Spectacle and Subversive Laughter in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*

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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has observed that the nation-state appropriates unto itself the monopoly of performance on the national stage that is the state: "it organizes the space as a huge enclosure, with definite places of entrance and exit…[manning borders] to keep away invaders. But they are also there to confine the population within a certain territory. The nation-state performs its own being relentlessly, through its daily exercise of power over the exits and entrances, by means of passports, visas and flags" ("Enactments of Power" 21). Further, Ngũgĩ writes,

> Within that territorial enclosure, [the nation-state] creates other enclosures, the most prominent being prison, with its entrances and exits guarded by armed might. How did prison, a much narrower stage, come to be such an important site for the state's performance of punishment? The state would prefer to act out its power, watched by the entire territorial audience. In the television age this is possible, though there are restraints ("Enactments" 21).

Ngũgĩ then discusses the deployment of spectacle as a mode of punishment in 18th century Europe. He also shows how the spectacle's economy of power has been used against some contemporary dissident artists who have been incarcerated by repressive regimes as a way of dislocating and dispersing them, thus "removing any basis for a collective performance of identity and resistance" ("Enactments" 24). Ngũgĩ suggests that prison acts as a metaphor for the postcolonial space in which "the vast majority of people can be described as being condemned to conditions of perpetual physical, social, and psychic confinement" ("Enactments" 25).

Whereas the emphasis in Ngũgĩ's article is on the choreography that goes into the staging of the spectacles of power that legitimate despotic regimes, this paper examines the resistant spectator in *Wizard of the Crow* (hereafter referred to as *Wizard*) who refuses to be awed by state power and who, by laughing at the spectacular excess,

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inscribes a different meaning to the spectacles. The spectator essentially contests the state's monopoly of meaning and its performance. It will be the argument in this paper that by answering back to the monologue of the spectacle through unscripted performances including silence where they are supposed to applaud, the average citizen subjects of the fictional state of Aburĩria engage in a dialogic exchange with the repressive state, contesting what Simon Gikandi has described elsewhere as the postcolonial state's "monopoly of meanings, performances and discourses" (*Ngugi wa Thiong'o* 38). Spectator laughter is a central component to this contestation.

Gikandi argues that Ngũgĩ's activist theater in Gĩkũyũ "undermined the covenant between the ruling class and its subalterns by suggesting that there was an alternative to the state, the party, and the president as sources of meaning and authority; ….his writings, by turning the state itself into a subject of ridicule, were undermining the representational authority of the postcolony" (*Ngugi wa Thiong'o* 38). *Wizard* deconstructs the spectacles of power and valorizes subversive laughter in undermining the representational authority of the Aburĩrian state and ruler. The spectator of the state spectacles recalls the spectator in traditional African performance who was more of a co-actor than a spectator. The average spectator in the novel is re-inscribed as an actor in state affairs, an active agent who subverts the choreographed spectacle watched by the entire territorial space. The spectator exploits a continual slippage between word and meaning, text and reception. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, "language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" (*Dialogic* 294). The ruling elite's spectacles and discourses are monologues aimed at an audience discursively constructed as apolitical, docile, voiceless and naïve. By answering the state's discourses with unscripted carnivalesque laughter the people of Aburũria engage the state in a dialogic exchange, populating the state's discourses with the people's own intentions.

In *Wizard*, the spectacular performance of the state's texts almost invariably elicits derisive laughter that becomes a space of change and renewal. The laughter subverts the intentions of the state which, through numerous multimedia texts—radio, print, televisual, "official" rumor—seeks to control the discursive field in Aburĩria. It creates a spectacle of stability and inevitability which is then circulated as reality. Guy Debord has observed that "The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and as such, the autonomous movement of non-life" (12). Further, Debord argues, "understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance. But any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle's essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life—and as a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*" (14). *Wizard* apprehends the spectacles of power as a negation of life; it shows how subscribing to the rhetoric of the spectacles would ultimately lead to the economic, moral, and spiritual death of the citizen subjects in the same way that those performing those spectacles have legibly abused their physi-

cal bodies, degraded the physical landscape and evacuated their lives of humanity. Writing of Ngũgĩ's earlier works, Gikandi has argued that "the colonial state [presented] the spectacle of power as its most important claim to legitimacy" (*Ngugi* 35). *Wizard* unmasks that spectacle as mere appearance, exposes its negation of life and gives visual form to its opposition.

To understand Ngũgĩ's unmasking of the spectacles of power, it is necessary to connect his theoretical formulation of spectacle and the nation-state as the stage for the performance of state power and Michel Foucault's discussion of spectacle and its relation to an economy of power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses at length how "a mechanism of power" operated in the spectacles of punishment in 18th century Europe. He writes of a power

> that did not hesitate to exert itself directly on bodies, but was exalted and strengthened by its visible manifestations;…that asserted itself as an armed power whose function of maintaining order was not entirely unconnected with the functions of war;… that presented rules and obligations as personal bonds, a breach of which constituted an offence and called for vengeance;…for which disobedience was an act of hostility, the first sign of a rebellion, which is not in principle different from civil war;…that had to demonstrate not why it enforced its laws, but who were its enemies, and what unleashing of force threatened them;…which, in the absence of continual supervision, sought a renewal of its effect in the spectacle of its individual manifestations;…that was recharged in the ritual display of its reality as "super-power'. (57)

Foucault could have been writing about *Wizard* in which the ruler of Aburīria stages fantastic spectacles to legitimize his power. He elevates himself to divinity at the same time that he mercilessly massacres his subjects for sport, demonstrating the asymmetry of power between him and his subjects. He is constantly at war with his subjects and every act of defiance against the state constitutes a personal affront to the authority of the ruler especially since, as official discourses hold, there is no difference between the ruler and the country. In staging its rites of punishment in all their spectacular excess, in its massive ceremonies of self renewal, the despotic ruler/state recharges the image of a super-power. And thus, just as Foucault wrote, "over and above the crime that has put the sovereign in contempt" the great rituals of restoring or renewing power to the monarch (in the novel we could think of the Ruler's exile of his wife Rachael, the ritual observance of his birthday and the control this exerts on the nation's time, the parodic entry of the Ruler into "Jerusalem", the attempted suppression of rebellious subjects, even the Ruler's desperate attempt to force the traditional diviner to use his occult powers to reveal the whereabouts of "dissident Nyawĩra" in a widely-attended ceremony that is televised) deploy before all eyes an invincible force:

> its aim is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength. Although redress of the private injury occasioned by the offence must be proportionate, although the sentence must be equitable, the punishment is carried out in such a way as to give a spectacle not of

> measure, but of imbalance and excess; in this liturgy of punishment, there must be an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority. And this superiority is not simply that of right, but that of the physical strength of the sovereign beating down upon the body of his adversary and mastering it: by breaking the law, the offender has touched the very person of the prince; and it is the prince—or at least those to whom he has delegated his force—who seizes upon the body of the condemned man and displays it marked, beaten, broken…Yet, in fact, what had hitherto maintained this practice of torture was not an economy of example…but a policy of terror: to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign. The public execution did not re-establish justice; it reactivated power (49).

Foucault argues that the execution, with "its ruthlessness, its spectacle, its physical violence, its unbalanced play of forces, its meticulous ceremonial, its entire apparatus were inscribed in the political functioning of the penal system" (49). We could substitute the prince for the Lord Ruler of Aburĩria; the penal system with the police state that is Aburĩria; replace the execution with the imprisonment, torture and ruthless hunt for those who disobey the ruler, and still be able to meaningfully relate the spectacles of power in 18th-century Europe with the excesses of despotic power in the fictional Aburĩria. Both abuses are motivated by the need to break the citizenry through the economy of example.

Writing generally of the abuses of power in postcolonial Africa, Achille Mbembe observes that state power "creates, through its administrative and bureaucratic practices, a world of meanings all its own, a master code which, in the process of becoming the society's primary code, ends by governing—perhaps paradoxically—the various logics that underlie all other meanings within that society." Further, Mbembe argues, state power "attempts to institutionalize its world of meanings as a 'socio-historical world' and to make that world fully real, turning it into a part of the people's common sense not only by instilling it in the minds of the…'target population', but also by integrating it into the consciousness of the period" (3). Mbembe observes that in the postcolony, "the *commandment* [authoritarianism] seeks to institutionalize itself, in order to achieve legitimation and hegemony, in the form of a *fetish*. The signs, vocabulary and narratives that it produces are not meant merely to be symbols; they are officially invested with a surplus of meanings which are not negotiable and which one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge" ("Provisional Notes" 3-4). Expanding on Bakhtin's discussion of the grotesque and the obscene in *Rabelais and his World*, Mbembe argues that even though the grotesque and the obscene are "parodies which undermine officialdom by showing how arbitrary and vulnerable is officialese and turning it into an object of ridicule," there is a need to go beyond Bakhtin's discussion of the grotesque and obscene in ordinary people's lives and pay attention to three things: "(1) the timing of those occasions which state power organizes for dramatizing its own magnificence, (2)…the actual materials used in the ceremonial displays through which it makes manifest its majesty, and (3) the specific manner in which it offers these, as spectacles for its 'subjects' to watch" ("Provisional Notes" 4).

Mbembe's reading of the postcolony is a useful bridge between Foucault and Bakhtin on the one hand, and Ngũgĩ's depiction of authoritarianism in *Wizard*. Ngũgĩ, like Bakhtin, is concerned with the state's appropriation of meaning, its attempt to control both text and reception, and its failure to understand that language, broadly defined, is not the private property of the state's intentions, but that it is overpopulated with the intentions of others. The state's monologues find answers in the people's inappropriate laughter that highlights the slippage between word and meaning. The state's attempt to create its own meanings and to institutionalize them through fetishized signs, vocabulary and narratives that brook no challenge recalls Foucault's depiction of the fetishization of the body of the prince, his word becoming law, and any challenge necessitating the deployment of excessive force that reactivates power, the same point that Mbembe makes above. And as Gikandi argues, the reactivation of power in the postcolony through spectacle is taken as the postcolonial state's most important claim to legitimacy.

Ngũgĩ's, Gikandi's, Foucault's and Mbembe's interpretations of the power of spectacle and Bakhtin's discussion of laughter inform this paper. And Mbembe's three-step process is a useful framework to bear in mind in an analysis of the ways the state in *Wizard* goes about dramatizing its own magnificence, the ceremonial displays through which it makes manifest its majesty and the ways these displays are offered as spectacles for the subjects to watch. I modify this structure in the rest of the paper by focusing on how the ruler dramatizes his magnificence in his own home and subsequently in the larger national space; the ceremonial displays of his majesty's power and the deployment of that power as spectacle whose success depends on what Mbembe would call a "zombified audience." Because the Ruler's spectators are not really zombies, the concluding section explores more generally how the people "play" with the state's rituals of self-legitimation and in that way repossess their voice. Whereas Mbembe emphasizes the cautiousness of the spectator, Ngũgĩ presents a situation where those spectators have decided that they have nothing further to lose, and their laughter is part of a utopic social movement to dethrone dictatorship. That movement seems to be informed by a Foucauldian understanding of the performance of state power, but whereas Foucault was satisfied merely to discuss the excesses, the resistant spectators in Aburĩria use such an understanding as a springboard to social action.

In *Wizard*, the Ruler repeatedly emphasizes that there is no difference between him and the country of Aburĩria. It is important to understand the self-legitimating private rituals that the ruler stages in his home before discussing the larger spectacles that he stages for the benefit of the larger territorial audience. As a Ghanaian proverb states, "the destruction of the nation begins in the people's homes." Given that the ruler is no ordinary person and taking into account his large claims that he is the country, it is illustrative that ironically, the Ruler attempts to do in/to the rest of the country what he has failed to do at home. In this regard, it is important to discuss the fate of the president's wife, Rachael, through whose body the Ruler hoped to make

manifest the unrestrained presence of the sovereign and thus reactivate his power. Fairly early in the novel Rachael makes the mistake of questioning the Ruler's sexual excesses, including rumors that he slept with schoolgirls whom the Ruler sees as "his fountain of youth" (6). Outraged, the Ruler wonders:

> How indiscreet and indecorous of her to ask the unaskable! Since when could a male, let alone a Ruler, be denied the right to feel his way around women's thighs, whether other men's wives or school-girls? What figure of a Ruler would he cut were he to renounce the right to husband all women in the land in the manner of the lords of Old Europe, whose *droits de seigneur* gave them the right to every bride-to-be? (*Wizard* 6)

For her indiscretion, the Ruler vows to show Rachael that he "had power, real power over everything including ….yes…Time" (7). He builds a house for her on a seven acre plot that is surrounded by a stone wall and an electric fence. In the house, all clocks are frozen at the hour, minute and second that Rachael had raised the question of schoolgirls. A record player in the house is programmed to play only one hymn:

> Our Lord will come back one day / He will take us to his home above / I will then know how much he loves me / Whenever he comes back
> And when he comes back / You the wicked will be left behind / Moaning your wicked deeds / Whenever our Lord comes back (8).

The Ruler is Christ, their last meal together is presented as a parody of the Last Supper, and the Ruler will only come back after the "wicked" Rachael has repented. His control of time in the house resembles the control he exerts on time in the country since the national calendar follows important events in the Ruler's life. From the song that is piped to the four corners of the seven acre plantation so that passersby can hear the words and benefit from it, it is clear then that the Ruler does not seek to just punish Rachael, but to break her in a spectacular display of power over her body, her space and time. From the hills, the house is visible to the neighbors and so is Rachael as she goes about her routines in her panoptic space. The private home is converted into a prison, but it also becomes a stage on which Rachael's punishment is staged for citizen-subjects who risk the same fate unless they repent their "wickedness." As Mbembe writes of the *commandment*, "the actions that signal sovereignty have to be carried through both with style and with an adequately harsh firmness, otherwise the splendour of those exercising the trappings of authority are dimmed" (9). Mbembe's reading of the "anxious virility" of the postcolony is even more apropos to the Ruler's actions: "Pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, with sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, etc. The unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one of the pillars upholding the reproduction of the phallocratic system" (9). That phallocratic system specifically calls for the Ruler to renew his youth by sleeping with young girls, besides other people's wives. By breaking Rachael for contesting the basis of his power, the Ruler would ideally reactivate his power. And that power is performed for all to see.

Mbembe has argued that "the *commandment* in the postcolony has a marked taste for lecherous living. Festivities and celebrations, in this regard, are the two key vehicles for indulging the taste. But the idiom of its organization and its symbolism focus, above all, on the mouth, the belly and the phallus" (6-7). As Mbembe argues, the body is central in the festivals and celebrations that stage the commandment's "displays of magnificence and prodigality,…the body in question is firstly a body that eats and drinks, and secondly, a body that is open–in both ways. Hence the significance given to orifices and the central part they play in people's political humor" (7). This emphasis on orifices, on lowly bodily organs and functions has a way of defetishizing those in power as both Mbembe and Bakhtin show.

Wizard consistently evokes Bakhtin's "drama of bodily life (copulation, birth, growth, eating, drinking, defecation)" (88) in the lives of the ruling elite. The emphasis is on the bodily lower stratum and its improprieties which evoke the indiscretions of those in power. Two examples will suffice. The first is the celebration to mark the Ruler's birthday during which Machokali, the sycophantic foreign affairs minister, unveils plans for the monstrosity of a tower that is to be built in honor of the Ruler. Machokali cajoles the people gathered for the celebration to spontaneously make comments on the momentous occasion after the people fail to give the project a standing ovation, attesting to the value of silence as resistance. But in a show of the spontaneous openness of the state, Machokali invites the audience to make comments on the project. An old man in his "excessive exuberance," to borrow a term from Alan Greenspan speaking in a different context, salutes the president by "mispronouncing" the president's official title *Mtukufu Rais* [your excellency president…] and instead calls him *Mtukutu Rais* [*Restless/ill-behaved child president*—My translation. Ngũgĩ translates this simply as "cheap Excellency" (*Wizard* 18)]. Corrected by the ever-present police to say instead Mwathani Raici [The Lord/ruler President, which suggests a leadership that is easy on the people](*Mũrogi* 20) or Rais Mtukufu [His Excellency the President], the old man instead calls him Rahisi Mkundu or "cheap arsehole" (*Wizard* 18). Corrected secretly—coerced rather, further to say *Mtukufu Mtakatifu* [a redundant honorific meaning His Holy Excellency], the old man now loudly proclaims the president *Mkundu Takatifu* "His Holy Arsehole" (*Wizard* 18) whereupon the multitudes break into tumultuous laughter. Even as he is forcefully removed from the microphone, the baffled man is exasperated at the bad treatment he is getting for praising his lord and master, and keeps repeating *Mtukutu Takatifu* [ill-behaved holiness], *mkundu mtukutu* [restless arse], *Mtukutu Rahisi* [carefree child], derogatory references that become circulated among the popular masses (*Mũrogi* 20). The net result of this harmless praise is the travesty, the defetishization of the Lord/Ruler by connecting him to lowly bodily organs and their functions, which Bakhtin shows to be a key feature of grotesque realism. The scene is parodic, deploying the major quality of parody—inversion—which, as Bakhtin describes it, functions by employing another's speech, introducing into that other speech an intention which is directly opposed to the original one. The second voice, having lodged in the other speech,

clashes antagonistically with the original, host voice and forces it to serve directly opposite aims (Bakhtin, qtd. in Krasner 35). It relies on what Margaret Rose describes as "the comic incongruity between the original and its parody" (45). In this scene, the old man's voice lodges itself in the text of the president's praise names and forces them to serve directly opposite aims. No verbal confrontation happens between the Ruler and the old man but the dethronement of the ruling elite could not have been more devastating. Commenting on comparable political jokes in Cameroon, Mbembe states that in this kind of humor, "the image of, say, the President's anus is not of something out of this world—though to the people's great amusement the official line may treat it as such; instead, the people consider it as it really is, capable of defecating like any commoner's" (8).

The other incident happens on the day that the plans for Aburĩria's fetish of modernity are to be unveiled. A group of women is invited to perform for the Ruler and the invited international guests. Unknown to the establishment, the women are all members of the Movement for the Voice of the People, the underground resistance. But playing up expectations that they were regular dancers, the women criss-cross the arena in formation but in a way that bridges the gulf between the onlookers and those seated on the platform for invited guests. The spectators and the performers therefore appear joined and symbolize the entire nation. But just as the Ruler raises his flywhisk to wave to the women in recognition of their discipline and what he assumes at that point to be their support for his project, the women stop and facing the president shout: "Set Rachael free! Set Rachael free!" (250). The women then turn and face the people and, according to Nyawĩra,

> "All together we lifted our skirts and exposed our butts to those on the platform, and squatted as if about to shit en masse in the arena. Those of us in the crowd started swearing: MARCHING TO HEAVEN IS A PILE OF SHIT! MARCHING TO HEAVEN IS A MOUNTAIN OF SHIT! And the Crowd took this up. There were two or three women who forgot that this was only a simulation of what our female ancestors used to do as a last resort when they had reached a point where they could no longer take shit from a despot; they urinated and farted loudly…"
>
> Some foreign diplomats laughed out loud, thinking that this was a humorous native dance…. (*Wizard* 250).

In this scene, simulation becomes reality, and that reality is suggestively connected to farting, urinating, naked butts and the Ruler. Additionally, the fetish meant to immortalize the president is equated to a pile of shit, which the women refuse to take from the ruler. The ritual insult thus turns on the twin functions of defecation and urination. The women are able to stage the ultimate ritual insult on the ruler by appearing normal, calm, domesticated and therefore familiar. They are essentially participants at the Aburĩrian equivalent of the medieval "feast of fools" that Bakhtin discusses in *Rabelais and His World*. As in carnival, the social levels tumble. The women's willingness to participate in the festivity honoring the Ruler "zombifies" the repressive state apparatus. It is this "logic of conviviality" that Mbembe privileges

over notions of resistance. He explains that this conviviality gives rise to a simulacrum that in turn explains how the people are able to "remythologise their own conceptual universe while in the process turning the *commandment* into a sort of zombie" (10). To use a cliché, the women have the last laugh when they are able to expose the Ruler to ridicule at what was supposed to be the high point of his self-legitimation and immortalization. Indeed, the Ruler's persistent complaint after this is why nobody foresaw the women's action and forestalled it.

Reflecting on his humiliation at the hands of the women, the Ruler wonders: "How could they be so oblivious to his might? Wasn't Rachael a shining example of what he could do to them?" (235). The question is rhetorical, but the answer is that Rachael was not a good example of what the Ruler could do to the women. For one, the Ruler had been unable to break Rachael's spirit. Secondly, the fact that they invoked her name and called for her release before shaming him clearly signaled the women's solidarity with Rachael and contests his assumption that only he can set Rachael free or that he had control over her space and time; her very being. The women's solidarity at this rally blossoms into a popular nationalism that eventually liberates the democratic space in Aburũria and specifically addresses the oppression of women.

The subversion in both spectacles lies in the people's ability to inscribe their intentions onto state spectacles and texts. By staging their spectacle of conviviality and resistance in the public square before the glare of the television cameras deployed to capture the president's spectacle, Nyawĩra's movement ensures that rather than the state acting out its power watched by the entire territorial audience, it is the resistance that gets a chance to stage its resistance before a captive live national audience. Their script rewrites the national spectacle by injecting derisive laughter that specifically connects the fetish meant to immortalize the Ruler to a pile of shit. By figuratively shitting and urinating in the Ruler's face, the women dethrone the ruler as the all-powerful monarch: people see the president as capable of defecating just like every commoner. The defetishization is akin to the process that Mbembe aptly describes as "theophagy" (11) where the "god himself is devoured by his worshippers" as people "unpack the officialese and its protective taboos and, often unwittingly, tear apart the gods that African autocrats aspire to be" (11). Even while being conscious of the ways the state coerces allegiance as discussed in Foucault, Mbembe warns of the need to take into account "people's inherent cautiousness—the analyst must watch out for the myriad ways in which ordinary people guide, deceive and actually toy with power instead of confronting it directly" (25). But while the people toy with power in Wizard, they also develop the courage to eventually confront it directly.

The women, like the rest of the people, are able to toy with power through playful laughter and both the state and the people are engaged in a performance. Indeed, the words *script, drama, performance, directing,* and *role-play* preponderate in *Wizard*. In this particular scene, Machokali was hoping that the women's performance would be "a grand finale" but for days afterwards, the Ruler only remembers the event as the "shameful drama at Eldares." By taking up Rachael's cause, the women of the

movement rewrite the script of her punishment and thus contest the Ruler's and state power; by mooning the president in the process, they defetishize the ruler and unmask the machinery behind his spectacle of power. It is important to read the scene of the ruler's ritual dethronement through subversive laughter a little closely for the way it signals the people's appropriation of the state's discourses of openness and power and how, in the space of performance, the possibility of changing the real world is enacted.

Following the mooning ritual, the state circulates its own texts that question whether the people really saw what they saw. It also constructs the women as unnatural, mad, abnormal, etc. at the same time that it vows to hunt down the ring-leader. But the state clearly loses the discursive war. Rumor has it that Nyawĩra the ring-leader slipped through a contingent of one thousand policemen sent to apprehend her, armed with submachine guns and helicopters. Other rumors have it that the police became victims of their own lustful instincts and on seeing the beautiful Nyawĩra started drooling on themselves instead of arresting her. Other rumors hold that Nyawĩra escaped by disguising herself as a man (216-217). And thus, Nyawĩra is mythologized at the same time that state power is demythologized. Rather than the monarch holding all the power as in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, it turns out that it is the condemned woman who holds the power and essentially holds the monarch at ransom, at least discursively. As the state tries to contain the mooning ritual discursively, the people invent more stories and jokes about the event that speculate that the site had been blessed with piss and that the regime had almost been swallowed by a bog, presumably of piss and shit. We are told that the people telling the jokes laughed so hard "their ribs hurt" (253). All stories are agreed on the stench at the site that takes a lot of perfuming and sanitizing. Gossip takes over and holds that the women "actually asked the Ruler to lick their shitholes. It was their day; it was their triumph" (254). At the level of spectacle and discourse, the state is outperformed.

Foucault dwells on the ceremonial of execution but in *Wizard*, that is the one luxury that the Ruler regrets having lost. He longs for the "good old days" when he massacred a million of his own people at the behest of the West under the guise of flushing out "Communist sympathizers." He is thus forced to apply softer disciplinary practices, and the ceremonial of Nyawĩra's anticipated betrayal and apprehension is one such event. The public is summoned to witness the event live, and a national audience watches the events broadcast on TV. But instead of watching the flushing out of Nyawĩra as the state has bluffed all along, the live audience witnesses the state's vulnerability and becomes a participant in staging resistance as every person at the ceremonial becomes co-opted into the body or soul of Nyawĩra, the criminal of official discourse.

The regime's oft-repeated bluff that they are going to find Nyawĩra wherever she may be hiding is meant to show the unrestrained presence of the sovereign. The meticulous ceremonial of her condemnation and appeals for her betrayal is the ulti-

mate performance of power, the only thing missing being the body of the condemned person against whose body punishment would be performed as a means of reactivating the ruler's power and visually signaling the consequences of opposing it. But ultimately, even though the state presents its mechanisms of surveillance as all pervasive, the "criminal" is able to hide among the people, because she is the soul of the people. Thus, the ruler's claim to know everything or to be able to control everything in Aburĩria is called into question, as is his power. As a student of performance—one of her majors at the university was theater and we are told she loved inhabiting now this and that character in ways that made it hard to tell her real identity—Nyawĩra herself is a master of disguise/the mask. She is easily able to slip through police dragnets at first because in the masculinist wisdom of the ruling elite, the movement she heads (The Voice of the People) can only be headed by a man. The gender inversions between the Ruler and Nyawĩra are important in the subversion of despotic power and highlighting the place of laughter in this process.

Bakhtin emphasizes that the mouth and the arse are two of the orifices that are central in political humor, connected as they are, to ingestion and defecation. But the belly also occupies a central place as the signifier of corruption especially in the postcolonial setting. Ngũgĩ takes this further in *Wizard* where the belly of the Ruler is the site for the inversion of phallocratric power: it is rumored that the Ruler is pregnant. And thus, this macho man is after all a woman in the patriarchal logic of Aburĩrians. There are competing texts in the run-up to the People's Assembly:

> The principal vehicles for the claims and counterclaims were the state radio, nicknamed the Dictator's Mouthpiece, and the people's word of mouth, nicknamed the Bush Telegraph. When the Mouthpiece talked about the dictator's birthday, the Telegraph talked about the dictator's day of giving birth. When the Mouthpiece claimed that the man who had manufactured the lies about male pregnancy had agreed to make a confession before the People's Assembly, the Telegraph countered with the claim that the ruler had agreed to confess his pregnancy before the entire assembly (670).

Thus, where the regime masculinizes Nyawĩra, the people feminize the Ruler in a parody of the official texts. And since the Ruler chose the particular date and site for the celebration as a dramatization of his control over time and space in the country, the people decide to "outperform the dictator's own performance" (670). The Ruler tightly controls the "entire drama" from his haven in State House, and he thinks that he alone knows "the entire script, the actors their allotted lines only" (672), but the people rewrite the script in a way that in the end reduces the Ruler to "a director helplessly watching his actors straying from the script" (682). His order to one of his agents to "stop straying from the script" is only partially successful (683). That script failed to properly anticipate spectator response and as those spectators react with derisive laughter; ribald jokes; unscripted singing and dancing, and even as the Ruler takes his "teledirecting role back," it is too late (689). The Ruler's love of seemingly spontaneous spectacle opens up the territorial space for the resistant reception of those spectacles and counter-performances that contest the Ruler's monopoly of

the nation and its discourses. And because the spectacles take place before the entire territorial audience tuned to their TVs, there is no undoing the visual and discursive dethronement of the ruler. It also turns out that the Ruler does give birth on his chosen birthday, as his bloated belly finally deflates in a massive blast of foul air that putrefies the whole land (705-6). In a final irony, Nyawĩra becomes the metonym of the toiling nation.

Almost throughout the novel, Nyawĩra is the "criminal" of official discourse, but she comes to embody Foucault's "inverted figure of the king" (29), the non-corporal 'soul' that according to Foucault, "is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on the punished…[that unlike the soul of Christian theology is] born…out of the methods of punishment, supervision and constraint" (29). Towards the end of the novel as Nyawĩra's partner, Kamĩtĩ, calls on Nyawĩra to give herself up at the ceremonial of her betrayal, all the people at the public gathering answer to her names and deeds; they claim her soul, which is the soul of the persecuted, the constrained. And they answer for the deeds of the Movement of the Voice of the People which has been masculinized in the patriarchal discourse of the state elite. Instead, like her name, Nyawĩra represents the spirit of toil; the soul of the nation that no longer belongs to the ruler. As the head of the Movement for the Voice of the People (726), Nyawĩra helps to organize the women of Aburĩria as a collective voice whose rallying cry is that when you hurt one woman, you hurt all women; when you empower a woman, you empower the nation. As both men and women rise up and answer to her name, thus collectively taking responsibility for what state officials label her "treasonable activities," it becomes clear that however great his power, the Ruler cannot arrest the whole nation.

A social movement that initially derived its power sorely from laughter takes root, thus overcoming one of the concerns that Mbembe highlights about laughter by itself. As he warns, though the process may "demystify the *commandment* or even erode its supposed legitimacy, it does not do violence to the *commandment*'s material base" (10). But Mbembe also warns that the practices of ordinary people "cannot always be read in terms of 'opposition to the state', 'deconstructing power' and 'disengagement'"(25). He suggests that in the same way the state is involved in multifarious performances of its identity, the people have to perform various roles just to survive. And some of those roles include reproducing the "authoritarian epistemology" in their daily contacts. But were they to lose the ability to perform the multiple selves, they would lose the possibility of multiplying their identities, a crucial survival mechanism under the commandment. It seems clear that Ngũgĩ shares Mbembe's conclusions that faced with obvious lies from the state, "and the effrontery of the elites…[the spectator's] body breaks into laughter. And by laughing it drains officialdom of meaning and sometimes obliges it to function empty and powerless" (25). Essentially, beyond resistance and opposition to the *commandment*, "What defines the postcolonised subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices which are fundamentally ambiguous, fluid and modifiable even in instances where there are

clear, written and precise rules" (25). In *Wizard* a hasty reading would conclude that there are sufficient grounds to overthrow the regime in the first book, and as Ngũgĩ would have proposed in his earlier writing. But the people's cautiousness, their ability to laugh at officialdom till it is drained of power, their ability to recognize their reproduction of authoritarian epistemology in their lives and their attempts to surmount this in a utopic nation are the qualities that the novel celebrates.

In "Reading *Matigari*: The New Novel of Post-Independence," Lewis Nkosi states that with that novel, Ngũgĩ "for the first time seems to be aware that it is hardly possible any more to write another post-independence novel of disillusionment without descending into pure farce" (202). Expressing his own frustrations with style, specifically with satire as a mode of representation, Ngũgĩ wondered: "How do you satirise their [despots] utterances when their own words beat all fictional exaggerations?" Ngũgĩ illustrated this by expounding on the so-called "Nyayo Philosophy" the misnomer that was supposed to have been guiding Kenya in the 24 years of Moi's misrule (*Decolonising* 79-80). Reading *Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari* clearly shows that for Ngũgĩ, satire was the preferred mode for indicting the ruling elite. In so doing, Ngũgĩ placed himself morally above the subjects of his mockery.

Mikhail Bakhtin notes that the satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery to which he is opposed. But in so doing the wholeness of the comic spirit becomes a private reaction (12). In *Wizard*, there is a somewhat uneasy balance between the traces of the satire of the earlier texts and the laughter that is assigned to the folk in *Wizard*. I say "assigned" guardedly for reasons that will become clear shortly. This uneasy balance is as much a reflection of the more mature Ngũgĩ, as it is a manifestation of an ongoing crisis of representation.

The reception of the Gĩkũyũ text of *Matigari* in the Kenya of the 1980s sensitized Ngũgĩ to the need to write a novel critical of a despotic regime, but which could be safely read within such a country. Ngũgĩ has variously reported how the text was eagerly embraced by the people who took the eponymous hero, Matigari, as the floating signifier of their second liberation. The way he tells it, the widely-roving Matigari became a threat to the establishment due to his ability to unite the people in singing a new song of change in unison. Much as that unison is very much "an imagined community", the confiscation of the text by the Moi regime was testament of its efficacy in at least fomenting trouble, if not of a revolutionary nature. That experience shapes *Wizard*, in the sense that for one, the dictator in the novel is a composite of several African dictators. It is an allegory whose spirit is the "profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol…an elaborate set of figures and personifications [not to be read] against some one-to-one table of equivalencies" to borrow words from Jameson in his comment on Ngũgĩ's earlier work (73). And thus, a Moi or a Saddam looking for himself against a table of one-to-one equivalencies would say that he did not do all the things attributed to the dictator in the novel, and he would be right. And because the novel is much more heavily influenced by

the fantasy element—which attracts the tag magic realism—of traditional African oral narratives, it does not come across as an open threat to any dictatorial power. It could easily be dismissed as the wild imaginings of a "disconnected" author, unrelated to any known reality in Kenya, who could, in the same way that Rabelais was dismissed in the 18th century, be accused of writing "despicable gay laughter," making him "chief among buffoons" (Bakhtin 117). Ngũgĩ is certainly not a buffoon, but he does present a veritable carnival full of them. In fact, Wizard resembles the medieval "feast of fools" whose inversions Bakhtin spends considerable space exploring in *Rabelais and his World*. And there are interesting parallels between the carnivalesque atmosphere in Rabelais and the "unseriousness", the flights of fancy steeped in magic realism in *Wizard* that would ensure that it was "safely" read even in a dictatorial regime like Moi's or Suharto's. It would be useful, then, to make a few remarks on farce, melodrama and carnivalesque laughter and their abilities or inabilities to dethrone dictatorships.

In *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom's Cabin to O.J. Simpson*, Linda Williams describes a fine line between melodrama and farce. She states that "melodrama's sympathy could be described as the feeling of emotional connection to suffering victims, while farce's ridicule is an emotional distance from a figure of fun (70). It is important to begin with these two because *Matigari* was described as something close to a farce. It is true to say that Ngũgĩ was emotionally distant from the ruling elite that he portrayed in that novel and also in *Devil on the Cross* and *Petals of Blood* before that. In all these texts, the author's sympathies were clearly with the suffering victims of the ruling elite, and there was a clear melodramatic portrayal of the large emotions of the people, probably best represented in Gĩcaamba in *Ngaahika Ndeenda*. There is also a sentimental display of the author's sympathies and a clear division between the virtuous and the villainous in those texts.

Like melodrama, satire holds up the villain to ridicule. It is therefore done from the outside, and from a position of moral superiority. On the other hand, carnival laughter is folk laughter; the people laugh at the villains and at themselves. It is ambivalent but in a different degree from the ambivalence in *Wizard* where the author laughs at the idiosyncrasies of the kings of "the feast of fools" in the name of the people, or for the people. Even though the novel captures the multiplicity of social voices through a variety of narrators, the controlling consciousness of the narrative—which self-consciously reveals that it is the one writing the story several times—is almost overwhelming. It alternates with the people's consciousness that is largely theorized by two intellective authorial surrogates, Kamĩtĩ and Nyawĩra, while the narration by Arigaigai Gathere, the corrupted traditional oral artist, calls into question the reliability of all narratives.

Nkosi had suggested that after *Matigari*, Ngũgĩ could only turn to farce, abandon realistic representation for the world of the fairy tale, or engage in linguistic violence to capture the excesses of the ruling elite. In *Wizard*, Ngũgĩ turns to the world of

the fairy tale, yes, but he also turns to allegory, parody, to signifying, to a play on language, without needing to do it violence. In fact, he appears to be in sympathy with the grandiose plans of the ruling elite, seeming to share their consternation that the people would refuse the honor of owning the tallest, most modern building in this part of the world, a modern-day Tower of Babel, which leads to major disagreements about its design, its funding, its location, its necessity; in a word, we are already in the tower. Ngũgĩ is able to get us there by verbal indirection. Gone are the angry harangues against exploitative systems, against despotic regimes and against those who were not agents of change with the people that characterized Ngũgĩ's three previous novels. The killings are there yes; the silence, the silencing is there yes; the fear yes; the official texts are there yes; again in direct competition with the Voice of Rumor, the voice of the voiceless but three things clearly stand out: 1) the author's emotional distance, 2) humor, and 3) the uncertainty. To illustrate the interconnectedness of all three dimensions, some further observations on laughter are in order.

As in Rabelais, the laughter is the laughter of all the people, directed against everyone, including the people themselves. And this is the difference between this novel and those before it: the people are made to laugh at their own impotence, too, as opposed to the satirical laughter of the earlier novels.

The performance of state power in the novel was earlier equated to the festive spectacles of medieval ages, a veritable "feast of fools". As Bakhtin argues, there are mixed messages in the medieval feast with its two faces of Janus:

> Its official, ecclesiastical face was turned to the past and sanctioned the existing order, but the face of the people of the marketplace looked into the future and laughed, attending the funeral of the past and present. The marketplace feast opposed the protective, timeless stability, the unchanging established order and ideology and stressed the element of change and renewal (81).

All this is true of *Wizard*. The ruling elite looks to the past to consolidate itself. In fact, it erases all pasts without the Lord Ruler; it invents those traditions that legitimize his present hold on power; and the rituals of coercing the people's consent mostly take place in the public square, the new marketplace that should be a place of exchange. Instead, it is turned into a classroom, where in banking fashion a la Paulo Freire, the regime enumerates its vision of progress and banks it in a suppressed populace. But the people exploit the gaffes, the gaps and the gasps, and use laughter to dethrone seriousness and excess. We are shown that there can be no seriousness when the president and those supporting him are given to verbal, biological and sexual excess. Likewise, we cannot take the president seriously, and the old man's praises for the president turn principally on "arse", the lowliest bodily organ, and also suggest the president's irresponsibility. The only thing missing from this feast of fools is the wearing of clothes turned inside out and trousers slipped over the head. But one of the central inversions of the medieval feast, the election of the fool as pope for a day, is here grossly abused. A fool took actual power, to be sure, and hangs onto it by hook and crook. But as the folk disappear into their little ratholes in Santa Maria

and Santa Lucia, they laugh at the fool's excesses; the laughter becomes a space of change and renewal. Official texts are deconstructed to show that the emperor has no clothes. But beyond that nothing is certain. Not even for The Lord Ruler/President.

The Lord Ruler tries to control how the people tell time, how they should interpret what they see with their own eyes [in most cases they are told that they did not see it], what the people can think, where they can congregate, how many can congregate and how they should relate to the instruments of state power. But he suffers anxieties about his masculinity and his masculinism; he suspects that his aides see through his macho bluff, and he starts hearing in his head the voices of the people in rebellion; his court turned against him. In his hallucinations, he is at a loss to explain how his uncontrollable wife's spirit of resistance ruptures the time capsule in which he thought he had confined her and how her spirit of resistance becomes the rallying force behind the women's resistance epitomized in the climactic shaming ritual in the novel. The Lord President's anxieties engender more compensatory gestures, decrees, contradictory orders and more spectacles of self-legitimation that ironically become appropriated by the people and made to carry the people's intentions. Through derisive laughter, the people are able to recover their voices.

The people of Aburĩria are able to use the Ruler's love for spectacle, for festival, as a space for carnivalesque laughter that creates the space of change and renewal. The Ruler is dethroned by the end of the novel, fine, and replaced by Tajirika, an equally buffoonish big man whose weaknesses and indiscretions we have been allowed to laugh at all along. By seeming to celebrate the mediocrity and the buffoonery of this "never colonized" postcolony that thrives solely on spectacle *Wizard* appears to have been designed specifically to escape the fate that befell Ngũgĩ's previous novel, *Matigari*, when Kenyan president Moi apparently ordered the central character arrested. When that failed, Moi had the novel withdrawn from circulation. *Wizard* then is an attempt to wrest the text, the power of utterance, of meaning and its performance from the monopoly of the despotic state's interpretive machinery, while showing humorously but clearly that the ship of state was adrift.

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