Big Men and Performances of Sovereignty in Contemporary African Novels

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ABSTRACT

In a yet-unpublished interview the Kenyan novelist Meja Mwangi deplores the Big Man syndrome as an unjust form of power prevalent on the African continent. Mwangi's understanding of the Big Man as someone who is above the law resonates with certain interpretations of Big Man power proffered in political theory. In contemporary African literature, Big Men are a recurring subject of literary representation and this article explores selected contemporary African novels as texts that simultaneously affirm and subvert Big Man power through a strategic redistribution of what Alex Woloch terms "character-space" (13–14). As characters inhabiting (gendered) human bodies, the bodies of Big Men become the site of the performance of sovereign power. This article contends that if sovereignty is understood as not monopolized by the state but as shared by both state and non-state actors—Big Men emerge as playing a fundamental role in its constitution. Not only do mode of dress and stature become important markers of that which is sovereign; the ability to command one's body and will violence, or life and death on other bodies, becomes the mark of sovereignty par excellence. While the literary text attests to the sovereignty of Big Men, it also carries with it its own subversion and contests Big Man power by juxtaposing their bodies with those of alternative characters that draw the reader to more just forms of power. It is this ability of the author to manipulate character bodies that enables the writer to both represent brutal forms of power and the resistance to it.

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> In our world, a Big Man is a rich and powerful man. Often it also means one who can do and get away with things that ordinary people cannot. His wealth, his power and his influence raise him above the law. For years, this has been the general perception of African politicians.—Meja Mwangi (2014)

INTRODUCTION

What do the characters Chief Nanga in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1967), Koomson in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), El Hadji Abdou in Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* (1976), Mr. Ibara in Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* (2005), the Old Man in Meja Mwangi's *The Big Chiefs* (2013), and Obinze in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) have in common? Despite their individual differences and in spite of occupying varied narrative spaces, these characters share that they are at some point within the course of the narrative identified as the Big Man. The figure of the Big Man is ubiquitous in African novels produced in the post-independence period, warranting the investigation of what I call a Big Man aesthetics. Usually allegorical characters that are on the literal level portrayed as male, corrupt, violent, rich, and without regard for the rule of law, Big Men feature in both major and subordinate narrative positions with the body becoming the privileged site of representing the performance of their power. Detailed descriptions of physiognomy and corporeal practices, such as manner of speaking and gesticulating, ways of eating and defecating, ways of inscribing and adorning the body, abound wherever Big Men are present.

Although typified, the relationship between the general traits ascribed to the class of Big Men and the portrayal of a specific Big Man is a complex one necessitating the production of multiple significations of Big Man. At its most typical, the representation is stereotypical, resulting in static identities constructed around a single idea of accumulating personal power by any means necessary. In such cases, all actions of the Big Man, no matter how varied, are present only in as far as they reveal his megalomania and/or aid him to get close to power. Such is the case with Chief in *Americanah*, who comes across as a flat character and occupies a subordinate narrative position. However, Big Men are not always flat characters because we see in the same novel Obinze, who is a conflicted and complex Big Man. In fact, one of the tensions in the book centers on Obinze's ambivalent attitude toward his own identity as a Big Man, a tension that is not clearly resolved by the end. As someone who has accumulated immense personal wealth, attracts sycophantic praises, and is involved in underhand dealings with other Big Men, Obinze is entangled in an environment that enables him to assume this identity. He confides in the book's co-protagonist, Ifemelu, how the idea of the Big Man is affecting his life:

> People treat you differently.… Suddenly you are getting all of this sucking-up from people because they think you expect it, all this exaggerated praise, … and it's so fake and so garish …, but sometimes you start believing a little bit of it yourself and sometimes you see yourself differently. One day I went to a wedding in my hometown, and the MC was doing a lot of silly praise-singing when I came in and I realized that I was walking differently. I didn't *want* to walk differently but I was. (Adichie 431)

For Obinze, the very idea of a Big Man and the performance of "bigness" that the identity entails become for him a source of inner personal conflict. Open to self-introspection, Obinze does not fully become entranced by the potent fictions produced by the sycophants who compel him toward, to use Mats Utas's term, "bigmanity" (8). Obinze is reluctant to reenact bigness and therefore consolidate his Big Man identity.

This article picks up more closely these ideas of performance, Big Men, and their link to the concept of sovereignty. Although sovereignty is defined in various ways, I here engage with Achille Mbembe's postulation that "to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty" ("Necropolitics" 11). The article concludes with a detailed reading of two novels: Meja Mwangi's *The Big Chiefs* (2007, 2013) and Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* (first published in 2002 in French as *Johnny Chien Méchant*). Both texts depict fictional worlds infiltrated by Big Men in which the power and capacity to dictate life and death have become pervasive. While the ubiquity of death renders itself as the dominant theme in both texts, I argue that an engagement with character and characterization demonstrates that both books open themselves to equivocal readings of the politics of death in which the struggle and will to survive is shown to be the ultimate form of countering death.

BIGMANITY AND SOVEREIGNTY AS PERFORMATIVE EFFECTS

In unravelling the links between Big Men, the sovereign subject, and the performative, it is important to first consider who is the Big Man and to ask whether he is indeed sovereign. A terminological study of the concepts of Big Man and sovereignty shows that both are contested terms that have been subjected to different interpretations. Ethnographers, to a large extent, and political scientists, to a lesser extent, have observed and identified Big Men in varied social spaces, including Melanesia, West Africa, war-torn countries, and electoral zones. Semantically, Big Man enjoys a range of associative meanings from a typological classification used to distinguish them from chiefs, a label used to acknowledge differentiated social status, a marker of leadership achievement, as well as a marker acknowledging an individual's resourcefulness, personal skills, or accomplishment in warfare. Synonyms such as manager, strong man, autocratic personal ruler, patron, entrepreneur, man of renown, generous rich man, and center man have all been suggested as alternatives to Big Man (see for example Lindstrom; Sahlins). Similarly, the problems in defining sovereignty are well documented in the literature of disciplines such as politics, history, and international law (see, for example, Sheehan; Bartelson). The contested nature of sovereignty has thus resulted in a situation where it tends to be defined along its many variants, such as territorial, informal, popular, state, and de facto.

I suggest that both the notion of Big Man and the concept of sovereignty resist stable definitions because states of bigmanity and sovereignty are each constituted by a series of performative acts—which are themselves multileveled, fluid, and fleeting. In the everyday sense of the term, to describe something as performative means that it has the quality of performing (i.e., doing) or is characterized by performance (i.e., deeds). In this sense, performative is an adjective formed from

the verb "perform" and falls in the group of similar adjectives such as formative, consultative, alterative, and augmentative. This sense of performative as relating to performance partly explains why it was the obvious term of choice when philosopher J. L. Austin isolated a performative utterance in his lectures posthumously published as *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), as an utterance that performs an action upon issuance (4–7). Thus, for example, when a priest utters the words "I baptize thee in the name of the father, the son and the holy ghost" in the course of a Christian baptism, he is not simply stating something, he is actually performing the baptism.

Taking her cue from Austin, Judith Butler introduced the idea of performative acts to describe how they (broadly construed) constitute gender identity. In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988), Butler challenges gender identity as an essence grounded in biological sex in favor of a view of it as always emergent and grounded in a stylized repetition of acts. She argues that "gender reality is performative [, i.e.,] it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (527). Butler elaborates that while there are endless possibilities in the ways in which gender identity can be performed, the performance of gender is restricted by social conventions and taboos leading to situations where, for example, heteronormativity comes to be seen as natural and the only way of doing gender. Seen in this Butlerian sense, the term "performative act" refers to performances that simultaneously constitute an identity and conjure up "an object of belief" (520). In this article, I will use the term "performative" in the three senses outlined above—i.e., every day, Austinian, and Butlerian—as demanded by context.

I am not the first to claim a relationship between Big Men and sovereignty, nor the first to conceive of both bigmanity and sovereignty as performative effects. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, although not directly employing the term Big Man, have argued for stronger inspections of "informal sovereignties" in which local strongmen, staunch bureaucrats, vivid politicians, businessmen, or vigilantes challenge the state's monopoly of violence and engage in sovereign practices (306–08). In Hansen and Stepputat's characterization, Big Men would qualify as engaging in practices of informal sovereignties since political anthropology has traditionally treated them as operating outside of formal structures of power. Notably, in the seminal paper "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia" (1963), anthropologist Marshall D. Sahlins drew attention to the informal nature of Big Man power by contrasting Melanesian Big Men with Polynesian chiefs who are installed or inherit the office of chieftaincy. He writes, "Big-men do not come to office; they do not succeed to, nor are they installed in, existing positions of leadership over political groups" (289). While Big Man is indeed not a political office and neither is it a political title, the present article does not treat official and unofficial spaces as mutually exclusive because, as will be demonstrated in the course of the argument, Big Men operate in both official and unofficial spaces. In fact, Big Men tend to hold political office or to be involved in formal politics because access to official power affords them with a ready base that can easily be converted into personal power.

Another remarkable point in Sahlins's work is his recognition that a Big Man is big only to the extent that he performs his bigness. Writes Sahlins, "the

attainment of big-man status is … the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract about him a coterie of loyal, lesser men" (289). Although Sahlins does not make a conscious reference to performative theory, the nature of Big Man power that he describes is performative. The Big Man performs power with his body while at the same time embodying it. If the indicative quality of Big Man authority is that it is personal power, as Sahlins asserts, then the Big Man also strives to accumulate as much power as he can and radiate it symbolically in the person. It is this image of a body accumulating personal power that the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o caricatures in the ever-bloating body of the Ruler in his novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). In an ideal situation and left unhindered, the accumulation of power by the Big Man would be limitless and he would be a true sovereign.

If the truth of a Big Man identity lies in its performance, can the same be said of sovereignty? Is sovereignty performative in the way that Big Man power is? Does the truth of sovereignty lie in its performance? In *The Improvised State: Sovereignty, Performance and Agency in Dayton Bosnia* (2013), Alex Jeffrey seeks to denaturalize the state as a preexisting locus of sovereign power in favor of one that performs its power in order to convey its legitimacy. While performances of state power can either be "spectacular" (e.g., state parades and inauguration ceremonies for state buildings) or "prosaic" (e.g., printing letters on government letter-headed paper), Jeffrey adds that performances will always be constrained by the resources available, hence his usage of the term "the improvised state" to reflect the combining of performance and resourcefulness in performing state sovereignty (1–7).

Apart from Jeffrey's understanding of how performances relate to sovereignty, there is also a second sense in which sovereignty is performative. Stéphane Beaulac has described sovereignty as "one of those powerful words" that not only represents reality, but is actively involved in creating and transforming it (1–2). Beaulac brings us back to the idea of doing things with words, whereby utterances about sovereignty constitute its reality. In this sense, sovereignty only exists by means of words. An obvious objection can be raised against this formulation: speech acts are not the only means of making sovereign claims. One can indeed ask what sovereignty is enacted through written documents such as state constitutions, the institution of boundaries over territories, or the exercising of violence on other bodies? First of all, if writing is understood as not a mere representation of the spoken word, but rather that both are expressions of the same language, then the distinction of speech vs. writing falls away. Writing can and does behave like a speech act. Secondly, a return to the work of Beaulac helps us to see that what we actually understand as concrete expressions of sovereignty, such as the presence of national boundaries and states, are in fact instituted by the meanings accorded to it. In his study of the etymology of sovereignty, Beaulac traces the word to the 16th century and to the writings of Jean Bodin. While recognizing that Bodin did not invent the notion of sovereignty, Beaulac argues that he was a pioneer in theorizing the concept and suggesting its applicability. Beaulac shows that although Bodin originally used the word "sovereignty" to place the French king at the top of the pyramid of authority, the original meaning did not crystallize but is ever-changing and continues to play a material role in the construction of social reality (25). What Beaulac is saying is that the language of sovereignty tends to be contagious, i.e., claims of sovereignty generate counter-claims and in the process disseminate the

word and its meanings multifold. Acts such as state making, territorial control, and war making should then be seen in two ways: first, as a result of the competing meanings fighting for dominance and secondly, as utterances attempting to create knowable objects in which to ground baseless postulations of sovereignty.

The preceding affirmation of bigmanity and sovereignty as performative does not yet begin to account for the specific historical contexts that produced the novels under investigation in this study. It is important at this point to ask, why do certain meanings and performances of sovereignties dominate in one place and not in another? What consequences do they have and is there a way to think of sovereignty outside the realm of language? Since both novels that I am dealing with here are set on the African continent it is to the African context that I will now turn. There is a lot of scholarship that draws attention to the fragmented nature of sovereignty in Africa and to states' inability to exercise it over their territories. In this article I will focus on Achille Mbembe because his work best demonstrates the interplay between what can be termed formal sovereignties (acts exercised by the state and usually enacted in corresponding legal instruments) and informal ones. In the essay "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa" (2000), Mbembe and Steven Rendall discuss the multiple sources of sovereignty on the African continent, from the precolonial period, to the colonial period, and the postcolonial present. Mbembe and Rendall are particularly concerned with how both state and non-state actors make sovereign claims that result in the production of specific kinds of boundaries on the continent. Of particular interest to the two critics is an understanding of Africa as a territory and the constant reconfigurations of sociopolitical spacialities that take place therein, resulting in the creation of both official and unofficial zones of locale. In a subsequent essay, "Necropolitics" (2003), Mbembe shifts focus from boundary configurations and places life and death at the heart of sovereignty. Defining necropolitics as the forms of subjugating "life to the power of death" (39), Mbembe's necropolitics is literally about the politics of death, i.e., he seeks to understand who kills and who is killed, as well as the ways of executing death. Placing the body at the center of his concept, Mbembe argues that under conditions of necropower death or the ever-present possibility of it affects both the individual human body and entire populations. Under necropower it is the body that is brutally severed or killed, and it is the body that is massacred enmasse. At the same time, it is the body that survives, resists, kills, and destroys (as in the case of a suicide bomber) or sacrifices (as in the case of the martyr). Mbembe is thus interested to show how necropower reconfigures "the relations among resistance, sacrifice and terror" (39).

If, according to Mbembe, "the power and capacity to dictate who may live or who may die constitutes the ultimate expression of sovereignty" ("Necropolitics" 11), then his postulation is crucial for a critical understanding of the location of the sovereign in particular historical contexts. By placing emphasis on the ability to dictate the right over life and death, Mbembe presupposes that there is always a person or a group of persons who exercise sovereign acts over other bodies—in most cases leading to the death and or maiming of individuals and entire groups of people. Drawing on Mbembe's notion of sovereignity, this article postulates that Big Men aspire to be material bearers of it and exercise both violence and the right of life and death over other bodies. Testing this postulation against the two novels by Dongala and Mwangi, several lines of fracture begin to appear

that suggest that the body can also be narrated and deployed in multiple ways as a site of resistance.

POSITIONING MWANGI AND DONGALA AS AFRICAN WRITERS

Born in the 1940s both Mwangi and Dongala belong to an older generation of African writers who witnessed many African nations gain independence from European colonizers and the ensuing tumultuous politics that came to characterize the postcolony. Writing in English and French, respectively, both Mwangi, a native of Kenya, and Dongala, from Congo Brazzaville, use their imagination to narratively grasp how the pursuit of certain political values and personal ambitions configure the nation in multiple ways, with the worst outcome being mass dehumanization and massacres of entire populations. In *Johnny Mad Dog* and *The Big Chiefs*, respectively, Dongala and Mwangi pick up the theme of mass dehumanization and massacre in unnamed African countries, with Dongala exploring it through the prism of a civil war and Mwangi through the prism of post-genocide. It is telling that Mwangi and Dongala choose not to name the country in which the story is set, although both authors make it a point to show that the story is taking place in Africa. They, for example, incorporate aspects of local significance in the narrative, referencing the country in question as a former colony of a Western power and making general references to the African continent.

In the context of this article, the setting of an unnamed country is important in at least three ways. First, a story set in an unidentified country does not open itself up to denunciations of historical inaccuracies, as the fictional element is enhanced in a story taking place in an anonymous space. This is particularly important in the case of Dongala and Mwangi, whose works are prone to be read as historical accounts or autobiographical. In the case of Dongala, he wrote *Johnny Mad Dog* after fleeing a civil war in his home country. In a talk at Simon Rock College now archived online, Dongala discusses how he fled the Republic of Congo and relocated to the United States where he began working on *Johnny Mad Dog* soon afterward. With respect to Mwangi, some of the scenes in *The Big Chiefs* foreshadow the 2008 targeted ethnic violence in Kenya that saw the burning of dozens of mostly Kikũyũ women and children who had taken refuge in a church in Kiambaa. The 2008 Kenyan violence was widely covered by both local and international media and in some cases comparisons were drawn between the Kenyan violence and the Rwandan Genocide (Nyassy; Gettleman; Thielke). Further, Mwangi's work could be misread as a historical document, considering that he was among ten African authors from eight different countries that travelled to Kigali in 1998, four years after the Rwandan genocide, as part of a writer-in-residence project to memorialize the Rwandan genocide (Hitchcott 55–56).

Secondly, by not specifying a particular nation-state, the stories can be generalized across varied African spaces that speak to similar experiences. While generalizing experience runs the risk of homogenizing what may otherwise be very disparate scenarios, it is clear that both authors do not want to restrict the vision espoused by their writing to a single African country. In fact, both Mwangi and Dongala come across as politically committed authors who espouse a pan-African politics, where pan-African does not necessarily mean the integration of

diverse African nations, but a way of proper governing across different African spaces—governing that will bring an end to suffering, unnecessary wars, and dehumanization. Seen in this second sense, and this brings me to my third point, Dongala and Mwangi foreground a generalized African space because they want to speak to an African reader whom they address in their writing. While not wanting to polarize the question of readership as between an African reader or a Western one, it is still important to make this third point, especially in the wake of recent criticism that attacks African writers for perpetuating an image of Africa's suffering to appeal to a Western audience and conform to negative Western-media-type coverage of Africa. In this regard, one of the most scathing remarks have come from writer and critic Helon Habila. In his review of Noviolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) he censures African writers for being obsessed with national frameworks in their writing and accusing them of affirming negative stereotypes about Africa not only as a means of connecting with the Western reader, but also as a way of winning Western literary prizes and attaining celebrity status. What such criticism does is to entirely lose sight of the African reader and reduce him/her to a non-entity in the constitution of African letters. African readers, some of whom might have firsthand experience with the conditions that produce what Habila's newspaper review calls "an African aesthetic of suffering" can relate differently to stories of war and genocide than a person who is far removed from the experience. If the African writer does indeed stage his/her art, it is not only to the Western reader that s/he appeals, but to a multiple audience with varying ideological assumptions.

THE BIG CHIEFS

Space and sociopolitical location is not only crucial for the politics of reading as demonstrated in the above section, it is also the tool with which the author assigns narrative position to characters. Against this background and returning to the main thesis of this article, one can see the narrative presence of Big Men both in *The Big Chiefs* and in *Johnny Mad Dog* as sociopolitically spatialized. As is evident from the title, the distinction between Big Man and Chief is collapsed in *The Big Chiefs.* The Big Men in the book are chiefs, and the reverse that the chiefs are Big Men is equally true. As Big Chiefs, the men to whom the book so refers hold public office as either an elected official or an appointed one. In short, the Big Chiefs make up a clique of the ruling elite. By qualifying the chiefs as big, Mwangi draws attention to the nature of the Big Chiefs' power, which recalls that of Big Men. Just like Big Men, the Big Chiefs are interested in accumulating personal power and are driven by personal ambition and interests. The Big Chiefs exercise sovereignty in all senses of the term—they have a monopoly on violence and decide on the right of life and death; from a legal point of view they arbitrarily make laws and more often than not hold the prerogative to break the laws they enact; and from a territorial point of view, the Big Chiefs have dominion over space, influence the emergence of internal boundaries, and decide on whom might occupy which zones within them.

The plot of *The Big Chiefs* unfolds within this idea of zones of unequal status within a single country. On the one hand, we have the city proper with a functioning economy and infrastructure over which the Big Chiefs, who are synonymous with the state, hold a firm grip. The operatives of the Big Chiefs—the

police—closely guard the borders of the city and are given the powers to decide who they can let inside. The determining factor for gaining access to resources and citizenship in the city is ultimately one's allegiance to the Big Chiefs. On the other hand, we have the Pit, which is the zone of exception, an enclave within the city that is likened to the devil's anus. The city's undesirables and political fallouts live in the Pit. Topographically, the Pit is a previously abandoned mine that later became the city's main rubbish dump. The residents of the Pit are largely denied entry into the city and require formal documentation to be allowed to do so by the border police. The conspicuous poverty of the inhabitants of the Pit, which is visibly marked on their haggard bodies, becomes the mode for profiling them. Much of the action in the book takes place in the Pit, and it is here that we find the book's narrator, an aged man who is simply identified as the Old Man. Mostly through a stream of consciousness, the Old Man retells the story of how the Pit came to be, of the country's genocide, and his own political fallout, which resulted in him becoming an inhabitant there.

Formerly a Big Man, or was it a Big Chief (?), the Old Man cannot finally say what his role was when he was close to the powers that be. Destitute and blinded, the Old Man comes under the care of the Boy in the Pit, who will later come to play an instrumental role in leading a resistance against the Big Chiefs and the inhabitants of the city. Almost all of the characters in *The Big Chiefs* remain nameless and are identified either by their gender, age, or former profession. By not naming the characters, Mwangi draws attention to the subaltern status of the inhabitants of the Pit, who are not only denied civil rights, but also the very right to be human. If naming is one of the modes through which subjects enter humanity and become knowable human beings, then the Pit's inhabitants' anonymity is a symbolic representation of how they are denied being human. On another level, the namelessness of the characters highlights the social function each one of them is destined to play in resisting the Big Chiefs by the end of the book.

Most of the inhabitants of the Pit formerly lived as shanty dwellers along the city's river valleys and around the city's dumps before the Big Chiefs categorized them as a superfluous population that needed to be disposed of. The Big Chiefs despise the shanty dwellers on the pretext that their conspicuous poverty makes them a sorry site in the city. However, masked in this pretext, the narrative reveals, is the real reason why the Big Chiefs despise them—namely that the shanty dwellers do not vote in the right way, and they refuse to take part in the performances that reproduce the Big Chiefs' power: "they would not line up on the streets, to obscure their unsightly huts, and wave flags, and dance patriotic dances when the Big Chiefs invited bigger chiefs from abroad to see their magnificent country" (Mwangi 57). After repeatedly dispatching the police to exterminate the shanty dwellers to no avail, the Big Chiefs finally find a justification to rid the city of them for good. A war machine that combines elements of a conflagration, bulldozing and rounding up by the Big Chiefs' operatives is unleashed on the shanty dwellers and they are banished to live in the Pit.

In the Pit, the Old Man, who is a walking archive of knowledge, spends his days by telling the Boy and the Girl stories of the genocide that had been orchestrated by the Big Chiefs in a bid to accumulate more power. Although the genocide is over when the book opens, its memory post-traumatically haunts the narrative. Images of death, which include human remains that are constantly unearthed in

shallow graves in the Pit, and maimed individuals serve as a constant reminder of the shadows and threats of death. Even though the Big Chiefs mastermind the genocide, source weapons, and broadcast ethnocentric messages to incite the people, they subcontract the right over life and death to the civil population, and the people are given the freedom to kill whenever they please. The resulting form of violence is an orgy of death in which neighbor turns against neighbor, midwives take the machete on newly born infants, and students turn on their teachers. The Old Man's story of the genocide is a complicated tale of woe that does not offer moments of respite. The Old Man is devoid of hope and this is clearly marked on his body—he cannot see and the Boy does not take him to the humanitarian doctors who come to the Pit to cure people's eyes.

The stream of consciousness technique also gives us access to the Old Man's thoughts, which we learn are full of regrets. It is obvious that Mwangi condemns the Old Man and by extension his generation for failing to lead. The Old Man had an opportunity to make the right decisions when he was close to power but he chose inertia instead. The Old Man claims that he wrote books and sent out international alerts of an impending genocide but no one—not even the Boy—is able to find any evidence to support this. Although the narrative is on the whole sympathetic toward the Old Man and shows him regretting his inaction when the genocide starts, Mwangi rests the responsibility of hope somewhere else. The Old Man simply functions as a living archive of history and passes on information of past wrongs to the younger generation.

It is with two inhabitants of the Pit, the Boy and the Girl, that Mwangi rests the new generation's foundation of hope. The ages of the Boy and the Girl are not given but one can deduce from the book that the two are probably in their teens. Both the Boy and the Girl are survivors, having managed to live through the genocide and witnessed so many deaths. The Girl is a young mother of three and her last child was fathered by the Boy. As a mother and nurturer, Mwangi sees in the Girl a different type of power that sustains itself by feeding on aspects of love and care. The Boy, on the other hand, is the embodiment of resistance against the Big Chiefs and leads a group of boys into the city to demand rights for the Pit inhabitants. Hardly armed, the Boy turns his own body into a weapon and uses his legs to run and dodge police bullets. Unarmed, the boy knows that death will be inevitable when they face the police during the resistance. However, it is martyrdom that the boy seeks in the sense in which Mbembe has described the martyr as "laboring under the sign of the future" ("Necropolitics" 37). The Boy sacrifices his own life to create a better future for his young son and future generations. In sacrificing his own life as a martyr the Boy overcomes death by immortalizing his legacy.

JOHNNY MAD DOG

Unlike *The Big Chiefs*, which opens in a post-genocide era, *Johnny Mad Dog* begins in the midst of a civil war. In the novel the space within the confines of the nation-state in which the war is taking place constantly shift, with new forms of territoriality and locality always appearing. What constitutes the limits of the state is not apparently clear and neither is it if there is a functioning government. Both the regular and the irregular army use force to claim rights and loot territories.

The militia, mainly comprised of child soldiers, have organized themselves into factions and also exercise the right to kill, loot, and rape. In this scheme of things, the state does not have a monopoly on violence and territorial borders. Violence is cyclical and attacks are unpredictable. The war itself triggers migratory movements not only for the civilians who are fleeing the war, but also for the itinerant militia, as they look for new places to loot and terrorize. It is in such conditions that Dongala embeds the two sixteen-year-old co-protagonists of his story: Laokolé and Johnny Mad Dog. The former is a secondary school girl who is fleeing the war with her crippled mother and young brother, while the latter is a ruthless child soldier. To appreciate *Johnny Mad Dog* one first needs to recognize its carefully thought-out structure, which functions through recourse to multiple narrators and unsettling binaries at different levels. Throughout the narrative we find interspersed at different points an engagement with binaries such as male vs. female, hero(ine) vs. villain, regular army vs. irregular army, state vs. society, refugee vs. militia, animal vs. human, and left-handedness vs. right-handedness. Dongala does not uphold the binaries as opposite ends of a spectrum, but constantly questions the dominance that would ordinarily be associated with one term and subverts it.

As in Mwangi's *Big Chiefs*, Dongala shows personal politicking and the struggle for personal power to be the cause of the war, although as the narrative progresses the different armies and factions do not even know why they are fighting. In the end it becomes a war between those who have weapons and those who do not. While in the *Big Chiefs* Mwangi uses the Old Man to narrate how the Big Chiefs destroy mass populations and futures for young people, Dongala uses Laokolé and Johnny Mad Dog to narrate and show how bad political decisions victimize children and in the process compromise their futures. Although politicians and Big Men are complicit in the violence in *Johnny Mad Dog*, they recede to the background within the main body of the narrative, and it is the militias who take center stage. However, it is important to note that the lines demarcating politician, warlord, corrupt bureaucrat, or Big Man become blurred. Johnny Mad Dog aptly captures this indistinguishability of roles:

> if, like so many others, he [a bigshot] was merely a bureaucrat on the government's payroll, then there were only two possibilities: either he had siphoned off large sums from the state treasury, or he was mixed up in politics and was an active member of the party in power (anyway, in our country the two always went hand in hand). (Dongala 228–29)

The bigshot or the Big Man that Johnny Mad Dog references in the above quote is Mr. Ibara, a corrupt customs inspector who remains a subordinate character throughout, and his role in the narrative is simply allegorical. Mr. Ibara's fictional identity always emerges to a lesser extent through the eyes of Laokolé, as she constructs a perimeter wall around his house, and, to a larger extent, through the eyes of Johnny Mad Dog. The flatness of Mr. Ibara renders him a character type, a representative of a class of men like him, the Big Men. Despite the subordinate position that Mr. Ibara occupies in the narrative, it is telling that Dongala discusses the looting of Mr. Ibara's house in detail and lavishes physical attention on his corporeal practices. The scene deserves to be quoted at length:

> Here I was, in the home of Mr. Ibara—one of those high-and-mighty types who would drive past us in their luxury cars and sneer at us, ignoring the misery around them. One of those bigshots who embezzled state funds to build their villas and support their mistresses; who had no need to build hospitals or schools in the country, because as soon as they felt the first twinge of a headache they would hop on a plane to America or Europe and get medical care. Yeah, I was in the home of one of those bigshots. I'd parked my ass in the armchair of a bigshot. I'd drunk from the glass of a bigshot. In a minute, I was going to take a piss in the toilet of a bigshot. And then, as I gazed at Mr. Ibara's wife sprawled on the floor, I had the urge to fuck the wife of a bigshot. (Dongala 236–37)

It is ironic that in this scene it is Johnny Mad Dog, he with little moral ground, who subverts the power of Mr. Ibara and by extension that of Big Men. Johnny Mad Dog targets Mr. Ibara's symbols of power, which include his wealth, his wife, and his body. While for the most part of the narrative Johnny Mad Dog is portrayed as a sovereign who decides on the right of life and death, and kills and maims for violence's own sake, the violence that Johnny Mad Dog visits on Mr. Ibara and his wife is calculated to humiliate him, render him impotent, and emasculate him. Violence here is calculated to trim the Big Man to size, so to speak. Johnny Mad Dog's own reflection on the looting and raping scene attests to this point: "Mr Bigshots of this world don't forget that the little guys exist, too! And know that they'll get you whenever they can. Remember this for your own good" (Dongala 238). At this point it also becomes clear that Dongala did not cast Johnny Mad Dog as the villain of the text. Johnny Mad Dog, just like Laokolé, is a child whose life has been turned upside down by the power struggles of Big Men. On closer reading of the text one realizes that although Johnny Mad Dog and Laokolé seem to be held in stark contrast, there are many parallels between them that speak of their status as children. As such, traditional categories of hero(ine) vs. villain are unhelpful in illuminating the tale of *Johnny Mad Dog*.

The scene, in addition, shows that in many respects the constitution of a Big Man identity is dependent on claiming female bodies. When Johnny Mad Dog rapes Mrs. Ibara, we encounter her not through her own eyes but through the dominating male gaze of Johnny Mad Dog, who wields the power of a gun. Mrs. Ibara lays sprawled on the floor, her body on display for the visual and erotic pleasure of Johnny Mad Dog and his fellow militiamen. While Johnny Mad Dog manages to disempower Mr. Ibara by raping his wife, what the scene reveals is not a justification for subverting Big Man power, but the lingering presence of patriarchal structures in which women—whether they are wives of Big Men or not—are prone to be claimed and unclaimed in male-dominated power struggles. The point of claiming women's bodies withstanding, a caveat still needs to be offered when using a gender-specific term such as Big Man, as it might suggest a realm of male-dominated power in which women are always victims in power struggles. In a footnote in the edited collection *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks* (2012), Utas notes that, despite the gender-specificity of the term, Big Men can either be female or male (27). A similar note was made over a decade earlier by another social scientist, Paul Nugant, in his *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana* (1996). While in the majority of the novels I have investigated Big Men tend to be male, there is an emerging number of novelists who bring to

attention the presence of Big Women, their female counterpart. In *Americanah* and *Rafiki: Man Guitar* (2013), Adichie and Mwangi, respectively, speak of Big Women, but they are not fully actualized individual characters and exist in the shadows of the other characters in the text.

In my reading of *The Big Chiefs* I argued that the plot unfolds within two zones of unequal status, one of which is a zone of exception. In *Johnny Mad Dog*, while there are zones of differentiated status, and the refugees end up being confined in a camp, Dongala also highlights the urban/rural divide in the text. The militia mainly attack districts within the city where they are assured of obtaining loot. Displaced from their homes the city inhabitants flee to the villages in the rural areas, to the forest, and to the district housing diplomatic missions. Free from direct control and close supervision by the militia, these spaces offer a buffer zone where the victims of war can temporarily take refuge. On the level of narrative technique, the buffer zones also allow Dongala to have moments of respite and shift the narrative away from violence. For instance, when Laokolé flees to one of the villages she immediately develops a connection with another girl. During her short stay at the village Dongala depicts a beautiful friendship between two free-spirited girls who take pleasure in admiring each other's blossoming bodies. In this village, life is communal and power is not directly linked to the possession of material wealth, as is evidenced by the village's headman not owning "the biggest …, and maybe the handsomest" house (Dongala 256). Dongala depicts in the village a particular sense of a romanticized sovereign space functioning on ideas of social justice and equality. It is perhaps because of this ideality that the reader only catches a glimpse of the village before the fleeting moment escapes.

CONCLUSION: RESISTING NECROPOLITICS

Thematically, *Johnny Mad Dog* shares more parallels with *The Big Chiefs* than differences. The ending of *Johnny Mad Dog* in many ways echoes that of *The Big Chiefs*. While in *The Big Chiefs* the Girl survives with her children, Laokolé also survives the civil war and takes on one of the orphaned children to raise as her own. The symbolism of the young mothers as nurturers, and therefore as signaling rebirth for the future, is obvious in both texts. However, at the level of narrative strategy, both texts differ in the way they approach the question of agency between the female characters. Read against certain conceptions of feminist theory, the Girl in Mwangi's text can be understood as passive and as always dependent on the Boy. She remains confined to her traditional roles of nurturer and educator of her children. On the other hand, Laokolé possesses agency, which culminates in the final scene in which she kills Johnny Mad Dog. Although Laokolé kills Johnny Mad Dog in an act of self-defense, it should still be read as a sovereign act because it is by defeating her enemy that she overcomes death and ensures her own survival. Laokolé uses her own body as a weapon to destroy Johnny Mad Dog. Harnessing the power of her left hand, and using it to her advantage, Laokolé is able to deliver the fatal blow that kills the right-handed Johnny Mad Dog. In this text, just as in *The Big Chiefs*, survival is the ultimate form of resisting necropower, with the body functioning as the utmost site of resistance. If necropolitics brings life under the control of death, then it is by managing to stay alive and gathering the strength

to kill in turn that one counters necropolitics. Laokolè's final scene after killing Johnny Mad Dog sums up this point:

> The fresh air was like a tonic, and I was filled with an all-encompassing joy. Joy at being alive. Joy at having survived. Joy at continuing to live. The fresh air revived the child, too, for she began to cry. And this was good—a child who's crying is a child who is alive. (Dongala 320)

I conclude by asking what my readings of these two novels tell us regarding the performative dimension of *The Big Chiefs* and *Johnny Mad Dog* when each is taken as a whole. Both texts are a way of doing things with words, in that they move the reader to question the ontological status that should be attached to notions like Big Man and sovereignty when they attempt to ground their reality in the body and in the process cause it pain, suffering, and death. Apropos the broader theoretical formulations with which I opened the article, literary texts that deal with the sociopolitics of Big Men go beyond addressing formal aesthetic concerns and force us to critically question why death and the resistance to it is symptomatic of politics. By incorporating Big Men in the narrative, authors, and by extension critics, are able to problematize the more abstract and speculative claims of sovereign theory. Rather than locating sovereignty solely in disembodied categories such as the state, conceiving of Big Men as material bearers of sovereignty helps to show how it is performatively constructed and finds its expression in tangible bodies while at the same time conscripting bodies of the masses into the politics of death. It is also with the body that masses resist politics of death.

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