Mechanics of Authoritarian Power and Interspecies Violence in *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*: A Canine Reading

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Introduction: Postcolonial Animals

The plot of Ivorian writer Ahmadou Kourouma's novel, *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*,[1] features a cycle of myriad dictatorships – a mythic expanse upon which human beings and nonhuman animals alike must struggle for survival. The novel revolves around the ascension of the skilled hunter Koyaga (modelled after Gnassingbé Eyadema, former president of Togo) and his leadership as the President of the fictional République du Golfe amidst the backdrop of the Cold War. Despite numerous challenges to his authority, Koyaga remarkably maintains his hold on power for more than three decades. The novel adopts the format of a *donsomana*, a Malinké hunter's praise song, performed with the help of a *sora,* a harp-like musical instrument. The story unfolds through a sequence of six vigils: each vigil is centered on a distinct theme, exploring topics such as tradition, death, fate, power, betrayal, and, as I will show, the multi-layered relationalities between human and nonhuman animals.

This article foregrounds the need to examine human-nonhuman relationships and solidarities, especially in literary texts written about the Global South. Working from a variety of critical positions, most notably postcolonial studies and ecocriticism, I pose the central question: what manner of interspecies relationship can an African dictator novel such as Kourouma's reveal within the African continent and how can we grasp the power structures existing within these dynamics? Aligning with Cajetan Iheka's assertion in *Naturalizing Africa*, that it is indeed time to begin advocating for an intersectional politics where human and nonhuman-environmental concerns are not subordinated to the wellbeing of either "life form" (Iheka 159), and that we need to find ways of discussing the "shared vulnerability [that] also plays out in the reciprocal forms of destruction" (Iheka 164) in ecologically threatened parts of the world (164), I offer a reading of Kourouma's novel that foregrounds its animal figures in the plot, specifically the presence of dogs.

Under regimes of violence perpetuated by dictators and despotic political leaders in Africa, and indeed many other parts of the Global South, the ontological plane separating the human and nonhuman animal is leveled by dint of a shared sense of corporeal precarity that human and nonhuman animals must carry. In this vein, the intervention into the field of African ecocriticism which this article offers, is to read a text that is generally regarded a dictator novel, as ecological fiction. In their volume on *Postcolonial Animalities*, Suvadip Sinha and Amit R. Baishya provide a fitting approach for thinking about works of postcolonial fiction refracted through the lens of ecocriticism: for them, what emerges from such a linkage is an "ontological and political miscegenation that constantly alerts us about the need of a multivalent reading of violence and precarity" (4). Kourouma's novel attests to this, while at the same time provoking the reader to consider questions of dismantling formalistic and generic conventions in African fiction. To return to Iheka's point, formulating ways to overcome human exceptionalism in ecocritical discourses goes hand-in-hand with regarding the lives of both human and nonhuman animals as equally precarious, and valuable, in threatened parts of the African continent – novels, such as *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, provide a space for imagining such relations in works of fiction.

With regard to the potential of such shared positionings, Anat Pick has effectively argued that vulnerability can become a critical site where conversations about cross-species ontologies, ethics and policies intersect (2018). By extension, then, the nature-versus-culture binary is efficaciously troubled through such a critical methodology. Kourouma, too, acknowledges the juncture between worlds comprising the natural environment and those residing in the cultural realm. The imaginative universe of the novel posits culture *alongside* nature, by insisting on culture's biopolitical domination over nature, and the many ways the former will subsume the latter for its own extractivist needs. Such an approach is present from the very early parts of the novel, where the reader is told:

> Great was [Allah's] surprise when he discovered that while he had been fashioning the world, the liars, the hypocrites and the envious had taken the free will he had granted to mankind and corrupted it. They had made themselves masters of human society. The world of beasts was superior to that of man. Beasts killed and destroyed only that they might survive, that they might defend themselves; man often destroyed needlessly, through spite or jealousy. (Kourouma 63)

In this excerpt, Kourouma deliberately creates a chain of social command in the human world, headed by corrupt men who prey upon both human and nonhuman animals. It is evident here that the nonhuman animals in such a universe are, in fact, not predators, even though they may need to adopt carnivorous means for survival; their methods are less predatory than symbiotic. Ecocriticism and animal

studies scholarship have increasingly drawn on Indigenous spiritual traditions to theorize relations between human, animal, and place, beyond the Cartesian equation of animals as non-rational unfeeling automata and the land as exploitable resource (Woodward 69, 130; see also Woodward and McHugh 2–3).[2] In Kourouma's novel, humans, animals, wilderness, geological spaces, elemental beings and mythologies coexist in a complex network of relationships of power within the continent of Africa. The author confines his narrative to the trials and tribulations of a single African country, the République du Golfe, which experiences a cyclical succession of authoritarian leaders, beginning with Fricassa Santos, lasting through several long regimes under a major dictator, Koyaga, and being passed down to other equally corrupt leaders at pivotal points of political tension. Many of the dictators whose names are interspersed throughout the novel are reminiscent of names of actual dictators who throughout history established their regimes in several African countries.[3]

I suggest that a reading of the novel that focuses on its vital and often violent human and nonhuman relationships sheds light on "the complexities that modern Africans face in the fight against post-independence dictatorships," as Evan M. Mwangi argues in his *Postcolonial Animal* (54). Reading the narratives of power struggles between political actors, denizens, and, consequently, their nonhuman cohabitants in the continent is, by no means, unchartered scholarly territory. Mwangi discusses a set of African texts that are concerned with orature in order to shed light on "the complexities that modern Africans face in the fight against postindependence dictatorships that are difficult to overthrow" (Mwangi 54). Through his clearsighted analysis of the canine narrator Mboudjak in Patrice Nganang's novel *Dog Days*, Mwangi shows that, under such despotic systems of state governance, the novel "captures vividly the despondency of a nation in the grip of an authoritarian regime" (83) and that the "(nonhuman) animal in the postcolony is, like us, an individual whose rights are ignored: it is therefore more useful to see animals as mutual sufferers at the hands of the state" (93). In his careful analysis of Nganang's dog narrator, Mwangi outlines how the fundamental rights of both human and nonhuman social actors come under threat in politically abusive, despotic forms of governance. In the following sections, I undertake a similar project: after homing in on the generic and formal specificities of Kourouma's dictator novel, I turn my attention to a thorough reading of *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*'s canine characters, canine symbolisms and human-canine solidarities (and the problems such solidarities might pose in the African postcolony).

The Ecological Dictator Novel from Africa

It is not easy to confine the genre of Kourouma's novel to a single category. In fact, to call it a dictator novel – meaning a sustained work of the imagination set in a fictional world under authoritarian rule – can be a limiting categorization. Several parts of Kourouma's text hold up just as well to being close-read as an epic rendered within the bounds of a novelistic work, attesting to the effectiveness of the author deploying the realist mode of narration to convey the story (cf. Gorman). However, in her 2019 monograph *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South*, Magalì Armillas-Tiseyra provides a useful set of constitutive and generic identifiers of the dictator novel which can be brought to bear productively on *Wild Beasts*. Distinguishing it from what she calls the "dictatorship novel," Armillas-Tiseyra emphasizes the fact that the "dictator novel" differs in its treatment of the dictator as a character in the novel; instead of merely focusing on a third-person narrative of a dictator's administration or tactics, the dictator novel "has become a space in which writers consider the difficulties of national consolidation, explore the role of external and global forces in sustaining dictatorships, and even interrogate the political functions of writing itself" (9-10).

While this applies to Kourouma's novel, the prominently multispecies story world of *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* also asks us to apply a wider lens. Because the novel coheres with both Armillas-Tiseyra's rubrics and Iheka's multispecies aesthetics, I would extend the generic category of the dictator novel and call *Wild Beasts*, instead, an "ecological dictator novel." In his fictional re-writing of the history of dictatorship in Africa, Kourouma constructs a complex network of human-animal relations and violent entanglements: "humans share the environment with nonhumans, a world teeming with various life forms that are as important as the human" (Iheka 25). In the following sections, I utilize this new genre and analyze the characterization of Koyaga, the novel's major dictator, and I shed light on his nomenclature and choice of totem, before turning to the various physical, visceral enmeshments – the "contact zone[s] of proximity or closeness" (Iheka 29) – shared between humans and dogs in the novel, with added emphasis on Koyaga's Lycaons.

Koyaga, the Hunter-Dictator

The figure of Koyaga resists simplistic symbolic analysis. There is no straightforward way to place him in our imaginations, either ethically or ideologically. He is known as the "hunter-dictator", and thereby carries within his name two figures: the human who hunts nonhuman animals, and the head of state who subjugates those under his rule.

Both are rife with implications of power and the ability to perpetuate violence upon othered bodies. In imperial Europe, hunting – both at home and in the colonies – was seen as a sport practiced by the wealthy upper classes alongside monarchs and the aristocracy. In such a form of sport, the utility of the end product was often not considered, and the loud and furious sense of hedonism that the act of killing itself provided was privileged in its place. Save for one or two token souvenirs extracted from their corpses (skins, fur, ivory), these animals' deaths were quite useless to those who had the power to take their lives at whim. In a similar vein, Koyaga is described as a mindless killer of nonhuman animals. During a ceremonious three-day hunting festival, Koyaga makes his appearance in front of the crowd of invited hunters "in hunting dress, not in the traditional garb the others wear, but in the dress of a European hunter" (Kourouma 373). It is evident that Koyaga has a dual intention in mind: first, he sandpapers away his own Africanness; second, he has the other hunters wear traditional African garments in contrast to his own European costume in order to evoke European "might" and military power. Koyaga's sartorial performance and his appropriation of imperial hunting techniques in post-independence Africa speaks to Achille Mbembe's point, in *On the Postcolony*, when he describes layers of deep temporality residing in the continent. Specifically, Mbembe argues that "[a]s an age, the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another […] [in] an *entanglement*" (14; italics in original). Kourouma, in the figure of Koyaga and his project of an alternative historiography, overlaps the time of colonialism (of state that is under imperialist governance) and the time of neocolonialism (of state that is dependent on globalized capital).

Kourouma further demonstrates Koyaga's predisposition towards ruthlessly tyrannical acts through his exploration of the oppression of vulnerable animal bodies on multiple spiritual and symbolic layers, for example by harnessing animal mythologies and totems to show how nonhuman animals are used by humans towards their own, selfish ends. These ends may be symbolic, as when the novel's presidents assume the totems of various wild animals and birds of prey, or social, as when Koyaga orders his army to attack farmers and poachers who hunt the same animals he does, simply to assert his power as the one who is at the top of the chain of military command, and to establish his geographical territory. Both human and nonhuman animals exist in a state of shared precarity under Koyaga's dictatorship. Anat Pick discusses the concept of animal vulnerability in relation to human vulnerability in several instances of her scholarly work. She provides a lucid definition of vulnerability when she argues that when "someone is utterly vulnerable, they are stripped of the privileges of species and social rank. Although such stripping is often the result of injustice, it

invariably reveals the contingency of species identity (as well as the identities of race, gender, and class)" (414). In the "[t]wentieth- and twenty-first century political violence targets the most vulnerable, mainly unarmed civilians, whose destruction is not merely physical but ontological: an uprooting of the victims' very humanity" (417). This uprooting of the victim's humanity, and hence their ontological destruction and contingent species identity, is what I situate within a shared network of violence with endangered nonhuman animal bodies as presented to the reader in Kourouma's novel.

Vulnerability is a complicated site and contains nested frameworks of oppression, the recognition of which can point towards a greater understanding of how one's own susceptibility to harm might open up grounds of multispecies solidarity. Such a sense of shared precarity comes to bear upon the visceral bodies of both kinds of animals. At the spiritual level, nonhuman animals are sacrificed by Koyaga's marabouts (a rank of Muslim clerics) for the purpose of bringing him luck. In a self-reflexive turn, the human animals find their own body parts on Koyaga's plate when the reader is told that he consumed the roasted testicles of his vanquished enemies with breakfast every morning to "enhance his life-force through ritual and sorcery" (Kourouma 426). These sacrifices serve a single function, which is to render Koyaga's power as absolute, over the minds, bodies, and spiritual levels of existence of all living creatures in the land.

The Function of Animal Totems in the Text

Whereas in certain African communities totems may vary from plants to animals and other entities, Kourouma deliberately chooses animal totems for his presidents. Koyaga specifically utilizes nonhuman animal figures so that the human animal who assumes the totem can violently transmogrify its aura. In this way, the presidents amplify their own mythical statuses through use of these totems. Bindi Ngouté Lucien argues that the aura "bestowed by the totem reinforces the worship of the president. In making the animal sacred, the characters make it an alter ego; a double that ought to be treated with deference" (120). Thus, the animals, objectified through the totems, remain vulnerable not simply to physical harm but also to being treated with an imaginative violence where their metaphorical meaning is privileged over their biological lives.

Koyaga's totem, a falcon, has been strategically chosen to establish his dominance over his government's administrative body. His choice of totem is cleverly designed to contribute to his cult of personality. The falcon, a majestic bird of prey, has an aerial view of its surroundings, and hence is bestowed with the power of all-encompassing, panoptical and oppressive omnipresence, adding a larger-than-life effect to the construction of his political persona.[4]

Additionally, it bolsters the message that Koyaga has been chosen by fate to rule the land, almost akin to the Divine Rights of monarchs in parts of imperial Europe. This is foregrounded in several instances in the novel, most notably when Koyaga's marabout realizes at his birth that he, Koyaga, was a "boy capable of hacking a trail through the jungle. Hacking through the social jungle of men; hacking through nature's jungle in the wild. A great man" (Kourouma 342). While the norms and belief systems around animals may be vastly different in the various indigenous communities in Africa, it remains true that the bedrock of ecological coexistence is one of cohabitation mingled with self-preservation, as opposed to constant predatory harm towards nonhuman animals.

In reference to Philippe Descola's ontological grid, Sharon Merz points out how anthropologists have theorized upon the relationship between "four ontological schemas, namely, animism, totemism, naturalism, and analogism" found in multispecies social structures of human-nonhuman actors within African communities (38). She forwards the thesis that totemism is less a semiotic question of whether totems ought to be understood metaphorically or metonymically, or one of ontological typology, but more a matter of how "the members of a given society experience and understand the relationship they have with their totem entities" (41). In her fieldwork on crocodile totems in four Bebelibe communities in Northwestern Benin, she references an interview where the speaker states that manhandling, specifically eating, one's totem may have negative preternatural consequences upon the wrongdoer. This points to the question about what kind of ontological web the African political actors, in Kourouma's text, situate their respective animal totems in, and how they perceive their own actions towards these animals while invested in perpetuating violence upon the bodies of humans and animals equally. Some of their totem animals are injured (as when Koyaga kills the enchanted caiman crocodile), but would these perpetrators hold themselves accountable to the harm out of respect for Indigenous rules about multispecies totemic relationships? As the novel shows, there no longer remains a logic behind violence upon either animal or human bodies, and the complex web of symbiosis and inter-species morality which had existed in pre-colonial Africa is nullified in favor of a system which extracts, exploits and subjugates human labor and natural resources for political means.

Dogs in Kourouma's Novel

It is in the figure of the dog that the violence present in human-nonhuman animal relationships in Kourouma's novel is most evident. Among the dogs who feature in the novel, a curious intermingling of subjection as well as subjecthood is at play. During the last leg of Koyaga's struggle for power with President Fricassa Santos (former president of the République du Golfe, and modelled after Togo's first president, Sylvanus Olympio), Koyaga assembles a group he calls his Lycaona: a "pack" that comprises twenty Paleo infantrymen who fought in the Algerian War and in Indo-China. The name references not only an ancient region in the interior of Asia Minor and characters from Greek mythology, but also the biological species genus "lycaon," which contains one extant species, the African wild dog. Upon being asked to provide a justification for this sobriquet, Koyaga responds that

> Lycaons, often called wild dogs, are the most savage, the most vicious, the most ferocious animals on the planet. […] After the carrion has been shared, each Lycaon withdraws to a covert corner far from the others to lick himself carefully, to remove the least trace of blood from his fur. A pack member who has been careless will instantly be devoured by the pack who believe him to be injured. […] Any one of us who appears to hesitate, to have doubts, to have second thoughts, will be killed. (Kourouma 103)

Thus, in this scene, Koyaga creates a world in which predatory behavior is the norm. Kourouma paints a picture of appropriating the capacity for predation of the nonhuman animal for the sake of human culture by presenting the military society he aspires to create as being, quite literally, a gruesomely competitive "dog-eat-dog" world. The term "pack" carries the added connotation of a disciplined-mob mindset that is trained to react violently to the slightest sign of weakness from a single unit of the group. In this way, dogs come to occupy the position of perpetrators against themselves at the cost of obeying the commands of their master, while also standing in as ferocious, nearly invincible figures of violence who evoke awe and fear in equal measure in the mind of the reader.

However, as one progresses through the novel, a complete reversal of this image of a cannibalistic society occurs. In a scene of animal sacrifice, where a group of humans attack, tear apart and devour the body parts of a stray dog, Kourouma nuances his usage of the canine metaphor. Here, the author moves away from anthropomorphizing the qualities of a dog, and instead, towards zoomorphizing humans to take on the characteristics of canine species. Among the possessed mass of individuals who attack and consume the dog in this manner, the weaker ones "get only the entrails, the paws, the head, or the tail. Each of the possessed proudly brandishes the portion he has won in the mêlée and proceeds to devour it raw. Every part of the dog is eaten" (Kourouma 167). This demarcation of the visceral fragments of the dog into valuable parts which the stronger human victors deserve,

and less lucrative sections which are consumed by the weak, establish a hierarchy among the humans, similar to how the distribution of animal commodities functioned in times of mercantilism among imperial powers. Through this violent entanglement between canine and human, lines of hierarchy are drawn not simply between different species, but between different members of the same species. In a similar vein, the *sora*, the novel's griot-storyteller, mentions at one point in the "Sixth Vigil" that dogs are counted among the animal sacrifices Koyaga's marabout and his sorceress mother undertake, that he "eat[s] the meat of a dog and drink[s] decoctions prepared by [his] mother and her marabout" (Kourouma 381). Canine-human relations assume a self-reflexive dimension when the members of the presidential guard are said to be "ferreting around like a pack of wild dogs on the scent of a pack of hunted animals" (Kourouma 391); zoomorphized, once again to take on, be possessed by, the quality of Lycaons who have "shared the meat of a dog with their Supreme Guide" (Kourouma 392).

When the human character with the caiman totem, proverbially nicknamed the "Old Man" by his cronies, meets Koyaga in a scene of conspiratorial allyship, an interesting addition to the array of canine positionalities occurs. Although the Old Man's totem is a reptile, his behaviour, demeanor and political manoeuvring are all compared to those of canine creatures. On their walk, as he discusses coup-d'états and state finance with Koyaga, he is said to be following Koyaga with the gait of "a puppy lolloping after its master" (Kourouma 220). Here, the characterization, or aura as discussed earlier, of a puppy, which has been displaced onto this other dictator, carries connotations of compliance, domestication and sycophancy. The fact that he advises Koyaga to draw wealth for personal gain from the state coffers exacerbates these negative implications. This cross- or multi-species argument adds further nuance to Kourouma's treatment of dogs, as he persistently foregrounds the ability of humans, especially the tyrants', to extract obedience, even docility, from their canine companions. This complicates previous depictions of canine violence. At the same time, as Kourouma demonstrates how human animals domesticate nonhuman animals for their own nefarious purposes, it seems as though the author also characterizes the latter as emotionally sentient. That Kourouma references the fidelity and affective nature of canine beings is an authorial strategy that opposes Koyaga's harnessing of his Lycaons as mere instruments of torture, violence and bodily harm. While the different dictators function along rigidly Cartesian lines apropos canine subjectivity, the novel itself refuses such easy binaries. Kourouma, in fact, endorses fluid becomings of inter-subjective relations exemplified not only through an overlap of inter-species identities, but through shared vulnerability as well.

The Carnivalesque Canine: Toppling Human and Nonhuman Animal Hierarchies

To expand further on these canine readings, it is fruitful to turn to what I call the "carnivalesque canine," which allows me to pinpoint the subversion of hierarchies the novel offers. In a later part of the novel, readers encounter Koyaga's hunting ceremonies: the playful yet deadly serious pantomimes performed during these festivities serve an anthropological purpose within the realist universe of the novel. It is possible that these rituals are a modified dramatic performance, as would be the case with most rituals in African cultures that historically take root in folklore and oral narratives.[5] The hunters who act in this pantomime clothe themselves in masks and animal skins, and "play the role of beasts" (Kourouma 378). Their theatrical performance includes other hunters chasing the masked ones and firing blank shots at them, while those impersonating animals hiss and yell and brandish whips at those playing the role of humans, even as they try to run away. During Koyaga's celebratory ritual, human-animal relations become irrevocably, bizarrely enmeshed as human animals (the unmasked hunters) carry out violence upon a mimetic version of nonhuman animals (the masked hunters) and, by extension, upon the bodies of fellow human beings. Through this act of indiscriminate hunting – coupled with the notion that in order to be a prized hunter in the present-day Africa of Kourouma's novel, one had to be able to expertly hunt "black game" – it becomes clear that the society retained here, even after Independence from the French, replicates the same modes of violence which French rule had perpetuated upon black African bodies during their tenure.

To this effect, Frantz Fanon's assertion in *The Wretched of the Earth* comes to mind with special emphasis: "[i]n certain developing countries, therefore, they are quick to catch on and realize two or three years after independence their hopes have been dashed. […] But it is common knowledge that for 95 percent of the population in developing countries, independence has not brought any immediate change" (34-35). In the case of Kourouma's West Africa, this lack of immediate change is reflected on the administrative, ethical as well as ideological levels, and leads to the conflation of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial temporalities discussed earlier.

In his landmark essay "Explorations in Animist Materialism," the late Harry Garuba contends that "a manifestation of an animist unconscious […] operates through a process that involves […] a continual re-enchantment of the world" (265). Such an approach subverts Western Enlightenment structures of thought by imbuing mundane objects and natural beings with meanings which defy conventionally colonial or positivist reasoning. These objects and

subjects, epistemologically reimagined, congregate and co-exist to carry out a worldmaking of their own. To this effect, he states:

> [A] persistent re-enchantment thus occurs, and the rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical. […] The objects thus acquire a social and spiritual meaning within the culture far in excess of their natural properties and their use value. […] The animist urge to reification may have been religious in origin, but the social and cultural meanings that become attached to the objects often break off from the purely religious and acquire an existence of their own as part of the general process of signification in society. (267)

Following his arguments along this vein then, it is productive to read a sequence in the novel where a sacred ritual involving both dogs and humans in Koyaga's kingdom allows us to pursue Garuba's argument further. The aforementioned animist element comes to be embodied in the figures of dogs, as well as in the blurred species-boundaries between the human and nonhuman animal in this particular example.

The sacrificial animals – dogs, in this instance – come to assume symbolic meaning through their role in a ritual enacted by Koyaga, his holy men and his follower hunters. Once the hunter dictator has cleared the parks and forests of less powerful human subjects (who prey upon animals), and established the most prominent game reserve in West Africa, he decides to organize elaborate, three-day-long hunting festivals in the land in order to uphold his pompous power. It is during the course of the festivities, as the shows and games near an end, that Koyaga holds the recruiting ceremony for his royal Presidential Guards, the Lycaons. Each community participating in the festival is encouraged to send a champion to the arena, where a scaffolding and stage are set up on which these individuals spar with one another. Thirty champions are chosen from among the best fighters to accompany Koyaga and his six elderly shamans to withdraw to the mountains:

> As is customary, for the next few days, the affairs of these men remain unknown to the uninitiated, but from whatever little is known, word has it that they eat the meat of a dog and drink decoctions prepared by [Koyaga's] mother and her marabout. […] The sharing of the meat of a dog and […] [t]he blood-pact assures [Koyaga] of the champions' loyalty […] [who] are recruited and assigned to the corps of the Lycaons, the presidential guard. The best of them will become officers. (Kourouma 381)

This act of humans eating dogs need not necessarily be taken at face value here. It is possible to alternatively read this event as a cannibalistic exercise. Since the reader has already been told that the Lycaons eat their own weaker pack members, and that those are the kind of species dynamics Koyaga instils among his soldiers, it stands to reason that, for these kinds of humans who emulate autophagic forms of violence, the consumption of other humans might be a sacred

ritual. If the goal of Koyaga's military discipline is to attack and devour the vulnerable among one's own pack, then it may be reasoned that the humans are instituted into precisely this kind of behavior in the mountains, where they learn to sacrifice and feed upon their own kind. In a manner of spiritual transfusion, the corpse of the sacrificed dog that is devoured occupies, in the symbolic realm, the position of the sacrificed human; within the ritualistic power plays Koyaga instigates, the boundaries between human and non-human animals become so indistinct as to wholly topple the very foundations of existence.

The Fungiblity of (Non)human Animals

Nonhuman animals, in the novel, are invariably fungible, whether they are numerous yet valuable (as in the case of Koyaga's Lycaons) or enchanted, and, hence, rare (as in the case of four magical beasts hunted by Koyaga). Despite the elaborate ceremony and lavish expenses involved in training each Lycaon in Koyaga's pack, they are wholly disposable, invariably interchangeable with another, and this is part of the dictator's intention. It is productive here to sit with Colleen Glenney Boggs' work, which turns to the weaponization of guard dogs to intimidate and subjugate prisoners. However, as Boggs argues, these "soldier dogs" are just as fungible as the human bodies they are trained to attack, despite their value as bioweapons against the prisoners. Boggs points out that in the "military's scheme of valuation, military working dogs are animate objects that attain temporary fetish status but are destroyed when they lose their use value – that is, their ability to regulate and mediate the violence of disciplinary regimes" (74). By explicating the dual function of the "animalized human and the humanized animal – as creating a position of animality that underwrites and unsettles the modern formation of representational subjectivity" (44), she undertakes an inquiry into the biopolitical means of control, harm and subjugation through the bestialization, and indeed, brutalization of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. On the subject of collapsing species boundaries, through the capacity of dogs to perpetuate violence under the command of their masters, Boggs argues that "guard dogs can inhabit the position of animality, but they can also take on a mediating function between the structural position of humanity and the position of animality" (50), thereby demonstrating how guard dogs can have ontologically fluid identities on the species spectrum, in state-controlled military spaces.

It is not only dogs, but, in a species-crossing move, also other animals that are being made fungible and manipulable by the violence enacted by humans. In a section of the novel titled "Vigil II," Koyaga hunts down four enchanted animals, each of whom possess specific might and fighting power. First, the "lone panther […] who lived only on human flesh" (Kourouma 72) is shot point blank and killed.

Second, the fearsome "black buffalo, oldest of its kind in the universe" (73) is tricked and then shot to death. Third, an enormous shapeshifting elephant is hunted down by Koyaga who fires five consecutive bullets from his rifle before the wild animal could use its enchantments to change form and evade the attack. Fourth, and finally, the "sacred caiman" crocodile is killed via strategy and gunfire despite the strong enchantments it had adopted in order to protect himself from Koyaga, despite having put up the longest fight among all four animals (77). After killing each of these enchanted animals, Koyaga stuffs the beast's tail into its own mouth, as a final violent gesture of subjugation. This harks back to his legendary habit of consuming the body parts of his vanquished enemies during breakfast, to assert his dominance over those whom he considers weaker or inferior in strength than he is. The wild animals, despite their sacredness and enchanted state, are not ceremoniously sacrificed, as might be expected of deaths in the realm of the Agambenian sacred, but coldly killed off to eliminate any threat to Koyaga's territory: Koyaga renders the enchanted animals not simply corporeally dead, but also insultingly, decisively, socially silenced.

The closing scene of the novel offers an ultimate, all-encompassing sense of fungibility – one that includes human, non-human and environmental relations. The dictator orders that land be cleared, and its human occupants driven away, for the creation of a massive game reserve. The wildlife park that Koyaga commands into existence is a venue where, to borrow Rob Nixon's words, "assaults from slow and direct violence on increasingly marginal ecosystems […] vulnerable to resource capture by transnational corporations; by third-world military, civilian, and corporate elites" become evident (254). Nixon further problematizes existing hierarchies within a similar group of racialized others by arguing that the phenomenon of "incursions of an excluded black majority into white nature enclaves […] created, under the banner of wildlife conservation, dispossessed conservation refugees" (Nixon 182). Thus, those who are made to intrude upon natural territory, cordoned off for conservation, become dispossessed refugees, while white landowners and African elites who already have ownership over land gain favor with state authority in a capitalistic system of social organization.

In Kourouma's novel, the ability to exercise power over people who labor (the peasants) and nonhuman nature which may be domesticated (lycaons) is derived from Koyaga's access to routes and infrastructures that help him ascend in social rank and class within the military state of République du Golfe. Nixon's work discusses the history of colonial land conservation practices, alongside trophy hunting and the creation of game lodges, as being one fraught with agendas of interspecies rivalry. These agendas frequently involved pitting people against animals, in an environment of diminishing resources, for the purposes

of creating rivalries between them and, at the same time, labelling the people who hunted for subsistence as "poachers" on the land. Much like Mbembe theorizes the different *durées* inherent in present-day Africa, Nixon argues that the game lodge "locates itself in the post-Apartheid marketplace by selling a blended aura of colonial time and prehuman natural time" (Nixon 181). Nixon contends that the "environmental advocacy of an ethics of place has all too often morphed into hostility towards displaced people" (239). Such an effort to create interspecies competition for resources (habitation, food) can also be found in the novel's closing scene:

> When they knew the reason for the exodus, the flight, the panic of the animals of the reserve, the hunters had not hesitated; they rushed to the defense of the beasts. They tried to contain the fire and faced down the hordes of poaching peasants with their rifles. This is why, between the airport and the fire, over the whole of the savannah there reigned a confusion beyond description, hunters and poachers pursuing one another, brawling and killing. (Kourouma 443)

The hunters, hastening to defend the nonhuman animals, in this excerpt, reside in an ethically liminal area. Once again, the novel insists on the complex question of social and economic class within Africa, and asks what the motives behind pitting disenfranchized peoples against nonhuman animals might be. In the end, who benefits from such an exploitative, competitive, brutal system, and whose power does it continue to uphold?

Conclusion

Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers have focused on the ways in which African literatures, alongside modes of postcolonial literary criticism, might aid in reading the ecological in cultural texts and how African literary studies might benefit from such an engagement especially. Heeding this call, my article, tending to what Iheka has called the aesthetics of ecological proximity and further, expanding the possibilities of Armillas-Tiseyra's dictator novel, reads Ahmadou Kourouma's text as being situated in a liminal genre of the ecological dictator novel. It is a text which was overtly written for the purposes of recounting authoritarian injustices under the garb of a quasi-realist satire, but it can also be understood as a politically astute and formally experimental work of postcolonial eco-fiction, revealing the suffering shared by human and non-human animals inhabiting the same natural environment in an African country.

Animality and humanity, in Kourouma's novel, reside on a complex level of relations. Through their aura and potential for multispecies worldmaking, totems assumed by the dictators carve out their own space within the text, especially Koyaga's falcon with its connotations of omniscient power. Koyaga's name, habits, tendencies towards

violence and ceremonial dressing assume implications of their own when examined with the knowledge of West Africa's past of French colonial domination in mind. The Lycaons play a particularly important role in the predator versus prey equation, and connotations of compliance, obedience, as well as subjectivity are additional implications which are carried by the canine characterization present in various parts of the novel. While the actual animals are deprived of their agency by Koyaga – who trains his canine creatures as carnivorous to the point of being cannibalistic – Kourouma remains vigilant in guiding his authorial strategies to subvert even Koyaga's nefarious dictatorial ways of committing ideological violence upon animal figures. The vulnerable states of being shared between *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*'s human and non-human animals ultimately collapse species boundaries within the narrative limits of the text, and offer a complicated, complex approach to questions of kinship and solidarity.

Notes

1. First published in French as *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* in 1998, it was translated as *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals* by Carrol F. Coates in 2001, and later by Frank Wynne as *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* in 2003. I use the latter version throughout.

2. Woodword and McHugh further argue that, while traditionally animal figures have been imagined in relation to spiritual, supernatural or occult associations in Indigenous societies, it is increasingly necessary for contemporary Animal Studies scholars to engage with these figures at face value. That is, without effacing their vital functions in society formations by serving as totems, animist gods, familiars or talismans, it is equally important to investigate the question of survival of these animal species, alongside their human animal cohabitants in the same habitat, in colonial contact zones of Africa, where both kinds of existences may be endangered.

3. Mobutu Sese Seko, Jean-Bédel Bokassa and Idi Amin are some of the names Kourouma mentions in an interview with Jean Ouédraogo (2000).

4. Armillas-Tiseyra identifies such strategies as belonging to the "symbolic economy through which the dictator maintains his hold on the social imaginary" (149).

5. The aspect of orality is especially significant since it is precisely through the recounted tales of the griot that we – and everybody else in the novel who is a listener – learn this story.

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