

The Half Lives of African Fictive States

Neil ten Kortenaar

On or about February 1966, African literature changed. The coups that overthrew the First Republic in Nigeria, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, and the Kabaka of Buganda divide the history of African literature in two: the period just before and after most of Africa became independent, and the period from 1966 to at least 2006, the year of publication of Ngūgī's *Wizard of the Crow*.¹ Literature registered the impact of the coups as a disruption in the setting of the nation-state that novels routinely share with the news and history books. Whereas Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, published in 1960, the year of Nigerian independence, takes the particular state for granted, after 1966 it became a straightforward matter for African authors to set a novel in a fictive state, a state in every significant way like the author's own but not found on extra-textual maps. Novelists could always, it seems, now imagine another African republic called Kangan, Songhai, Katamalanasia, the Ebony Coast, Congheria, Kanem, Aburiria, or not called anything at all. Examples include Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les Soleils des Indépendances* and *En Attendant le Vote des Bêtes Sauvages*, Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de Violence*, Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, Mongo Beti's *Remember Ruben*, Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et Demie*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, and *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow* by Ngūgī wa Thiong'o.²

Critics generally read fictive states as allegories of existing states—what Achebe says of Kangan he is saying about Nigeria and about African states in general—and then ignore the strangeness of the fictive state setting. But not all states everywhere can have fictive counterparts. Although novels from England are routinely set in fictive towns or counties, on fictive streets or schools, it is impossible to imagine an English novelist setting a novel in the past or present in a country in every way like England that is not called England. I venture to say that, in the British or French or American novel, the nation-state is so inevitably a part of the background as to be unquestioned

Neil ten Kortenaar is a professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Toronto. He has published *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004) and *Postcolonial Literature and the Impact of Literacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). He has published many articles on African and Caribbean authors and is currently working on a study of state formation as imagined in African literature at independence. (Email: neil.kortenaar@utoronto.ca). The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1 The first coup in West Africa had deposed President Olympio of Togo in 1963. In Congo-Kinshasa Joseph Mobutu overthrew Patrice Lumumba in 1960 and assumed sole authority in a second coup in November 1965. In the space of a few months in 1965, no less than nine army takeovers took place, including Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, the Central African Republic, and Chad, in addition to Ghana, Nigeria, and Congo-Kinshasa.

2 I discuss fictiveness in novels in Neil ten Kortenaar, "Fictive States and the State of Fiction in Africa," *Comparative Literature* 52.3 (2000): 228–45.

and even to seem transparent. In the future, of course, one might find Oceania or Old England where England used to be or Gilead occupying America. A measure of the dystopian nature of novels by George Orwell, Julian Barnes, or Margaret Atwood is that England or the United States will be replaced by a fictive state such as regularly features in African literature set in the present. But in Western novels with loyalties to realism, the author's own state has been so thoroughly integrated into the psyche that the contemporary world cannot be imagined without it.

Between 1966 and 2006, African states, by contrast, regularly generated allegorical fictive counterparts. Kourouma's *En Attendant le Vote des Bêtes Sauvages*, the supreme African example of the dictator novel, recklessly mixes fictive and nonfictive states in an unbounded series with always room for more. The novel is a series of praise songs performed for Koyaga, the president dictator of the Republic of the Gulf (which resembles in important ways Guinea-Conakry), who has learned indispensable lessons from his fellow dictators from the Republic of the Hills, the Ebony Republic, the Republic of the Great River, the Country of Two Rivers, and the Country of the Djebels and the Sand, all of which have obvious models outside the novel.³ In the novel these fictive states exist alongside nonfictive states, including the countries they are modeled on: the Ivory Coast, Zaire, Oubangui-Chari (the Central African Republic), and Morocco. Koyaga and his peers are fictional, but the novel also mentions by name Hamani Dioré, Seyni Kountché, Kadhafi, Boumedienne, Nkrumah, and Mengistu Hailé Mariam.

In Kourouma's novel, the Ivory Coast can exist alongside the Ebony Coast, Zaire alongside the Republic of the Great River, and Oubangui-Chari alongside the Country of the Two Rivers. And readers will remember that, even outside the text, Zaire and Oubangui-Chari bear other names. In Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, Kangan, where some people speak Igbo, both is Nigeria and exists alongside Nigeria. In Ngũgĩ's fictive states, people speak Gikuyu because the Free Republic of Aburiria is and is not Kenya. The fictive shadow states in novels are by one measure less substantial than the extratextual states to which they adhere, but at the same time they render the institutions of the state opaque and uncannily visible.

Why should the military coups have inspired fictive states in literature? The coup against Nkrumah, says John Dramani Mahama, whose father lost his ministerial post and had to flee, "serves as the line of demarcation, separating the certainty of what was from the uncertainty of what lies ahead. It is a moment in which you suddenly become aware of who you are; you become aware of the fragility and unpredictability of the world in which you live."⁴ The coups changed the world but not because they introduced violence and tyranny and dispelled the optimism lingering from independence. Ayi Kwei Armah's 1968 novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which concludes with the 1966 coup, shows Ghanaians under no illusions about Nkrumah's regime. Indeed, the coups in Nigeria and Ghana were at first greeted with optimism as *ending* corruption and tyranny! Achebe's prescient *A Man of the People* of 1965,

3 Ahmadou Kourouma, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (Paris, France: Seuil, 1998).

4 John Dramani Mahama, *My First Coup D'état and Other True Stories from the Lost Decades of Africa* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 3.

already set in an unnamed state, predicts that the endemic corruption and violence of party politics will invite a coup.

The 1966 coups relegated the states' constitutional foundations to the dustbin, but the independence constitutions had never had the sacrosanct nature of the documents produced after the American Revolution. Crawford Young writes that they had "reflected bargains struck with the colonizer rather than a negotiated compact between state and society."⁵ At the time of the coups, the new constitutions had already been amended: Ghana and Nigeria, for instance, became republics in 1960 and 1963, respectively. Okoth Ogendo describes the African political situation as "constitutions without constitutionalism; that is, constitutions have been used just as any other instrument to achieve narrow political ends."⁶

The significance of the military coups is that they interrupted the seemingly inevitable trajectory from colony to democracy and instituted a kind of eternal return to the moment of the transfer of power. Military rule in Africa relied upon what Beckett and Young call "Permanent Transition": each regime "legitimated by a sense of *progress* toward creating its own alternative: civil democratic government."⁷ The military rulers, like the colonizers before them, justified their persistence by declaring they were laying the foundations for their own obsolescence. Oyeleye Oyediran calls the last colonial decade in Nigeria the "Mother of Transitions,"⁸ and the name is apt because the moment of independence proved the model to which subsequent moments repeatedly returned.

"Our country is an abiku country," doomed forever to die and be reborn, declares Azaro's father in Okri's *The Famished Road*: "Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain."⁹ This invitation to read Azaro's own abiku nature as an allegorical comment on the unnamed "country" in which the novel is set testifies not just to the difficulty that the nation-state has being born but, just as importantly, to the nation-state's eternal return. African states' seeming permanent perch on the cusp between absolutism and democracy made it possible for the literary imagination to invent fictive states alongside existing ones.

States in Africa and Elsewhere

Fictive states in Africa are not new but have regularly been projected onto the continent by novelists who are not Africans and by Africans who are not novelists. Anonymous and pseudonymous African territories figure prominently in European and American novels by Céline, Waugh, Naipaul, Updike, Bellow, and Boyd. South

5 Crawford Young, *The Postcolonial State in Africa: Fifty Years of Independence, 1960–2010* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 129.

6 Quoted in Goran Hyden, *African Politics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 108.

7 Paul Beckett and Crawford Young, "Introduction: Beyond the Impasse of 'Permanent Transition' in Nigeria," in *Dilemmas of Democracy in Nigeria*, eds. Paul A. Beckett and Crawford Young (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1997), 4.

8 Oyeleye Oyediran, "Transition without End: From Hope to Despair—Reflections of a Participant-Observer," in *Dilemmas of Democracy in Nigeria*, eds. Paul A. Beckett and Crawford Young (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1997), 175.

9 Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London, England: Vintage, 1992), 479.

Africans Peter Abrahams in *A Wreath for Udomo*, Ezekiel Mphahlele in *The Wanderers*, and Nadine Gordimer in *A Guest of Honour* have all invented fictive states north of the Limpopo. It would seem easy for outsiders to invent a generic state defined primarily by its Africanness. When, however, novelists invent fictive states that resemble the ones of which they themselves are citizens, the stakes are much higher. Even when the authors themselves write from exile, flight is not an option in the novels as it is at the end of, say, Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*. And, I will argue, although fictive states in works by noncitizens serve to satirize the African state's mimic nature, the fictive states imagined by citizens are political meditations on the nature of the state and its institutions. African novels set in fictive states take the state as their subject.¹⁰

Fictive states are also common in African journalism and political thought, where it is a frequent practice to redraw state borders when speculating on an ideal political order. Guy Martin discusses six such countergeographical projects that invent continent-wide federations of alternative states, ranging from five to fifteen in number, that have the advantage of being larger and more viable than the continent's actual fifty-odd states.¹¹ Martin himself and Muena wa Muiu argue for just five states called Mali, Kimit, Kush, Kongo, and Zimbabwe, assembled in an African federation with a single capital called Napata to be constructed in the center. As in our mental image of the Berlin Conference of 1884, when the European imperialist powers met to establish rules for dividing up the continent, the utopian political theorists sit at desks with pencils and colored markers, and draw what they want upon a slate they have cleared.

The potential for projecting fictive states onto Africa suggests there is something already fictional in the sense of unreal about actual African states, at least that they have failed to be integrated in the psyches of citizens in the sense that Britain or France have been. The perceived unreality of African states is frequently blamed on the unnatural borders drawn up by the European colonizers. Nigeria, it is said, fails to cohere because it contains speakers of 250 languages; Christians, Muslims, and animists; and the very different ecosystems of rainforest and savannah. Supporters of Northern or Southern or Biafran secession have argued that a state must reflect an already existing nation, as defined by language or religion, and by that criterion Nigeria is a fiction in the sense of an entity whose artificiality can never be forgotten.

Fictive states, however, whether dystopian as in literature or utopian as in political science, are not concerned with the ethno-nation or anything on the ground whose borders can be traced. For the utopian designers of fictive states, the question is one of scale. Martin and Muiu and the other political theorists who redesign borders in order to liberate the energies of the continent judge that African states are too small, too

10 Let me distinguish fictive states from fictive empires such as are found in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Fictive states are located in a world that has been fully integrated into a global system of states, whereas fictive empires are on the frontier of a space that has not yet been integrated. Conrad writes about an unnamed European country whose agents penetrate an unnamed continent based on Africa, Coetzee about an unnamed empire in an unnamed continent based on Central Asia (see Hermann Wittenberg and Kate Highman's article "Sven Hedin's 'vanished country': Setting and History in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," *Scrutiny* 20.1 [2015]: 103–27). Conrad and Coetzee are commenting on the nature of empire rather than the nature of states.

11 Guy Martin, *African Political Thought* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

numerous, and too poor and need to be reorganized into fewer, larger, more coherent units in order to register properly on the world map. Patrick Chabal points out that “the division of Africa into colonies was done with no serious consideration for economic, particularly capitalist, economic logic,”¹² with the result that “a number of colonies were economically not viable and had no conceivable means of becoming viable independent countries.”¹³ The states designed by Martin and Muiui resemble the map of Africa in the game of *Risk*, which involves counters moving among territorial blocks of similar size into which all the continents are arbitrarily divided. Martin and Muiui propose states big enough to be economically viable, but also smaller than the continent as a whole, presumably of an optimum size to allow for the consent of citizens in a social contract. The implicit appeal to the reason of rational actors who will be citizens is part of what makes these fictive states utopian.

The redesigned states of Martin and Muiui would each include *more* language groups than current states do, and what makes this plausible is the assumption that there is an overarching African culture. We can see a continuity between the imagined entities of the political theorists and Kwame Nkrumah’s PanAfricanist project, which took the name of Ghana, a former African empire located in the interior to the north, in order to rename the British colony of the Gold Coast, whose name reflected the perspective of foreign traders who came to West Africa by sea. Nkrumah thought of the state he ruled as the vanguard of a PanAfricanist project much wider than its colonial borders. Frederick Cooper and Gary Wilder have reminded us that anti-colonial nationalists, especially in Francophone Africa, held political ideals other than self-determination for the colony, ideals such as democratic multicultural empires or PanAfrican federations.¹⁴ The option that succeeded at decolonization, independence for the colony, was neither inevitable nor self-evident: as Todd Shepard writes, decolonization had to be invented.¹⁵

The alternative ideals that Nkrumah or Léopold Sédar Senghor had were not, however, realized, any more than Martin and Muiui’s scheme will be. The only strategy that actually succeeded in decolonizing was to demand self-determination for the colony whose borders, capitals, laws, and administration had been determined from outside. Although decolonization was often proclaimed to be the restoration of a lost autonomy after a period of foreign domination, it was never the precolonial polity or the ethnic nation defined by language or religion that achieved independence, nor was it the transcontinental or subcontinental federation. In Ghana in 1957, as in Nigeria in 1960 or Kenya in 1964, sovereignty passed from a colonial regime to an independent state that occupied the same territory and was governed by the same basic law. Even in the few cases where the new leaders adopted the names of ancient empires and

12 Patrick Chabal, *Power in Africa: An Essay in Political Interpretation* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994), 102.

13 Chabal, *Power in Africa*, 108.

14 Frederick Cooper, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2014, and Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

15 Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

kingdoms, Ghana, Mali, or later Zimbabwe, “the primary purpose of independence was accurately perceived by the nationalists to be the conquest of the colonial state.”¹⁶

The UN General Assembly Resolution of 1960 that declared that *all* colonies were entitled to self-determination also assumed that *only* colonies, not ethnic groups or traditional chieftaincies, kingdoms, or empires, merited self-determination: “Only constituted colonial territories with a distinct administrative personality [that is, states] were entitled to succeed to internationally recognized sovereign status.”¹⁷ In order to achieve decolonization and expel the colonizer, anti-colonial nationalists had to adopt the idea of the state encrypted in the colony, the Weberian state characterized by written laws upholding impartial justice, a bureaucratic administration, and a monopoly on violence. We cannot escape the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that, in international eyes, people were judged worthy of self-determination only in so far as they had once been subject to colonial law. In effect, the new citizens of Ghana, Nigeria, or Kenya were asked to pretend that the rule of law, imposed by colonial conquest, governed the transfer of sovereignty from a foreign power to a local one and to forget the law’s own origins in overwhelming violence. The violence that had founded the colony and therefore also the laws governing the successor state was the more easily elided where, as in West and Central Africa, self-determination was accorded without an armed struggle.

There is something real, in the sense of stable and ineluctable, about the colonial state that the utopian political thinkers fail to appreciate when they dream of new states with redrawn borders established by social contract. However much the colors and the names on the map of Africa have changed since 1918, the borders have been drawn in seemingly indelible ink.¹⁸ In the twentieth century, only in the Americas have state borders been as unwavering as they have been in Africa. Along with the borders, the new nation-states inherited from the colonies they had been the language of administration, a topic that Martin and Muiu and the inventors of new states generally fail to discuss. In most parts of Africa, state administration is in English, French, or Portuguese. The exceptions are in Arabic or Swahili. In Cameroon at the present moment, a Francophone state is oppressing the Anglophone minority, a consequence of imperial rivalries that the dreamers of alternative states with new, non-colonial borders would be unable to account for.¹⁹

16 Chabal, *Power in Africa*, 76. The one exception in Africa is Ethiopia, a feudal empire that evaded colonization in part by arms but also by successfully mirroring the trappings of modern statehood—written law, central administration—so the European powers did not have the justification for invading that they used elsewhere. Ethiopia was invaded by Fascists in the thirties, as were many nations in Europe soon after, but the invasion was short lived. The handful of other new states that corresponded in some measure to precolonial kingdoms—Lesotho, Swaziland, Rwanda, Burundi—are the smallest of African states and landlocked, and in any case had also been colonies or colonial protectorates, the indispensable condition for being awarded independence.

17 Young, *The Postcolonial State in Africa*, 301.

18 With very few exceptions, African nation-states have not tried to take over one another’s territory in a way that would change the lines on the map, and the exceptions such as Somalia in the Ogaden or Uganda in Kagera have almost always failed. In what has been called Africa’s world war, the conflict fought within the Congo by its neighbors Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, and Zimbabwe, and by militias from outside, never sought to change borders but only to control the capital.

19 Cameroon was a German colony until 1918, at which time it was divided between Britain and France. As independence was approaching, the English-speaking parts were asked in a plebiscite whether they

The utopian countergeographical models of African states, whether by journalists, political scientists, or by politicians such as Nkrumah or Senghor, are all based on the model of the social contract and ignore the basis of the state in conquest and violence. African novelists who invent fictive states share the sentiment that Africa's problems can be traced to the states bequeathed by the colonizers. And, like the political theorists, they presume an overarching African culture. They never, however, forget the violence needed to maintain the state. Although the imagined states of the political scientists are intended to be more real than actual states—they express what should be—those in African novels express what *is* the case.

In Africa, as Mahmood Mamdani argues, the colonial state relied on a distinction between citizen-rulers and subjects, a distinction that continued to have ramifications after independence.²⁰ Decolonization, however, as mentioned previously, presumed that a condition of achieving citizenship is prior subjection to the law. Citizens had first to be subjects. In the case of Britain and France, national mythology has it that violent revolution or the gradual revolution brought about by parliamentary resistance to absolute monarchy succeeded in wresting sovereignty from kings. As a result, the state, once identified with absolute monarchy,²¹ became the vehicle for the rights of man and citizen, democracy the accepted teleology of the state. To judge from English and French novels, the state also thereby became transparent and unremarkable, the seams binding what literature can imagine to the political organization of the world rendered invisible.

According to Michel Foucault at least, invasion and conquest were at the origins of the sovereign state everywhere, including England, where sovereignty and the law were inaugurated by the Norman Conquest, and France, where the state was created by the invasion of Gaul by the Franks and, before that, by the Romans.²² Franz Oppenheimer goes so far as to characterize the state everywhere as “a social institution, forced by a victorious group of men on a defeated group, with the sole purpose of regulating the dominion of the victorious group over the vanquished.”²³ In terms redolent of modern African history, Nietzsche attributes the state *in Europe* to conquest by “a herd of blonde beasts of prey, a master race, a race of conquerors which, aggressive, powerful and organized, pounces with its most horrid claws on an unsuspecting population, one which in numbers may be tremendously superior, but is still undisciplined and nomadic. Such is the origin of the ‘state’ (I think we have disposed of that notion, one held enthusiastically by many, according to which the ‘state’ originates with a sort of contract).”²⁴

But if citizens are always first subjects, then the state in Africa reveals a truth of the state everywhere, even in Europe, where such is the majority's identification as

wanted to join Nigeria or French Cameroon: the northern part voted to join Nigeria, but the southern part, afraid of domination by Igbo traders, voted to join Cameroon, resulting in a bilingual republic.

20 Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

21 Perry Anderson, *The Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, England: Verso, 1979).

22 Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 124.

23 Franz Oppenheimer, *The State*, trans. John M. Gitterman (Montreal, Canada: Black Rose, 2007), 8.

24 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Michael A. Scarpitti (New York: Penguin, 2013), 72.

citizens they may no longer feel their subjection to the state. Adam Sitze explains that the subjection established by violence at the moment of a state's origin continues to reside alongside the principles of democracy. There is an "antinomy created in and by the English revolution, between the *sovereignty of law* (the revolutionary principle that nobody is above the law) and the *law of sovereignty*," which uses the health of the state or public order to justify the abrogation of the law.²⁵ If states everywhere were originally imposed by conquest, the difference between western European states and African ones is that the former forget those origins and remember instead the long process whereby citizens successfully wrested concessions from or did away with the king and won rights for themselves.

Eric Santner suggests that modern ideas of national sovereignty derive from European Renaissance notions of the king's two bodies, a mortal body and a sublime one identified with the land and the people. These in turn were inspired by Christ's dual nature as man and God. The king's spiritual body was co-extensive with the state and survived the king's death, hence the cry "The king is dead, long live the king." In the French Revolution, after the king was executed, the sublime sovereign lived on as the mystic embodiment called the People. The spiritual body of the sovereign was transferred to the People who "become the bearers of sovereignty, assume the dignity of the *prince*."²⁶ In western Europe, states are doubled in the imagination, but the state's bodies, sovereign and population, have been so closely bound to each other as to be indistinguishable.

In Europe, when the People inherited the king's sovereignty, they also took on the monarch's ambitions for conquest, for how else can we explain the imperialism of those states that thought of themselves as the world's leading democracies? In the nineteenth century, Britain and France, states that saw themselves at the forefront of world history *because* they had overthrown or tamed kings and *because* they had abolished slavery, projected the conquest state outward. When new states such as Belgium, Germany, and Italy appeared, also in the nineteenth century, the first thing they did to prove their credentials as states was to anoint an emperor or king, and the second thing was to join the scramble for African colonies. The significance of the transfer of sovereignty from kings to People was not the abrogation of absolute rule but the persistence of dreams of conquest.

Sitze writes that the state of exception that set up the law, the illegality that defines the law itself, "the *innermost inside* of the British Empire," "exists almost exclusively at its *outermost limits*."²⁷ That is because, as Hannah Arendt writes, "given that the empire could not be integrated into the nation, the first consequence of power export was that the state's instruments of violence, the police and the army, which in the framework of the nation existed beside, and were controlled by, other national institutions, were separated from this body and promoted to the position of national representatives in uncivilized or weak countries."²⁸ The colonies expressed the violent

25 Adam Sitze, *The Impossible Machine: A Genealogy of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 5.

26 Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xii.

27 Sitze, *The Impossible Machine*, 68.

28 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 136.

truth of state sovereignty, hidden from citizens in the metropole but obvious to the colonized.

The calibration of the sovereign's two bodies in African states often remained imperfect. In Kourouma's novel *Koyaga* and his peers behave as if *they* and not the state they rule were immortal, declaring themselves presidents for life and eliminating potential successors as threatening rivals. Because they were there at the beginning, the state cannot be imagined without them, and when, like Mobutu or Mugabe, they totter from the throne, they even seem prepared to bring the state down with them.

The question we need to ask is why decolonization in Africa did *not* forge sovereign peoples in the way that the European revolutions that deposed or displaced kings are imagined to have done. In Africa at decolonization, with only one large-scale, long-term exception, the "herd of blonde beasts" described by Nietzsche withdrew, bequeathing to their former subjects the state and its law that they had originally imposed by violence. At the heady moment of independence, it may have seemed to many that a successful transfer of sovereignty to the people was possible. Even as he warned of the pitfalls of national consciousness, Frantz Fanon looked forward to the day when Africans would become Kenyans, Senegalese, and Nigerians, meaning citizens of a state defined as a collective project. He believed that, for psychological reasons, the independence of the colonized required violence in the form of a revolution: "violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect."²⁹ It also dissolves groups based on kinship and smaller than the state, "and introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and of a collective history."³⁰ Manifestly artificial borders need not be an affliction where such a project is concerned because inheritance is less important than the future that people build together. In Schmittian fashion, Fanon argued that only by forcing a state of exception, a moment when the people opt for sovereignty and make the necessary sacrifice to achieve it, could decolonization succeed.

If I am right, then the trouble with Nigeria is not that it is arbitrary—all states were arbitrary—but that it still feels arbitrary to many. Why did independence not forge sovereign peoples and instead threw up new sovereigns? One reason is the recentness of the colonial state. In most of Africa south of the Sahara and north of the Limpopo, the coming of the law and the establishment of the colonial state administration occurred in the decade and a half before and after the turn of the twentieth century. Of course, what Walter Rodney calls the "Underdevelopment of Africa" began much earlier, with the massive transatlantic trade in slaves, which gave rise to predatory native polities engaged in war for captives and in raiding. But, as colonizers, Britain and France turned to Asia and to Africa only after losing their first empires to revolutions in the Thirteen Colonies and Haiti. The first British colony, Sierra Leone in 1787, was intended to resettle freed slaves from the New World. And most of Africa experienced conquest and then colonial administration only much later, at the end of the century. Typical in this regard is the Igbo setting of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*,

29 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1967), 74.

30 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 73.

conquered in a series of military expeditions that formed a shock-and-awe campaign from 1900 to 1914.

Where European philosophers such as Hobbes and Rousseau have imagined a moment in the misty past when the social contract that founded the state came into existence, almost everywhere in West, East, Central, and Southern Africa there were people alive at the time of independence who remembered the establishment of the colony by force. Those who came to identify with the new states, such as the young Achebe, author of *Things Fall Apart*, forget the recentness of the conquest, which he pushes back into the reign of Queen Victoria, and reduce the violence to a single event: the massacre of the village of Abame that takes place offstage. Cooper, however, reminds us that “Terror tactics—mass slaughter during conquests, collective punishments on villages and kinship groups thereafter—were hallmarks of colonization and lasting features of maintaining control.”³¹ Others who had resisted the colonizers over the sixty or so years between conquest and independence were not concerned, as Achebe was, with making the state theirs but with getting rid of the state as itself the product of conquest.

Cooper writes that “Empires perpetrated violence because they were strong and because they were weak.”³² A second reason that state sovereignty did not pass to the People at independence was the sheer weakness of the colonial state. During the late-nineteenth-century Scramble for Africa, the European rivals had an interest in avoiding war with one another over Africa and drew up rules establishing mutually acceptable limits to the colonial expansion of each. The colonizing states acknowledged each other’s sovereignty over the areas within those consensual borders, even when the colonizers’ effective control of the African interior was nonexistent. As long as a colonial power held the capital, it was convenient for everyone to assume they occupied the territory associated with it. The result was what Jeffrey Herbst calls fictions of power: “European colonialism was a combination of domestic administrative structures and a state system that went to elaborate lengths to uphold the notion that Europeans were actually ruling Africa.”³³ These were the states inherited by anti-colonial nationalists at independence.

Peter Ekeh notes that while “democracy developed historically in Western Europe in the context of the struggle for freedom from domestic repression,” “African nationalism’s democracy was concerned with the freedom of peoples and collectivities from *foreign* domination.”³⁴ Instead of the revolutionary cry “the king is dead, long live the people,” African nationalists proclaimed, “the colonizer is gone, long live the nation-state.” The kings who originally conquered and fashioned states in Europe became inextricably associated with the lands they conquered, something the imperial powers did not do in Africa. In Europe the invading groups remained; racial difference

31 Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 157.

32 Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 157.

33 Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 96.

34 Peter P. Ekeh, “The Concept of Second Liberation and the Prospects of Democracy in Africa: A Nigerian Context,” in *Dilemmas of Democracy in Nigeria*, eds. Paul A. Beckett and Crawford Young (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1997), 91.

became class difference (though, for a long time, class difference was imagined as a difference in blood, that is, as a racial difference); and rulers and ruled eventually spoke one language, be it that of the conquerors (Gauls learned Latin; Britons learned Anglo-Saxon), the conquered (Franks learned Gallo-Latin), or a mix (Anglo-Saxon and Norman French produced English). African states, by contrast, were conquered by foreigners *who remained foreign* and who did not extend an invitation to subjects to identify with the sovereign. Racial difference was asserted, the descendants of invaders left, and the languages of the conquerors and conquered remained distinct, with that of the conquerors remaining the language of the administration.

Decolonization was therefore a great body swap: the racially distinct bodies of the colonizers departed, leaving behind the sublime body of the postcolonial state. But where the sublime body bequeathed to the People is foreign, some of its foreign racial charge may continue to adhere to the sovereign state that remained in place. The racialized body with which people more easily identified tended to be the continent rather than the state, which is why so many liberation movements called themselves “African,” as in the African National Congress or Zimbabwe African National Union.

The King's One and a Half Bodies

In his article “On Politics as a Form of Expenditure,” Achille Mbembe develops a comprehensive typology of the African state without naming a single one. He does, however, cite Kourouma and Labou Tansi as authorities.³⁵ In Labou Tansi’s *La Vie et Demie*, the moment of independence in Africa is described as a parodic incarnation:

Blacks had prayed for independence. That was the only prayer of theirs God had ever listened to. They sacrificed animals, gave their daughters to convents, and their sons to seminaries. But this first gift from God was a disappointment: the Honourable This, the Honourable That, His Excellency This, His Excellency That. Independence had disappointed and so had God.³⁶

Those praying to God for independence, that is, for sovereignty for the colonial territory, are not citizens demanding their rights, but colonial subjects petitioning for the boon of sovereignty. Not surprisingly, God does not answer their prayers or, rather, his answer is deeply undesired: they receive only new sovereigns.

In Labou Tansi’s novel, a dictator called the Providential Guide rules Katamanasie and can say, with Louis XIV, “L’État c’est moi.” The Providential Guide is best regarded as a continuation of the colonial *commandement*, Achille Mbembe’s term for the absolute and arbitrary power expressed in legal fiat, “the *principe autoritaire*: the arbitrary discipline of the subject by the state that ‘aspires to the exercise of a symbolic hegemony over indigenous societies signified by its claim to a monopoly of legitimate vision’ and that incorporates into that exercise of power ‘a vocation of modernizing the nation and civilizing the society.’”³⁷

35 Achille Mbembe, “On Politics as a Form of Expenditure,” in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, eds. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 299–333.

36 Sony Labou Tansi, *La Vie et Demie* (Paris, France: Seuil, 1979), 112. My translation.

The Guide and his successors model themselves not on the precolonial chief or the modern totalitarian dictator but on the European absolute monarch. The Guide has himself crowned Cézama the First.³⁸ He is eventually succeeded by Colonel Mouhahantso, who takes the name of Henri-au-Coeur-Tendre and who is in turn succeeded by his assassin Katarana-Mouchata under the name Jean-Coeur-de-Père.³⁹ They resemble Jean-Bédél Bokassa, who changed the name of the Central African Republic to the Central African Empire and had himself crowned emperor in 1977, just prior to the publication of Labou Tansi's novel, and Mobutu Sese Seko, whom Michela Wrong characterizes as the direct heir of Leopold, king of the Belgians, ruler of the Congo Free State.⁴⁰

Santner explains that, in the European Renaissance, the distance between the king's two bodies meant that the mortal body took on a tragic resonance, a creaturely quality that animals themselves, because they never bear the trappings of authority and therefore cannot be stripped of them, do not have. In addition to his spiritual nature, a king always carries a potential tragic resonance because he can lose his crown and be reduced to "a poor, bare, *forked* animal" like Lear or be killed, like Richard II or Hamlet senior. The corollary of the king's two bodies is that his mortal body has the potential to become more mortal than other bodies: an abject thing of horror.⁴¹ Certainly, one result of the hubristic identification of the ruler with the state is that African dictators have also been, as Mbembe points out, *more* mortal, more embodied than other rulers. In Cheikh Aliou Ndao's novel *MBaam Dictateur*, a dictator called Wor of an unnamed country is transformed into Mbaam ngonk, a big donkey. When a dictator falls, he falls lower than mere humans: "Yesterday a great chief, today below the human. That's the people's vengeance."⁴² The dictator-donkey cannot commit suicide: he is forced to live forever as an "âne symbole."⁴³

In *La Vie et Demie*, the Providential Guide attempts to stave off his own mortality by graphically proving the mortality of another. In the opening scene, a man called Martial, who has led twenty unsuccessful "civil wars" against the Providential Guide, has just been captured. The prisoner is introduced into the Guide's presence with a "voici l'homme,"⁴⁴ echoing the "ecce homo" or "Behold the man" with which Pilate introduces Christ to the mob baying for his blood (John 19:5). If independence marked a demonic incarnation, hell rendered flesh in Labou Tansi's terms, Martial's death represents a version of the Passion. He and his wife and children are brought before the Guide seated alone at dinner. The Guide takes the table knife with which he had been eating meat and thrusts it into Martial's throat. He then resumes his dinner.

37 Mbembe discusses the commandement in Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2001). The definition here is taken from Young, *The Postcolonial State in Africa*, 327.

38 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 75.

39 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 83.

40 Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

41 Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 60.

42 "Hier un grand chef, aujourd'hui en dessous de l'espèce humaine. C'est la vengeance du peuple." Cheikh Aliou Ndao, *MBaam Dictateur* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 2003), 328.

43 Ndao, *MBaam Dictateur*, 268.

44 Labou Tansi, *La Vie et Demie*, 11.

After the meal, the Guide uses the knife to gut Martial, who remains standing, from his solar plexus to his anus. He then gouges out his eyes. “What are you waiting for to die?” he asks his victim.⁴⁵ Martial replies that he does not want to die this death. The Guide shoots him several times in the head, the bullets passing in one ear and out the other. Martial repeats that he does not want this death. The Guide returns to the table to eat dessert and asks Martial what death he would prefer. When he receives no answer, he takes his submachine gun and shoots him in the forehead and in the heart. With a sabre he slices Martial in two at the waist. The lower half falls to the ground but Martial is such an upright man that the upper half remains suspended in the air. The Guide then pulls up a chair and says wearily, “Look here, Martial, be reasonable.”⁴⁶ He forces champagne laced with poison down Martial’s mouth; it pours from the hole in his throat, runs down his front, and drips onto the ground.

Finally, the Guide cuts Martial into small pieces and orders that he be prepared into a pâté and a casserole and forcefully fed to his family the next day. There can be no more graphic illustration of the “politics of the belly,” Jean-François Bayart’s characterization of the nature of African politics.⁴⁷ The Guide is the best eater in the country—he wins eating contests against all comers⁴⁸—and his powers of consumption are a gauge of his power. His enjoyment of food is a parodic version of a real value: a good ruler is one who provides for his subjects by ensuring there is enough to eat.⁴⁹ In the Guide’s demonic performance of this duty, he gives his subjects to eat, but they are also his food: they must be grateful for being allowed to eat by a tyrant who forces them to eat one another.

Most critical discussion regards *La Vie et Demie* as a denunciation of the tyranny that has characterized many postcolonial African states. The novel’s grotesque excess, however, overwhelms its satirical intent. Power in the novel is not merely abused or misused; violence is so integral to that power that “abuse” is a misnomer. As the Providential Guide cuts Martial into small pieces, he swears by his 362 ancestors, recalling “by his courage and energy the long ago days when those same ancestors cut down the forest to build the very first version of the village that would become Yourma, the capital.”⁵⁰ He casts his violent leveling of Martial’s resistance as a repetition of the original founding of the state, an act of razing the forest and taming the wild. The Guide manifests his power by eliminating the one who threatens his rule in the kind of binding violence that Moira Fradinger says creates a state by establishing the borders between insiders and outsiders.⁵¹

45 Labou Tansi, *La Vie et Demie*, 13.

46 Labou Tansi, *La Vie et Demie*, 14.

47 Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, trans. Mary Harper, Christopher Harrison, and Elizabeth Harrison (London, England: Longman, 1993).

48 Labou Tansi, *La Vie et Demie*, 21.

49 Michael G. Schatzberg, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Food, Family* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

50 My translation: “rappelant par sa hardiesse et sa fougue les jours lointains ou ces mêmes ancêtres abattaient la forêt pour construire la toute première version d’un village qui devait devenir Yourma, la capitale.”

51 Moira Fradinger, *Binding Violence: Literary Visions of Political Origins* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

I am arguing, with Mbembe, that the sovereign state is a model imposed on Africa by Europe. My point, however, is not the false or mimic nature of the African state. On the contrary, I assume that the state in Africa tells us something true about the state anywhere and everywhere. According to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, when kings ruled supreme in Europe, they used public and graphic violence to punish offenders and render their power visible. When, after the great democratic revolutions, sovereignty passed to the abstraction of the People, violence became hidden behind prison walls and citizens integrated within their psyches their own discipline by an abstract all-seeing power.⁵² In Europe, so thoroughly have the majority integrated their subjection to the state that they may therefore no longer feel their subjection. In the African colony and its postcolonial successor, by contrast, sovereign power was too weak to impose internalized discipline on citizen-subjects and needed to retain the use of graphic violence.⁵³

The Guide's almost ritual repetition of the original conquest is bound to fail, however. Katamalanasie, after all, was not actually founded by the Guide's ancestors but by the colonizers. An anonymous European country, clearly modeled on France, continues to supply Katamalanasie with its Guides in the dual sense of selecting them and provisioning them. The Guide's redundant cruelty illustrates his power—he can torture and kill Martial and no one can stop him—but also suggests his need to assert mastery in a situation over which he does not have full control. The same cruelty that proves the Guide's sovereignty also establishes the limits of his power and testifies to Martial's capacity to survive. The proper ritual requires the acquiescence of the victim, and this the Guide is unable to extract.

The Guide intends to debase Martial and reduce his noble adversary to the most complete abjection. The wholly abject, however, is exalted and returns in a spiritual state that no one else in the novel achieves. The Guide objects when his victim refuses to be as satisfied by his violent death as he himself is: "You should be dead, Martial. You should already have found a death that satisfies."⁵⁴ "I do not want this death," Martial repeats. The torture of Martial restages in a limited compass the long-lasting civil war that has ravaged the country, the many battles in that war replicated as so many ways of dying. The country that is forever being reborn in Okri's *Famished Road* trilogy here forever refuses to die. Martial, the Guide's supreme victim, is killed much more than he needs to be because he can never be killed enough. He dies invictus, unconquered.

What Judith Perkins says of early Christian martyrs could be said of Martial and his relation to Africa: "the martyrs were cultural performers acting out dramatically

52 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977). Alexie Tcheuyap quotes Foucault's account of the Renaissance monarch to discuss power in the novels of Kourouma, without commenting on the strangeness of the fact that the postcolonial ruler should resemble a European monarch: "Mémoire et Violence chez Ahmadou Kourouma," *Études françaises* 42.3 (2006): 40.

53 Gichingiri Ndīgīrīgī uses both of Foucault's models of state power, that of the Renaissance king and the surveillance state, to explain the tyranny in Siad Barre's Somalia and in Ngūgī's *Wizard of the Crow*, in *Unmasking the African Dictator*, ed. Gichingiri Ndīgīrīgī (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 176, 198.

54 Labou Tansi, *La Vie et Demie*, 55. My translation: "Tu devais déjà mourir, Martial. Tu devais déjà trouver une mort qui te suffise."

the community's belief that to be a Christian was to suffer and to die."⁵⁵ Martial's agony at the beginning of the novel is an object lesson in the suffering and death that are the nature of this world and in how to endure with courage. He himself is welcomed as reborn when the people see his ghost.⁵⁶ Martial, who has resisted all his life and continues to resist all through his death, inspires his followers, "les gens de Martial" or Martial's people, "all those men and women for whom life only serves to kill life, who go hungry, who are killed for a yes or a no, the true people, the true nation, the earth-men, God's bits of wood, these pebbles of flesh, these human stones."⁵⁷ Martial's people presume that the vision of Martial heralds the final judgment. When police try to arrest someone in the crowd that gathers, others call out, "It's not him it's me."⁵⁸ This is the gesture of substitution that the national community is based on: every citizen is equal and can substitute for another because all equally embody the nation.

As Walter Burkert notes of the scapegoat/*pharmakos* in Greek and Roman antiquity: "Either the victim must be termed subhuman, particularly guilty, or even 'offscourings' to be dumped ... or else he is raised to a superhuman level, to be honored forever. The extremes may even be seen to meet, deepest abasement turning into divinity."⁵⁹ Like Christ, physical abasement and destruction appear to be conditions for Martial's ongoing life after death. While Martial becomes a spirit, the Guide is reduced to an eater of flesh, basely corporeal.

Martial has suffered a great fall, from military general to meal, but then been exalted from meal to hero. The ghost of Martial, however, is not of the military leader but of the Guide's victim. Martial's spirit cannot shed the grotesque material violation it suffered before death. It preserves the form Martial took in the hours before he died: just an upper body, a bleeding hulk, unable to speak because of the wound in its throat. When the ghost appears in the Guide's bed every night, it stains the bed sheets with its ink. After death, Martial's is but a half body with but a half life.

With regard to the republics that succeeded monarchies in Europe, Santner writes:

The crucial thought at the heart of the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies is that within the framework of the political theology of kingship, the signifiers that represent the subject for other signifiers are, so to speak, "backed" or "underwritten" by the sublime flesh, the sacral soma, of the monarch. With the demise of the political theology of kingship, this "personal" source of libidinal credit disappears. Postmonarchical societies are then faced with the problem of *securing the flesh* of the new bearer of the principle of sovereignty, the People.⁶⁰

55 Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London, England: Routledge, 1995), 25.

56 Labou Tansi, *La Vie et Demie*, 38.

57 Labou Tansi, *La Vie et Demie*, 131. My translation: "tant d'hommes et femmes dont la vie ne servait qu'à tuer la vie, et qui avaient faim, qui avaient soif, qu'on tuait pour un oui ou pour un non, le vrai peuple, la vraie nation, les hommes-terre, les hommes-bouts-de-bois, ces cailloux de viande, ces pierres humaines."

58 Labou Tansi, *La Vie et Demie*, 39.

59 Quoted in Carlin A. Barton, "The Scandal of the Arena," *Representations* 27 (1989): 22.

60 Santner, *The Royal Remains*, xv.

The Guide's torture reduces Martial not just to someone who can be killed at the whim of power but to flesh, defined by its vulnerability to pain, its life apart from the spirit, and its capacity to feed other bodies. The "immunological procedures of modernity," Santner explains, are "always at pains to sort out the flesh of the *people* from that of the *People*, the *ensetzlich* flesh of creaturely life—a life whose only entitlement is to *enjoy bare life*—from the flesh that gives substance to the *dignitas*, the claim to belong to the set of those endowed with sovereignty."⁶¹ This second flesh, for all its fleshiness, is as immortal as the sublime body: the physical body, whether of the king or the People, survives across time and must "take on the properties if not exactly of eternal life then those of the *undead*, of a being whose body is charged with representing eternity in the space of secular, political life, one whose corporeality is elevated to the sublime dignity of an eternal Thing."⁶²

La Vie et Demie has much more to say about the state in Africa. I have not done critical justice to the novel's complexity or its sheer craziness because my subject is not Labou Tansi's novel but the capacity of African states after 1966 to generate shadow selves in literature. The spectral nature of Martial's upper body, I am arguing illustrates the failure of the African state's several bodies to align but also their persistence. The fictive states in African novels between 1966 and 2006 are at once about tyranny *and* sacrifice. It is a great paradox that the citizens in Soyinka's, Achebe's, or Labou Tansi's fictive states are willing to die or even to kill for states that have no existence outside the novel. We can put this another way: novels set in fictive states constitute Schmittian parables of statehood: they show that sacrifice is needed to make states real, even though, given the fictive nature of that state, they cannot themselves constitute that sacrifice.

It does seem that in the last decade and a half, the capacity for fictive states in African fiction has shrunk enormously as military dictatorships have given way to new republics.⁶³ The newest generation of African writers are more likely to write realism where, as in western European novels, the existence of the state is taken for granted. Even in speculative fiction like Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*, where one might expect to find fictive states, aliens concern themselves with the state of Nigeria. Does the new imaginative investment in the state mean that the Beautiful Ones have been born? that the people and the sovereign are now aligned? that Africans are integrating the kind of discipline inculcated by state surveillance that characterizes modern Europe? Is that a thing to be desired? Or is it just the novelists, themselves less likely than previous generations to live on the continent, who identify more with states? Does the new realism render the world more transparent or does it obscure something about state sovereignty that the fictive states revealed? Whatever the case, the African novelists who created fictive states continue to have much to teach not just about the state in Africa but about the very nature of state sovereignty.

61 Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 243.

62 Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 41.

63 The fourth republic in Ghana has been in place since 1992, a democratic regime in Nigeria since 1999. In 2002, Daniel Arap Moi was banned from seeking re-election and there were free elections in Kenya.