equivalence between the two domains (Quayson 2006, 728). Like realism, magical realism is an example of what Jameson calls a “hybrid concept” in which an epistemological—or even ontological and often ideologically inflected—claim is presented as an aesthetic ideal (2013, 5–6). It is also, as the wide-ranging body of critical literature suggests, a diffuse and slippery term that oscillates between the status of genre and mode.

The designation of these dictator novels as “magical realism,” however, would fail to grasp the specific nature of their departures from realism; nor would it account for the implications of this departure within each individual text. Instead, I argue that the deviations from realism in these novels point to a constitutive problem of the dictator novel; that is: to the difficulty of representing the dictator, as a *literary* figure, as well as to the complicated relationship between literature and history encapsulated by this figure. To grasp this is both to better understand the nature of the dictator novel as a genre and to perceive the limits of literary category as such.

In lieu of rigid classification, and following interventions in genre theory by Jacques Derrida and Wai Chee Dimock, I offer here the more flexible critical category of the “constellation.” This is a collection of textual practices associated with the representation of the dictator in the dictator novel of the South Atlantic. It is a purposefully open-ended system to

which features may be added or subtracted. I call this constellation “disrupted realisms,” and it is within these larger constellations of association that the critical force of the dictator novel becomes clear. My argument unfolds in three parts; first, I outline definitions of my key terms; second, I summarize the history of magical realism and its relationship to Latin American and African literatures; finally, I return to the constellation of disrupted realisms in the dictator novel, laying out the principal coordinates of this assemblage.

The Dictator Novel in the South Atlantic

Already in *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961) Frantz Fanon warned against the danger of newly independent nations in Africa descending into dictatorship, invoking the “shortsighted fascism that has triumphed for half a century in Latin America” as a cautionary example (2004, 117). Fanon’s warning proved prescient. Dictatorships flourished on both sides of the Atlantic during the Cold War, in which Latin America and Africa were interrelated “theaters.”⁴ The political phenomenon of dictatorship occasioned a literary response: works of resistance and denunciation that aimed to uncover and dislodge the practices of authority on which dictators relied. In brief, the dictator novel is a tool for critique of the dictator.⁵ It is distinguished from the larger category of novels about dictatorship by its inclusion of the dictator as a character in the text, up to and including focalization from the dictator’s perspective. In its occupation of the dictator’s perspective, the dictator novel becomes an analytic endeavor. It is concerned less with the enumeration of the dictator’s crimes, although this is a component, than with the critical dissection of the dictator himself (Rama 1976, 10).

Fanon’s observations open a comparative itinerary for reading the dictator novel across the South Atlantic. More generally, the history of Cold War dictatorships offers possibilities for comparison across the Global South. A constitutive feature of novels about dictators in the Global South is their attention to the role of foreign powers in instituting and maintaining dictatorships before, during, and after the Cold War. Yet the iconic figure of the so-called Third World dictator—captured in films such as *Bananas* (1971), *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), and *The Dictator* (2012)—is most deeply rooted in the history of dictatorship in Latin America and Africa. While several of the observations I make here may be generalized to the Global South, the specificity of my engagement with the South Atlantic has to do, first, with the particularities of Latin American and

African political and literary history, and, second, with the difficulties of comparison as they pertain to the constitution of the South Atlantic as a framework for thinking about literature.

The term “South Atlantic” presents conceptual challenges, as outlined in the introduction to this volume. It is at once a geographic designation (referring, first, to the ocean and, more broadly, encompassing the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa), a historical formation (as Luiz Felipe de Alencastro describes in his contribution to this volume), and a conceptual category. To use the term “South Atlantic” is to recall the frameworks of Atlantic studies and the Black Atlantic, which extend over much of the same geographical and historical space. These take as their starting point material relations of circulation and exchange. The South Atlantic shares this history—here the dominant imperial powers were Spain and Portugal—although it has received comparatively little attention. However, the material and conceptual connections (historical analogy; political, cultural, and critical exchange; and shared reading practices) between Latin America and Africa make it a vital space for comparative analysis in the present.

The South Atlantic, further, shares with the term “Global South” a tension between apparent locational clarity and acknowledgement of ideological and political inflections in its definition. In both, the term “South” carries implications of delayed modernization and underdevelopment. Even as its resuscitation in the phrase “Global South” emphasizes South-South cooperation, these connotations remain (Dirlik 2007, 12–15). For literary and cultural critics, what defines the Global South is the recognition of the failures of globalization as a master narrative (López 2007, 3). It is, in this sense, best understood as a political consciousness, and therefore a successor to the Third World as an ideology and project (Mahler 2015, 95–96; Prashad 2012). The same is true of the South Atlantic, in the sense put forward in this volume. As signaled by Fanon and sustained in the present, there is increasing recognition of analogous historical trajectories as well as of continuing material and ideological interconnections, particularly when it comes to issues such as dictatorship, economic marginalization, human rights and postconflict resolution, and the mechanics of international debt. The South Atlantic is an essentially comparative space, and one in which the practice of comparison itself can be submitted to analysis.

Comparison, as method and praxis, has recently been the subject of critical debate for its imbrication with colonialism or Eurocentrism, as well as its tendency to institute hierarchies amongst objects compared.⁶ Against hierarchy, models of comparison as relation, equivalence, or juxtaposition have emerged. Because of its historical interconnections, the South Atlan-

tic is an ideal space for what Shu-mei Shih terms “comparison as relation,” which approaches texts as part of a network connected by historical intersections or isomorphism (2013, 96). This requires a broader and more properly global conception of history and textual production, one that links the histories of dictatorship and its literary representation in Latin America and Africa. As my intent is to redirect critical attention to the narrative strategies undertaken in the texts themselves, I find Susan Stanford Friedman’s notion of “collage” as a juxtapositional comparative methodology particularly useful. Collage here serves as an analogue for “constellation,” in its function as a transitive verb; both are compositions. As Friedman explains, collage “maintains the particularity of each [text], refuses hierarchy and instrumentalism, and fosters identification of new generalities based on what texts share” (2011, 759). Rather than assimilate texts to each other (using one to measure the other) via insistence on homology, it reads texts together in their incommensurability, using this to generate new theoretical frameworks.⁷ It is from here that my own analysis of the dictator novel in the South Atlantic begins.

*The Dictator as Literary Subject
and the Problem of Magical Realism*

On both sides of the Atlantic, the dictator seems to defy literary representation. To paraphrase Carlos Fuentes, how can the (fiction) writer compete with history? (1993, 92). Along similar lines, Ngũgĩ asks: “How does a novelist capture and hold the interest of the reader when the reality confronting the reader is stranger and more captivating than fiction?” (1986, 78). Another version of this problem is what Achille Mbembe has called the “aesthetics of vulgarity.” In *On the Postcolony* (2001), Mbembe describes the ways in which authoritarian rulers make use of the obscene or grotesque as part of the aesthetics and practice of power (2001, 103, 133). To simply point to the dictator’s vulgarity or excesses does not suffice as critique; in fact, it misses the ways in which the dictator’s subjects, too, find purchase and participate in this system of signs and symbols.

In the larger framework of the dictator novel in Latin America and Africa, there are many works that remain rooted in realism as the vehicle for critique. However, the term “realism” refers less to the narrative mode itself than to the mandate to represent the underlying “truth” of a situation. See, for instance, Josaphat Kubayanda’s call for a “new realism” in the introduction to a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* on dictatorship and literature (1990). Yet, following Ngũgĩ, it is not enough to list the

dictator's crimes: the task of the writer is to render these in a new light. Here, the use of nonmimetic narrative techniques has less to do with descriptive capacity than with critical potential. It is most often in the ostensibly unrealistic, dreamlike, and outright fantastic moments that these narratives gain meaningful traction. See, for instance, the use of stream-of-consciousness narration and the shifts in narrative perspective to show the many dimensions of life under dictatorship in Miguel Ángel Asturias's *El señor presidente* (*The President*, 1946). The way forward, then, lies through the imaginative and critical capacities of form.

Disorientation and defamiliarization are key strategies for grappling with the dictator as a literary subject. Writing to Mario Vargas Llosa about *Autumn of the Patriarch*, García Márquez declared: "I want to see up to what point it is possible to convert into a poetic narrative the infinite cruelty, the delirious arbitrariness and the immense solitude of that exemplary barbarian of Latin American mythology" (March 20, 1967; my translation). This act of conversion is expressed in the novel's formal complexity. It includes sudden shifts between the dictator's perspective and that of a collective "we," which stands for the dictator's subjects; sudden alternations in narrative time, as the dictator's reign stretches over more than a century; and the use of long, grammatically unwieldy sentences with very few paragraph breaks. The novel, in short, refuses to systematize (simplify) its historical or even political narrative. The resulting disorientation and defamiliarization are part of its "magical" effect.

I the Supreme, meanwhile, is a radically postmodernist text. It mixes real and fictional archival materials, many filled with marginalia of unknown provenance, with the notes of a fictional and mysterious "Compiler," who functions as a stand-in for both the writer and reader. It is not simply that the identity of the narrator or the terms that structure the narrative are purposefully unclear, this novel puts into question the very validity or efficacy of writing as a recording technology. While not "magical" in the same way as García Márquez's novel (indeed, Roa Bastos often seems to be ironizing the tropes of magical realism), it shares with its contemporary the desire to push the limits of narrative form.

Writers also make recourse to alternate cultural sources as means for broaching the dictator. As Ngũgĩ explains, his solution to the representative impasse outlined above was to turn to the Gikuyu oral tradition familiar to his intended audience. He chose the figure of the ogre (*marimū*)—man-eating creatures that live off the labor of others—as a central metaphor (1986, 81). The ogre plays a key role in *Wizard of the Crow*, as well as Ngũgĩ's first Gikuyu-language novel, *Caitani Mũtharaba-*

Inĩ (*Devil on the Cross*, 1980).⁸ In “The Language of African Fiction,” Ngũgĩ describes this as a central development of his “fiction language”; that is: “fiction itself taken as a form of language, with which to effectively communicate with one’s targeted audience” (1986, 75).⁹ For Ngũgĩ, language choice, form, and content are the three key aspects of a socially relevant critical text (1986, 78).

In the case of *Wizard of the Crow*, the object of critique is not just the dictator, but the long economic, political, cultural, and psychological afterlives of colonization. It is against these forces that Ngũgĩ marshals Gikuyu language and culture. Ngũgĩ’s “fiction language,” then, draws on the aesthetic principles associated with orality in order to rethink (or “convert”) the formal parameters of the novel. The resulting defamiliarization produced by these juxtapositions, along with the incorporation of “unnatural” events, are part of what makes *Wizard of the Crow* “magical.” But the quick application of the label “magical realism” to this dictator novel and those like it is debatable.

Following an observation made by Lydie Moudileno in a discussion of Labou Tansi’s *Life and a Half*, magical realism tends to function as “a privileged modality for the expression of syncretism, paradox, and other such dualities that characterize contemporary postcolonial societies” (2006, 31). Since its international dissemination with the Latin American literary “boom” of the 1960s, there has been a tendency toward expansive use of the term. Gayatri Spivak, for example, noted its rise to prominence in the criticism of the 1980s, citing a reference to García Márquez as a “paradigmatic case of Third World literary production” (1993, 63). At about the same time, Homi Bhabha declared in the introduction to *Nation and Narration* that magical realism had become, “the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world” (1990, 7).¹⁰ But, as Moudileno argues, such declarations (effectively comparisons) have been a problem for African literature, which tends to be read into the dominant paradigms of non-Western literature rather than on its own terms. In this case, it is magical realism, as identified with a particular moment in the history of the Latin American novel and specifically García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967), which, to paraphrase Mariano Siskind, has functioned as the archetypal text of magical realism in its global circulations (2014, 85–95).

The concept of (or, group of ideas associated with) magical realism has a long and piecemeal history.¹¹ The Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier first theorized the core principles of what he called the Latin American *real*

maravilloso (marvelous real) in the prologue to his novel about the Haitian revolution, *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*, 1949). For Carpentier, the European encounter with the Americas, its natural phenomena, and its people is the constitutive moment of the marvelous real, and it is sustained in the present by the cultural syncretism that has defined the region. Carpentier's formulation was not entirely new. Two decades earlier, the German art critic Franz Roh used the phrase "magic realism" in describing post-expressionist painting, also called New Objectivism.¹² And the marvelous real was not the only precursor for the magical realism of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Literary historians have long emphasized the influence of modernist writers—James Joyce and William Faulkner, for example—on the development of the literary aesthetic that would become Latin American magical realism (Martin 1989, 127).

These contending genealogies put pressure on the locational specificity that undergirds Carpentier's notion of the marvelous real. They also make visible the origins of magical realism in the tension between a Latin American investment in cultural autochthony (oriented toward the past, primitivism, and the anthropological turn) and engagement with international modernist or avant-garde movements (oriented toward the future, modernity, and technological development) in the early twentieth century (Rosenberg 2006). Tensions existed not just between Latin America and Europe, but also within Latin American societies. As Alberto Moreiras points out, in Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s there was in the intellectual public sphere a confrontation between "the centripetal forces of regionalism/nationalism and the centrifugal forces of the artistic avant-garde" (2001, 184).

There is a fourth term in the series: *réalisme merveilleux* (marvelous realism). Formulated by the Haitian writer Jacques Stéphen Alexis, marvelous realism helps to bridge questions of ontology (the nature of Latin American reality) and narrative form (its literary expression). Alexis was in explicit dialogue with Carpentier as well as the Haitian *indigéniste* movement, which arose in response to the American occupation of Haiti (1915–34). Like Carpentier, Alexis gestures to European arrival in the Americas as a starting point (1956, 252). But, unlike Carpentier, who speaks of indigenous and African cultures only as resources or archives, Alexis emphasizes their continued evolution and ongoing influence (1956, 250–251; Dash 1998, 95).

Moreover, Alexis frames his discussion in clearly political terms. At stake here, once again, is the content of the term "realism" as it pertains to audience and the question of politically committed literature:

[R]ealism for Haitian artists means beginning to speak in the same language as their people. Haitian Marvelous Realism [the marvelous realism of the Haitians] is therefore an integral part of Social Realism, in its Haitian form it follows the same concerns. The wealth of tales, legends, the symbolic systems of music, choreography, and of the visual arts [*plastique*], all the forms of Haitian popular art [can] aid the nation in resolving the problems and in accomplishing the goals that lie before it. (1956, 268; my translation)

Many writers identified as “magical realists,” including García Márquez and Ben Okri, insist that they are in fact social realists (Gaylard 2005, 38; Zamora and Faris 1995, 4). To take such statements at face value, however, would be to ratify an ethnographic understanding of magical realism, effectively treating it as a form of “marginal realism” (Takolander 2007). Alexis does not claim that Haitian reality is itself “marvelous” or “magical.” The drive of marvelous realism is not toward representative (mimetic) fidelity to an external reality, but instead toward effective communication (critique) in order to bring about political change. Here, Alexis recalls the conclusions Ngũgĩ reaches in “The Language of African Fiction.” Like Alexis, Ngũgĩ’s aim is to speak to the people about their present political reality in a familiar (literal and figurative) “language.” This approach shares the critical, demystifying function of realism, but disrupts the particular textual features associated with that narrative mode.

I have in the preceding paragraphs moved from the question of ontological specificity and cultural autochthony to the disruption of inherited or borrowed cultural forms with the aim of crafting a locally specific representation of lived experience. Yet these articulations of magical realism in its various permutations remain unclear on the subject of formal prescriptions. It is an umbrella term, at best. In the face of this ambiguity, critics argue that magical realism retains explanatory power, that it can be a “decolonizing agent,” and that it represents both an appealing disruptive force and an articulation of the “politics of the possible” (Cooper 1998, 15; Faris 2004, 1; Slemmon 1995, 408; Sangari 1987, 157). With this in mind, it is possible to reread Bhabha’s declaration that magical realism is the literary language of the postcolonial world as an appeal to the possible utility of the label “magical realism” as a bridging mechanism for reading together geographically and historically far-flung texts; facilitating, for example, comparative work in the South Atlantic.

But such readings risk overdetermination. The celebration of magical realism as a disruptive force always also risks reifying difference, and, by extension, making all forms of difference equivalent. It similarly threatens to flatten the internal cultural dynamics that supply that “disruptive” material (Morieras 2001, 145; Franco 2002, 159). The most pressing risk, for my purposes, is the extent to which magical realism has become the default mode in which texts from Latin America—as well as the South Atlantic and Global South—are read. In this sense, the problem of magical realism resembles the problem of genre’s double function as classificatory and exclusionary apparatus (Derrida 1980; Dimock 2006).

In order to illustrate this problem, I return to Labou Tansi’s *Life and a Half*, which narrates the reign of the Providential Guides, a line of dictators “supplied” by an unnamed European power. As the novel progresses, characters and generations proliferate and repeat at a dizzying pace. In the final third, a portion of the original country secedes, sparking a highly technological arms race and, later, open warfare. Both countries are reduced to radioactive ash and, at the end of the novel, one character (Jean Calcium) emerges from an underground shelter to find a new political order in which people have “chosen reality” and refuse to speak of the past. The novel has been compared to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and treated as an example of magical realism transported—or, translated—to Africa.¹³ There are similarities, but the vision of technology expressed in the final third of the novel is a far cry from, for instance, the encounter of the villagers in Macondo with the various technological wonders that the gypsies bring on their annual visits.

This critical slippage is the target of Moudileno’s essay “Magical Realism: ‘Arme miraculeuse’ for the African Novel?” in which she argues that the latter sections of *Life and a Half* should be read not as magical realism but as science fiction, privileging its concern with technology and orientation toward the future (2006, 34–35). Here, magical realism and science fiction are taken to be mutually exclusive. If the fantastic (including magic and the mythical) is the defining trait of magical realism, for science fiction it is the incorporation of future-oriented technological speculations, which keeps it grounded in rationalism (Jameson 2005, 63). But in practice these are not hard and fast distinctions; as Eric Smith observes, both magical realism and science fiction serve the dialectical function of yoking together incommensurable realities (2012, 4). Moreover, in recent years there has been a postcolonial reclaiming of science fiction in a critical gesture that has upturned the conventions of the genre (Langer 2011, 9).

With this in mind, Moudileno's emphasis on the turn to science fiction in *Life and a Half* proposes to shift the ways in which "Africa" is read, challenging the foundational oppositions that have historically coded the continent as the space of ahistorical "magic," as well as violence and barbarism (2006, 35–36). Moudileno's fruitful analysis of *Life and a Half* can be pushed further. At its end, the novel reinscribes its nuclear apocalypse into a myth of origin. Immediately after describing the scene of nuclear destruction, the narrator adds: "Rain fell on Felix-Ville for two months after Jean Calcium had stopped sending his murderous vibrations. This is how the Nile, that witnessed the births of all the pharaohs, was born, along with the Nyassa, the Victoria, and the lake region" (2011, 131). Time, already distended, becomes cyclical and the narrative is reframed as a prehistoric myth in which we might read the codes that govern the present. This gesture recalls the conclusion of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which the last member of the Buendía family deciphers the prophesy of their history as Macondo is destroyed by the wind. The turn to the cyclical temporality of myth, moreover, accords with Labou Tansi's assertion in the opening warning (*Avertissement*) that the novel should be read as a fable.

At the end of *Life and a Half*, then, the reader is left with a series of overlapping possible registers in which to read the novel: fable, magical realism, science fiction, and myth. It would be a mistake to privilege any of these to the exclusion of the others. The novel's narrative polymodality is in fact a feature and not a bug of the dictator novel, produced by the challenge of representing the dictator as a literary figure. *Life and a Half* is best understood as a collage or constellation of narrative registers, each of which is mobilized in the service of narrating as literature (fiction) the particular history of dictatorship with which it is concerned. In a wider frame, this novel as a dictator novel is part of a constellation of textual practices that cannot be reduced to the category of "magical realism."

Disrupted Realisms in the Dictator Novel

At the beginning of this essay I referred to a constellation of aesthetic practices associated with political critique in the dictator novel. I used the word "constellation" to name a set of features, one or several of which may be present in a given text and, conversely, none of which is definitive. My thinking follows recent moves toward more open critical frameworks better suited to accounting for nuances or deviations from the established norm, such as Ato Quayson's identification of four "issue clusters" in magical realism in the essay "Fecundities of the Unexpected."¹⁴ This turn has been

motivated by the expansion of literary fields, as in the case of the new World Literature or the emergence of “global” Modernism, and consequent challenges to established taxonomy, terminology, or methodology.¹⁵ In each case, as in my own juxtapositional collage of dictator novels across the South Atlantic, the goal is a critical apparatus that will allow further-flung comparisons, accommodating new texts, features, and questions as the network expands. I am here at once describing and performing a mode of reading. In what follows, I use a selection (collage) of dictator novels to identify a constellation of aesthetic practices that both deviate from the norms of realism and exceed the category of magical realism. I gather these under the general title of “disrupted realisms.”

My use of the plural “realisms” aligns with a question raised by Carpentier in a 1966 interview on the topic of politically committed writing: why “realism” in the singular (1985, 141)? Carpentier here points to the limitations of a totalizing and transcendent model for realism, as a singular notion of realism does not allow for variations of the concept across time and space. With this, as well as Alexis and Ngũgĩ’s theorization of locally oriented aesthetic practices in mind, realism must be treated as a pliable or open-ended category to which elements may be added or subtracted. These additions or subtractions, which I term “disruptions,” produce differing versions of realism, necessitating the plural. In what follows, I outline some principal coordinates (these are the “clusters”) in the taxonomic constellation of disrupted realisms in the dictator novel of the South Atlantic. This map highlights key elements, with much overlap between individual clusters. It is, in this sense, a preliminary sketch.

The first and most common cluster concerns the resistance to, skepticism toward, or exhaustion of the critical potential of (strictly defined) realism as a narrative mode. This attitude is expressed in the recourse to alternate generic formulae or modes, including the fantastic or supernatural, romance, myth, fable, and even science fiction. The shift is occasionally explicitly announced, as in the opening warning of *Life and the Half*. More often, however, this critical stance is signaled by the purposeful departure, however brief, from the formal conventions of realism as well as in self-reflexive, metafictional, or postmodernist destabilizations of the narrative. *I the Supreme*, *Autumn of the Patriarch*, *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals*, and *Wizard of the Crow* are all examples.

The second cluster, closely related to the first, concerns the incorporation of popular, vernacular, oral, and autochthonous modes of representation, tropes, or figures. Recalling Ngũgĩ and Alexis, this is not just a means for reflecting local reality, but a heuristic device intended to help the audi-

ence interpret that reality. In *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals*, for instance, Kourouma structures the narrative around the performance of a *donsomana* (a Malinké praise poem recited for members of the hunter clan) for the recently ousted dictator, Koyaga. The *donsomana* is a ritual of purification and its completion will allow Koyaga to reclaim power. In order to effectively purify, however, the *donsomana* must also double as a denunciation of the dictator's crimes.

Importantly, these interpolations at once refer to their source and activate new networks of critical and textual interconnection. Ngūgĩ provides a useful example: in *Devil on the Cross*, the ogre functions as a figure for the rapacious national bourgeoisie. When the ogre reappears in *Wizard of the Crow*, however, it is both a reference to Gikuyu orature and an intertextual reference to Ngūgĩ's earlier work; this is emphasized by the many references to *Devil on the Cross* in *Wizard of the Crow*. The ogre also becomes the vector along which Ngūgĩ makes transnational literary allusions, as when a character compares her situation to that of a woman kidnaped by an "ogre" in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (2006, 202). The reference itself is imprecise, but the point is the gesture rather than specific content of the allusion.¹⁶ These interpolations are not simply references back to autochthonous cultural formations; they function as literary, intertextual, and intercultural points of contact, activating new and wide-ranging networks of association.

The third cluster comprises the purposeful disorientation or defamiliarization of the reader. This is achieved by the dislocation of the narrative in time or space, as well as on the level of language itself, as in the use of rhetorical strategies intended to unsettle the reader's sense of the real in the world of the text. Examples include the proliferation of characters with very similar names in Labou Tansi's *Life and a Half*. Repetition here not only disorients, it signals the circularity of violence, anticipating the status of primordial myth conferred on the narrative at the novel's conclusion. Along slightly different lines, the continual disorientation of the reader can serve an instructive function. The sudden shifts in narrative focalization in *Autumn of the Patriarch*, for instance, serve to activate the reader as a critical presence in the text. As Ángel Rama has pointed out, the absence of a positive moral force (that is, of a character who stands in opposition to the dictator) in the novel requires the reader to assume that position (1976, 53).

Estrangement, disorientation, and uncertainty also work at the thematic level. The narrator of *Wizard of the Crow*, for instance, repeatedly puts the truth of events reported into question. At the beginning of a section in

which the Ruler visits the United States, the narrator appeals to the audience for help in recalling the story, as no one can be in two places at once (2006, 273). This gesture incorporates the reader into the production of the narrative, implicitly aligning her with the narrator's (antidictator) project and invoking the critical function of collective memory and even rumor in opposition to the "official" record. It is, once again, a call to critical (skeptical) thinking on the part of the reader. Similarly, the interweaving of real and fictive historical documents in *I the Supreme* functions as what Linda Hutcheon has called "historiographic metafiction." Here, the past is not an "it" in the sense of objectified reality, but something that can only be grasped through its narration in—and within the interests of—the present (1988, 57). The uncertainty resulting from this is a source of anxiety for the dictator, since he desires total control over not only the nation but also the historical record. The impossibility of this desire folds outward and comes to define the role of the Compiler in the text.

As in previous points of the constellation, this third cluster is a broad grouping that shares elements with other categorical and period designations, including magical realism, modernism, and postmodernism. This is what is meant by reading texts in their incommensurability, and it is here that the model of a constellation most clearly pushes against more rigid organizing frameworks. In refusing to separate *Wizard of the Crow* (for the fantastic swelling and buoyancy of the ruler) from *I the Supreme* (for its metafictional play with the conventions of historiography) according to period, literary tradition, or continent, I am able to highlight the points of convergence between these two rather different dictator novels without pushing either into a categorical designation into which it does not fully fit.

The final cluster in this constellation includes narrative or thematic attention to the global distribution of power, questions of economy (including the function of markets, the fetish nature of the commodity, and large-scale inequalities), and a concern with technology and the potential outcomes of technological innovation that bends toward science fiction. Dictatorship in the South Atlantic, and the Global South more generally, is necessarily embedded within larger global networks of political and economic power. Accordingly, dictator novels of the South Atlantic are crowded with foreign actors, whether they be the "foreign country that supplies the Guides" in *Life and a Half* or the US Marines in *Autumn of the Patriarch*, whose presence links local events to a global network of political and economic interests.

Technology, in both its existing forms and its speculative inventions, frequently serves as the medium for the expression of these concerns. For

instance, while *Life and a Half* opens with that scene in which the Providential Guide cannibalizes Martial, a few generations later the practice is transformed. Instead of eating a dissident journalist, the (current) Guide has his European doctor transplant the journalist's major organs into his own body (2011, 113–115). In *Wizard of the Crow*, meanwhile, transplants, cosmetic surgery, and genetic engineering offer the promise of physical and thereby social transformation. At the start of the novel, three of the dictator's henchmen undergo surgeries abroad to enlarge their eyes, ears, and tongue (respectively) in order to secure better positions in his cabinet, offering themselves as the dictator's enhanced eyes, ears, and mouthpiece.

Ngũgĩ further interweaves the transformative function of cosmetic surgery with the vernacular figure of the ogre. During a visit to the United States, a government functionary (Tajirika) is handed an advertisement for a mysterious company called "Genetica, Inc.," which promises complete physical transformation. Tajirika enthusiastically begins the process of transforming himself into a white man. But the company is shut down, leaving him only partially changed. Although Tajirika tries to keep his condition secret, his daughter spots him one day and believes that ogres have taken over her father's body, as they do in stories (2006, 741–743). In tracing Tajirika's transformation to Genetica, Inc., Ngũgĩ rewrites the vernacular figure of the ogre as the kind of monstrous hybrid that is the stuff of science fiction; as Ian P. MacDonald has observed, Tajirika here is not an ogre, but a "cybogre" (2016, 72). This *generic* transformation facilitates the observation that the most "magical" of things come from the progressions of science itself. In doing so, much like Labou Tansi, Ngũgĩ locates his novel firmly within the future-oriented (technological) progress of history.

The clusters I have laid out here are, once again, intended as a preliminary outline to which further examples, specifications, and even clusters may be appended. To paraphrase Wai Chee Dimock on genre, the disrupted realisms I describe constitute a provisional set that will always be bent, pulled, and stretched by its many subsets (2006, 86). Bending, pulling, and stretching are inevitable, because this is a volatile and necessarily incomplete body of material. The purpose of the term "disrupted realisms," therefore, is to point to the multiplicity of engagements with the problem of realism in the dictator novel of the South Atlantic and thereby serve as the starting point for a more careful analysis of individual texts.

In closing, while critical realism would seem to be the narrative mode most suited to the denunciation of the dictator in the dictator novel, the variety

of examples I have discussed demonstrate the limitations of that premise. The term “realism” itself names a diffuse and wide-ranging set of textual practices and interpretative imperatives (Jameson 2013, 2–3). Magical realism, a frequently applied substitute, presents many of the same difficulties. More importantly, use of the label “magical realism” also invokes a series of literary associations (particularly with Latin American literature in the 1960s) that risks foreclosing careful analysis of the text at hand, collapsing categorization into interpretation. The more flexible and mobile assemblage (the constellation) I have outlined in this essay is intended to counteract these analytical problems, while acknowledging that some provisional sense of association or category is necessary for discussion to take place.

The problem of genre as an interpretative category weaves throughout this essay. Even as I have insisted on the particularity of the dictator novel as a narrative type and the specificity of the dictator novel of the South Atlantic, I use the term “genre” with hesitation. The dictator novel of the South Atlantic exists at the place of overlap of content (the South Atlantic dictator as literary figure) and literary form (the disruptions or bending of the representative imperatives of realism as a narrative mode for the purposes of political critique). The term “genre” is a useful name for this overlap, but its use should not overdetermine the analysis of individual texts.

Having come to this endpoint through the piecemeal work of comparative collage, which allowed me to identify new generalities based on what these texts share, I return to Ngũgĩ’s deceptively simple phrase, “fiction language.” This is the proposition that fiction itself functions as a literal and figurative language with which the writer communicates with an audience. The term not only incorporates the question of audience, as do discussions of *littérature engagée*, it also allows for a much wider conception of the features, ranging between content and form, which define particular texts or groupings of texts. To speak of political critique as part of “fiction language,” therefore, is to acknowledge the centrality of ideology often buried in discussions of terms such as “realism” and “magical realism.” The political critique of the dictator novel of the South Atlantic, then, is directed not just at the problem of dictatorship (and the global forces that sustain it) but also at reading practices that would reduce their strategic disruptions of realism to the confirmation of existing stereotype.

NOTES

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1. Examples include José Mármol's *Amalia* (1855), Juana Manso's *Los misterios del Plata* (1855), Miguel Ángel Asturias's *El señor presidente* (1946), Alejo Carpentier's *El recurso del método* (1974), Ousmane Sembène's *Le dernier de l'Empire* (1981), Henri Lopès's *Le pleurer-rire* (1982), and Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987).

2. Rita Barnard observes a similar phenomenon in South Africa's post-apartheid literature of transition. Referring to Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995), she notes that it "decisively breaches the generic constraints that the culture of resistance, with its demand for realist immediacy, had for years placed on the black writer" (2004, 280).

3. I have analyzed the critical function of fetish objects in dictator novels at length elsewhere; see Armillas-Tiseyra (2014).

4. The attempts to found a South Atlantic Treaty Organization (SATO) described in the introduction to this volume were an expression of that interconnection.

5. In Latin America, the dictator novel precedes the Cold War and has its roots in the political unrest (the rise of dictatorships) that followed independence in the nineteenth century. In Anglophone and Francophone African literatures, meanwhile, the dictator novel emerged as a subset of the larger category of the novels of political disillusionment, which followed the nationalist literature of the late-colonial and independence periods.

6. For an outline of these debates, see the volume *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (2013), which collects essays from *New Literary History* 40 (3) (2009) and *PMLA* 126 (3) (2011) and 128 (3) (2013).

7. As Friedman acknowledges, there are risks to this more open and flexible structure: "The danger of juxtapositional comparison is the license it might provide to juxtapose willy-nilly, for the sake of conjunction without assurance of productive comparison. (Sometimes, juxtaposition is just juxtaposition, not comparison)" (2011, 758). In practical terms, this requires that the critic herself sustain the validity or soundness of a comparison, rather than presume its justification emanates from the texts themselves.

8. For more on Ngũgĩ's advocacy for writing in African languages, see Ngũgĩ (1986).

9. Ngũgĩ's concept of "fiction language" is intimately bound with questions of orality. In his more recent criticism, Ngũgĩ presents the oral tradition not just as a source of tropes or figures, but also as a set of aesthetic principles. Specifically, orality recognizes the interconnections of art forms as a reflection of the interconnectedness of reality (2012, 73–75). Ngũgĩ himself connects orality to magical realism, via a discussion of Kamau Brathwaite's

use of the term (2012, 75). This rests on their shared capacity to confound existing critical categories.

10. The trend continues: a recent issue of *ARIEL* (47.3, 2016) featured a cluster of essays on magical realism, including discussions of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), Junot Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013).

11. For a discussion of the circulations of magical realism as a "world literary discourse" see the chapter "The Global Life of Genres and the Material Travels of Magical Realism" in Siskind (2014).

12. Roh's essay was published in 1925; a Spanish translation appeared *Revista de Occidente* in 1927. Carpentier discusses Roh in a later piece, "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real" (1975), where magic realism is assimilated to surrealism. See Guenther (1995) for a contextual overview of Roh's "magic realism."

13. Moudileno quotes the publisher of Éditions du Seuil describing Labou Tansi's novel as an "echo of other literatures, especially Latin American literature" (2006, 36). She, in turn, pointedly avoids reference to Latin America in defining "magical realism," citing instead a definition from M. H. Abrams's *Glossary of Literary Terms* (2006, 30).

14. Quayson's four clusters or "narrative problems" within magical realism are: (1) generic blurring and the status of the real; (2) metaphorical-literality chains; (3) magical realism and the representation of space, time, and space-time; and (4) magical realism and the philosophy of history.

15. For instance, in reconsidering genre as one possible vector along which to remake the organizational logic of the discipline, Dimock proposes a "broader constellation," which would make visible the coevolution and cross-fertilization of literary forms (2006, 91). Jessica Berman, meanwhile, in reframing modernism as a global phenomenon proposes it be seen as "a constellation of rhetorical actions, attitudes, or aesthetic occasions" (2012, 7).

16. The reference in *Wizard of the Crow* is to the episode of the "complete" (or, "full-bodied") gentleman in *Palm-Wine Drinkard*. This is the story of a Skull who rents body parts to impress and kidnap the daughter of a village head, who in turn enlists the Drinkard to rescue his daughter (1984, 200–213). Both the Skull and the ogre represent magical and malicious forces that operate through trickery or deception, which is the basis for the allusion.