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Who Should Live?: Politics of Necropolitics in John Mwakyusa's *It Can't Be True* and *Yes, I Did It*

Yunusy Ng'umbi
Department of Literature, College of Humanities
University of Dar es Salaam
yngumbi@udsm.ac.tz/yngumbi@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article examines the different ways in which the postcolonial concept of necropolitics is imagined, negotiated and exercised in the context of socio-political instability. It specifically explores how Mwakyusa's crime fiction, *It Can't Be True* (2017) and *Yes, I Did It* (2022), problematises the concept of necropolitics in ways that suggest re-reading the postcolonial state of Uganda by underscoring power dynamics, marginalisation, corruption, and child soldiering. The paper argues that Mwakyusa's narratives deploy the concept of necropolitics not only to unveil the crime fiction nature of the narratives, but also to suggest growth and continuous struggle in peacebuilding in the context of socio-cultural, political and economic instabilities. Through a close reading of the texts, supported by textual and contextual analysis, the paper examines how Mwakyusa's novellas complicate the understanding of the concepts of the right to live and the right to die, in an attempt to negotiate power within the context of socio-political instability in Uganda. The paper is informed by the postcolonial theory, in particular, Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, in exploring how different forms of power are imagined in *It Can't Be True* and *Yes, I Did It* in ways that demonstrate power where the sovereign power can dictate how some people may live and how some must die.

Keywords: Necropolitics, Biopower, Crime fiction, Sovereignty power, Death

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Introduction: Concept of Necropolitics in a Postcolonial Context

Mwakyusa's novellas, *It Can't Be True* and *Yes, I Did It,* represent the complexities associated with socio-political dynamics that lead to the hatred and extermination of other people in the name of power, control, and domination. While communicating the source of instability in the fictionalised postcolonial state of Uganda, these narratives speak to what Ben Anderson calls making life "become the object target for specific techniques and technologies of power" (Anderson 2012, p. 28). Anderson extends it further, saying that "to protect, care for and sustain

valued lives is to abandon, damage and destroy other lives" (*ibid*.) to suggest the dichotomous relationship between living and death in the context of politics. I am using the term 'politics' in this paper as an inclusive term to refer to the system of governance in a particular area. In this case, living becomes something whose existence depends on the political atmosphere of a specific geo-political space in a given time. Built on the socio-political and economic context of Uganda, this paper examines how the two narratives by Mwakyusa speak to and complement each other in representing the concept of necropolitics under the auspices of socio-political dynamics, including marginalisation, corruption, and child soldiering. The paper argues that Mwakyusa's narratives deploy the idea of necropolitics not only to reveal the crime fiction nature of the narratives, but also to suggest growth and continuous struggle in peacebuilding within the context of socio-cultural, political, and economic instabilities.

To execute this central argument, I place in conversation between the two narratives, *It Can't Be True* (2017) and *Yes, I Did It* (2022), authored by Mwakyusa, to identify the facets of necropolitics depicted in the selected novellas; interrogating the different ways in which the concept of necropolitics is configured and re-configured in the context of political struggle in the postcolonial state of Uganda; and examining the trajectories of necropolitics depicted in the novellas to come up with a holistic view about how the concept of necropolitics can be deployed in literary discourse in informing what Frantz Fanon calls 'postcolonial tragedies' to mean calamities and catastrophes brought by postcolonial leaders. In my discussion about these duologic narratives[1], Albert, who is the protagonist in these two novellas, becomes the centre of debate. He enables us to read the concept of necropolitics in terms of how it is imagined as a state machinery for exercising power over its subjects and as a social system that engineers the extinction of specific individuals who have demonstrated some 'unwanted' behaviours. Thus, in the context of these novellas, power control is exercised at the level of the nation and the level of a person in the form of revenge.

In his seminal article "Necropolitics," Mbembe provides an insightful discussion on what the concept of necropolitics entails and how it slightly departs from Michel Foucault's notion of biopower. According to Mbembe,

[1] I use the term 'duologic narratives' in this paper to mean a pair of narratives with related stories; it is a continuation of the same story.

the state, in this case a nation or territory organised under one government, exercises its power through control and domination. In exercising its power, to a large degree, it has "the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 2003: 11). Mbembe goes further arguing that "to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (Mbembe 2003: 12). This gives an impression that a sovereign state has twofold roles: ensuring the survival of its subjects by providing what is required for them to live and exterminating them in case they happen to cross borders to encroach the governing power. While the former celebrates human existence on the planet Earth, the latter pushes human beings to the margin. It communicates what Marina Grzinic calls "'the darker side' of biopolitics" (Grzinic 2021, p. 222), which is understood through the discourses of capture, disappearance, desertion, vanishing and dying. Grzinic clarifies this further when she points out that the dual roles of the sovereign state can be summed up by the concept of 'necropolitics', which means "the right to decide who should live and who must die" (*Ibid*). She qualifies the concept of 'necropolitics' as a "semiotic, literary, and theoretical-technological invention that inserted itself as a cog in the machine of biopolitics" (*Ibid*). For Mbembe, the power manifested in the sovereign state is that of self-control and protection from internal and external forces. It exercises its power in a manner that maximises profit.

In his discussion, Mbembe does not refrain from expressing his feelings about how he developed the sociopolitical concept of necropolitics, which has its theoretical underpinnings in social and political power. The idea has its roots in the Greek word' necro', meaning 'corpse', thus associating it with the politics of death. And, if one wants to understand how the politics of death works, says Mbembe, they "need to summarise Foucault's (1978) concept of biopower" (Mbembe 2003, p. 12). In 1970s Foucault came up with an idea that he described it as "'discipline societies' that "were constituted by a whole set of regulations and by empirical and calculated methods relating to the army, the school, and the hospital for controlling or correcting the operations of the body" (Foucault 1978, p. 136). Discipline was exercised with the aim of making citizens fit "to participate in an orderly and productive way in modern industrial societies through institutionalised forms of regulation" (Soyinka-Airewele 2015, p. 7). He later shifted the focus from discipline to biopower to emphasize the changes in technology and "systems of 'security societies' that enable the control of

populations, determining their lives, bodies, behaviour and well-being" (Soyinka-Airewele 2015, p. 8) under the umbrella term of human rights. As Peyi points out, the concept of biopower was a perfect fit of the time because it theorised the "struggles for change because of its capacity to create death beneath a surface of normality" (Soyinka-Airewele 2015, p. 8).

The word biopower etymologically comes from the combination of two words, "bio" and "power," and its origin can be traced back to the French word "biopouvoir," which translates to "power in modern life and body cultures." The social theorist Michel Foucault coined this term to describe modern postcolonial societies ' power to control individual subjects and the entire population. According to Foucault, the modern postcolonial state maintains its sovereign power through threat and intimidation. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault dedicates a chapter to discussing the mandate of sovereign power. According to him, "one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power [is] the right to decide life and death" (Foucault 1978, p. 133). Of course, Foucault's use of the word 'privilege' in this context is deliberate. He uses it to convey different and multi-dimensional ways in which sovereign power can exercise control over its subjects. It is, therefore, identified through binary oppositional words, such as inclusion vs. exclusion, advantage vs. disadvantage, or immunity vs. susceptibility.

In the context of dichotomous relationships, the sovereign power becomes the infiltrator of the culture of silence and muteness that defines who belongs to the public domain and who must be relegated to the shackles of mutism. This tradition, as Foucault points out, is not new in socio-political cycles because it can be traced back from "the ancient 'patria protestas' that granted the father of the Roman family the right to 'dispose' of the life of his children and his slaves; just as he had given them life so that he could take it away" (*ibid.*). In Roman law, the father figure was recognised as supreme and children were not allowed to defy their father's power. Richard Saller in "Patria Potestas and the Stereotype of the Roman Family" looks at this law as being oppressive and gender insensitive because it "offers an image of an extended family unit dominated by a patriarch whose rule was nearly absolute and endured for his lifetime" (Saller 1986, p. 1). Such a law, according to Saller, is out of use. It is "left in the hands of scholars trained in Roman law" (*ibid.*). Disregarding this law, as Saller appears to suggest, does not mean ceasing the practice of deciding who

lives and who dies. Instead, the practice has been adopted differently by monarchical states to ensure their continued rule.

In its modern form, as Foucault opines, "the right of life and death is a dissymmetrical one… where the sovereign state exercises its right of life only by exercising its right to kill, or by refraining from killing" (Foucault 1978, p. 136). This can be evinced through "seizure of things, time, bodies and ultimately life itself" (*ibid.*). Foucault continues saying that "If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of the recent return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life" (Foucault 1978, p. 137). However, to counter-argue Foucault's idea, Mbembe asks, "is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective?" (Mbembe 2003, p. 14). Mbembe suggests a re-reading of biopower to understand the dynamics surrounding "politics, sovereignty, and the subject (citizens) different from the one we inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity" (*ibid.*) thus suggesting a new trajectory of death that has to be understood in a postmodern perspective. One can argue here that Mbembe suggests necropolitics as a social-political theory and concept that captures the current "foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death" (*ibid.*). He suggests an idea that is interested in interrogating how human beings, different from other animals, confront death and how they question what is perceived as truth in their attempt to "cast into the incessant movement of history" (*ibid.*).

In this context of exterminating human life by the sovereign state, one wonders "how could power exercise its highest prerogatives by putting people to death, when its main role was to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order?" (Foucault 1978, p. 138). What is death, anyway? The responses to these questions take us away from the conventional meaning of death Roland Barthes had in mind when he said it is the "language which speaks, not the author" (Barthes 1977, p. 143) to mean diminishing or 'death of the author' thus giving a room for the critic to interpret a given text without being bound by socio-cultural and political biases. The answers to these questions invite multiple ways of thinking about the circumstances of death and how the death penalty is imposed on an individual. Here I must declare my interest that my field of orientation

influences the response to this question, that is, literary scholarship. That being said, I cite a few examples from literary texts that justify the death of certain characters in African fiction.

Tsitsi Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* begins her narrative with the statement "I was not sorry when my brother died" (Dangarembga 1988: 1), coming from the female protagonist Tambudzai. Aminatta Forna's female protagonist, Asana, in *Ancestor Stones* demonstrates the same attitude when she has a "wishful thinking…of seeing her twin brother, Alusani, die for her to win back her mother" (Forna 2006, p. 30). There are also female characters who are depicted as having a hand in killing some male characters, for example, Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (2005), and Jacinda Waringa in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (1982). Contrary to Barthes' concept of death, these novels discuss the physical demise of characters and their metaphorical embodiment. It should be stressed here that what governs the death of characters in the novels, as mentioned earlier, is patriarchal ideology that poses a threat to female characters. While Mbembe's concept of death, in the face of necropolitics, is grounded in political and economic power for Western capitalist profit maximisation, the novels above centre the idea of death in a socio-cultural context.

This trajectory of eliminating some characters in narratives appeals to multiple ways of understanding death and its motives. In these cited contexts, death is used as a metaphor that oscillates between social and political spheres. It speaks to what Chikwenye Ogunyemi calls "eliminating bad men so that men and women can live together harmoniously" (Ogunyemi 1985, p. 76), which also means eradicating individuals who appear to act as stumbling blocks to the achievement of socio-political and economic rights. In short, what these narratives underscore is the elimination of antipathetic behaviour (not individual persons) that is against the prescribed norms of particular societies. The above-cited narratives appear to hold the view that human beings are inherently perfect, but their behaviours are the ones that subject them to imperfection; thus, they need to be extinguished.

However, Mwakyusa, in his narratives, appears not to subscribe to any of the writers as mentioned earlier. He depicts characters who fall victim to and witness traumatising moments of killing, hence pushed by circumstances to exert agency in avenging what is perceived as an

oppressive power. In so doing, these characters galvanise the crime fiction nature of the novellas by depicting different ways in which characters exert agency in transgressing the nation's social and legal values. In addition, Mwakyusa, being a newcomer to literary cycles, has so far not received any scholarly attention, thus leaving the current literary agenda on the death trope in East African fiction unexplored.

The Death Antecedent in *It Can't Be True*

It Can't Be True (2017) is John Mwakyusa's debut novella that unfolds through the protagonist, Albert, who is traumatised by the ruthless killings of his parents (mother and father) by men purported to be in the government system. As a revenge for the loss of his dear parents, Albert joins the 'men' at Nakasongola Military Training Camp. Eventually, he is deployed to work in the Urban Anti-Terrorism Unit. This novella has two different stories. There are two stories: Albert's and Paul's, but the two stories are woven together into a single narrative, using Sharon, a female character who is also a student at Makerere University. While the story of Albert accentuates the crime fiction nature of the novella by depicting how the protagonist nets criminals like Bianca, Pastor Sebina and Lawrence for being accused of killing the lawyer (Alvin Kasalirwe), Paul's story is centred on his love relationship with Sharon without knowing that the two of them are blood-related. Based on their relationship, there is Albert, who has also fallen in love with Sharon, thus bringing a conflict between Albert and Paul. Eventually, neither of the two (Albert and Paul) manages to marry Sharon. Albert ends up marrying a barmaid, Esther, and Paul concentrates on his studies.

Since this paper is dedicated to the two novellas by the same author, I consider *It Can't Be True* as a novella that initiates a debate on the death trope and how it is imagined in the fiction. This also justifies why I have used the antecedent of death in this section as part of my subtitle to underscore the fictionalisation of the source of death and its complexities in bringing about radicalism among characters in the novella. I, thus, discuss how the novella communicates the physical and mental growth of the protagonist, Albert, including how he deals with the ruthless killing of his parents by soldiers and how the death of his parents triggers a spirit of revenge. Major General Marko Chagonza, a fictional character in the novella, plays a pivotal role in Albert's physical and mental growth. He offered Albert shelter immediately after the National Resistance Army

(NRA) seized power in 1986, which led to the capture of Kampala. It is out of Major General Marko Chagonza, "under whom Albert had fought during the last three months before the capture of Kampala" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 3), that he (Albert) and "other soldiers who had not completed school joined special schools" (*Ibid*). Thus, the Albert we are celebrating here, apart from being mentored in the lines of fighting influenced by personal ambition for revenge, is a graduate of Makerere University with a B.Com - Upper Second (Hons).

The narrative begins with the statement, "We shouldn't have killed his wife" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 1), which introduces the overriding motif and the crime fiction nature of the novella. This beginning not only sets the tone of the story but also demonstrates the essence of child soldiers in the postcolonial Uganda. It prepares readers to celebrate the pride of the child soldier and how his deeds intersect with the social and political affairs of postcolonial Uganda, including the politics of death. It is a statement of regret, and at the same time, it communicates that the man (husband) was destined to ruthless death or what Mbembe calls the subject through which "the absolute power of the negative" (Mbembe 2003, p. 12) is exercised. Although readers are left pondering why kill this innocent couple, the narrative singles out Albert as an object of grief and the one who manifests images of forced orphanage, isolation, trauma, and revenge. He is forced by circumstances to join the army in the bush "for a protracted bush war" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 3). As the narrator admits, "Albert, unlike most soldiers, was not interested in political ideologies or the liberation struggle but was rather motivated by seeking revenge for his dead parents" (*Ibid*). The novella teases out this family-politics relationship by nuancing how the Uganda bush war between Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) and the government's Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) under Milton Obote brought about the recruitment of child soldiers in the army. Albert was only 10 years old.

However, Mwakyusa refrains from allowing his protagonist to enter active politics in Uganda. He instead crafts him in a manner that subscribes to crime fiction, allowing him to succumb to fear and threats from despotic authorities. He knows the task ahead of him, Albert, and how strong he should be in ensuring that the purported terrorists from all corners of

Uganda are netted and dealt with. As a trained child soldier[2]Albert is determined to deal with all sorts of terrorism that affects the well-being of postcolonial Uganda. In "May I Suggest Murder? An Overview of Crime Fiction for Readers' Advisory Services. Rachel Franks points out that crime fiction is a popular genre today. Franks argues that "nearly one in every three new books in English falls within the crime fiction category" (Franks 2011, p. 134) and this increase in the popularity of the genre, as John Fenstermaker points out, is caused by "unprecedented growth in literacy, explosion in print" (Fenstermaker 1994, p. 9) and other factors such as the increase in poverty, unemployment, rapid urbanisation and population growth. In her taxonomy of crime fiction, Franks classifies murder as an umbrella genre that encompasses detective and procedural fiction, on the one hand, and spy fiction, which includes thriller and suspense, on the other hand. What can be regarded as Mwakyusa's effort to craft a crime fiction that speaks to the 1980s Uganda's political instability is visible through the protagonist and child soldier, Albert, who offers both the murder and the spy trajectories.

The death of Alvin Kasalirwe through a bomb attack expounds the multiple images of Albert and how, in different scenarios, these images manifest paradoxical and intersecting roles in enhancing the narratological aspect of the story. It unravels the murder and spy nature of the narrative, and it also shifts the reading of Albert from being a person fighting for revenge for the loss of his parents to state machinery. This death event gives Albert the chance to practise his training as a soldier and spy. It is from the same scenario that readers encounter Esther and Sharon, who serve as foil characters, drawing attention to Albert's qualities in the context of love affairs. It should be noted at this juncture that unknown people perform the murder of Alvin Kasalirwe in the context of what Mark Seltzer calls "the true-crime world" (Seltzer 2008: 22), where there is a "mass-observed world…and violence is directed against bodies and persons" (*Ibid*). The narrator says, "…a bomb exploded right where Alvin and many others were standing…7 persons were confirmed dead, 15 were rushed to Mulago Hospital and 29 were treated for minor injuries" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 6). While the omniscient narrator leaves readers wondering whether it is "the work of Al-Qaida" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 7) or someone with ill intentions,

[2] According to the National Child Policy 2020 by Government of Uganda, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, a child is "any person under the age of 18 years. Therefore, since Albert is 10 years then he is liable to be a child.

the narrative sets Albert in motion to search for the truth about the murder. Albert, in the words of Sam Goodman, has to "visit any number of places in the course of a mission" (Goodman 2016, p. 6), and each place visited plays a role in the narrative structure of the story.

Although the narrative does not specify precisely how Albert came to be a professional spy, it suggests that the training he received at Nakasongola Military Training Camp included a programme of espionage. As such, Albert, a child soldier, becomes a figure "bound up with nationhood" (Goodman 2016, p. 1), who is determined to restore the image of the postcolonial nation of Uganda, one tainted by bloodshed. The narrative, in this context, appears to critique Mbembe's idea of necropolitics by suggesting that it is no longer the state that exercises control over mortality. Still, some individuals have jumped into it for their own interests. Thus, what Albert is doing here is reclaiming the space of sovereignty. In his attempt to search for truth about the bomb attack, Albert asks Esther, a barmaid working at Byajo Hotel: "did you hear about the bomb explosion that occurred in Kampala yesterday?" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 9) from which Esther responds: "Innocent people are dying, and you the ruling elite are doing absolutely nothing" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 9). Esther is quite aware that the role of the state is to protect the lives of its citizens. What she doesn't know (as discussed later) is that these killings committed in the narrative have a 'blessing' from individuals with state power. With finality, Esther asks Albert, "Are you a spy?" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 10). Boldly, Albert responds, "No. No. I am an accountant clerk working with the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA). As readers, we are aware of this dramatic irony that draws our attention to the nature of the genre, spy fiction.

Albert is a consistent liar; he tells Esther that his name is Mukasa and he is a Muganda, while in fact, he is a Munyankore and his real name is Albert. While these lies underscore the facets of crime fiction under the guise of spy fiction, I consider the conversation between Albert and Esther as an eye-opener to understanding: first, the intersection between crime fiction and necropolitics. The act of killing involves a crime. Therefore, killing informs crime, but crime does not necessarily inform killing. Thus, in this case, the act of killing Alvin Kasalirwe makes us read the story as a crime fiction. In other words, necropolitics is redefined as a manifestation of crime. And it becomes a crime if an individual commits it without the blessing of the sovereign state. Second, their conversation conveys the mutability of crime

fiction, which enables readers to focus on the space and spatial mobility of the spy. As this story suggests, through the movement of Albert, space "shapes the form of the narrative, the development of the plot, and it informs characters" (Goodman 2016, p. 6), accused of killing Alvin Kasalirwe. Third, through their conversation, we come to understand the social contradiction emerging from challenging modernity, which considers "reasoning as the truth of the subject" (Mbembe 2003: 14). Rather, the story dismisses reasoning in favour of less abstract objects. This is justified by Albert's short and harsh responses to questions. Esther asks: "All the same, Esther, let's agree that Kampala is better than before 1986" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 11) … "Okay. It is if you insist" (*Ibid*). The narrative tries to suggest that this is a polarised time. What is considered to be true is subject to scrutiny; thus, reasoning cannot necessarily provide an objective reality. It also avoids Albert from disclosing his identity to Esther in their first meeting because it could distort the whole mission of searching for information about Alvin Kasalirwe's death.

We understand that Albert passed by Byajo Hotel for breakfast when he was on "his trip to attend the burial of Alvin Kasalirwe" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 7), and his mission was to track "down the bomb suspects" (*Ibid*). Albert falls in love with Esther, but he doesn't disclose it until he comes back after the burial of Alvin Kasalirwe. Unfortunately, he attends the wrong burial. He is shocked to hear from the preacher, Pastor Sebina Mwesigwa, that the man "died of HIV/AIDS, whereas he had come to attend the burial of the recent Kampala bomb victim" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 21). Despite being a wrong burial, the narrative doesn't leave readers empty-handed. In other words, it is a mistake that makes readers understand who Pastor Sebina Mwesigwa is: "the head of the Ministry of Divine Deliverance (MDD)…known in the country for his straight talk and hard-hitting sermons" (*ibid.*). This is one side of the Pastor. In contrast, as I discuss in the next section, Pastor Sebina Mwesigwa is a complex figure that can be likened to a hyena in sheep's clothing. As I discuss later, he is a character who enables us to theorise the concept of necropolitics in the context of a synchronised atmosphere between religion and the sovereign state. Finally, Albert arrives at the proper burial, and we still witness the same voice of Pastor Sebina Mwesigwa and his hard-hitting sermons. Knowing that a "dozen ministers and MPs were at the burial service" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 22), Pastor Sebina Mwesigwa deviates from his sermon to attack the government: the government needs to pass "a law in which the political

destiny of the country would be determined through multiparty democracy" (Mwakyusa 2017, pp. 22-23). While this sermon can be taken as a camouflage to disguise Pastor Sebina's real image of being a murderer, the narrative postpones revealing this truth. It instead takes us through to Sharon Erepu, a girl who "was to be married to Alvin" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 26).

The arrival of Sharon and her brother, Lawrence, in the narrative amplifies what Soyinka-Airewele calls "systematic decay in our societies" (Soyinka-Airewele 2015, p. 7), suggesting multiple and intersecting ways in which we can understand social relationships and their detrimental consequences. In the first place, Albert, while offering them a lift to Kampala from Kituntu, falls in love with a beautiful girl named Sharon, whose boyfriend has recently been buried. In the name of love, Albert gets time to explore from Sharon about the death of Alvin from which he gets only a scant of information, including his family background; "a prominent lawyer in Kampala,…born into an affluent family" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 36), "a graduate of Master in Law at Yale University" (Mwakyusa 2017: 37) and he "resolved to deal only with investment cases involving almost exclusively foreign investors" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 40). As a state machinery in the name of soldier and spy, Albert, in the words of Rebecca Fasselt, plays an "integral function in the negotiation of social anxiety" (Fasselt 2016, n.p) about the prevailing atmosphere of murder. He would like to track these "private armies" (Mbembe 2003, p. 87) that have assumed the state's power to control people's lives. In her theorisation of crime fiction, Fasselt relates the concepts of 'strangers' and 'foreigners' to crime. She cites a few examples from British and American detectives, noting that "early British detective fiction included foreign criminals threatening middle-class lives" (Fasselt 2016, n.p.). And, by extension, the "early American detective fiction went further, echoing unsympathetic and often xenophobic representation of foreigners in the popular press" (*Ibid*). Whereas Fasselt argues from the context of South Africa, influenced by race, ethnicity, language, and geographical differences that drive the proliferation of crime fiction, *It Can't Be True* offers a different dimension of understanding crime fiction through the lens of necropolitics. It suggests that the power to decide over life and death can remain in the hands of private armies that are influenced both internally and externally. As I discuss later, this is evinced by the involvement of Lawrence, Pastor Sebina Mwesigwa and Karina or Bianca

(a Brazilian lady and an investor in the poultry farm) in the killing of Alvin Kasalirwe.

Mwakyusa wraps up the story by revealing part of Albert's spy mission that the three culprits (Lawrence, Pastor Sebina Mwesigwa and Karina or Bianca) are responsible for killing Alvin. Albert, who operated this mission of netting the culprits as a child soldier, is now a grown-up, married to Esther. In this juncture, the narrative appears to suggest a shift from celebrating the pride of the child soldier in tracking the terrorist agents in the postcolonial Uganda to the corruption agenda in the face of neoliberalism. Thus, Karina, whose other name is Bianca, attests: "I first came to this country during the bush war and was partnered with a Ugandan friend, Pastor Sebina Mwesigwa, to spread the gospel and help the villagers fight abject poverty. We operated in Masaka, Kenoni and Buwama" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 112). We also learn that Karina is a pseudonym, and she is not a Danish investor, as she has registered for her poultry project under the real name of a Brazilian lady, Bianca João Eduardo. While this excerpt can be read as a hint at the cartographies of war in Uganda that plagued its economy, the story's central focus is to reveal the ill-fated mission of Karina's investment project in Uganda's neoliberal economy and why Alvin was murdered. Bianca continues attesting that she "operates a mining company called Bianca Coltan Mining Company in the Eastern Congo […and she has] been employing children in the mining activities and she has been using the XBC bank to wire all the mining proceedings to her bank accounts in Europe and the Cayman Islands" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 114). On the part of Alvin, she says: "Alvin Kasalirwe, one of the finest and most trusted lawyers in town, if not in the region, helped us a lot when we were setting up this farm project. He wrote contracts, MOUs, and even facilitated the whole process of registering the business with the Uganda Registration Service Bureu" (Mwakyusa 2017:, p. 116). And that Alvin "knew nothing of our mining dealings in the DRC" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 116). The worst part of the story is when Alvin "joined an International Environmental Organization based in Brussels, which is notorious for collating human rights abuses in mining sites in third world countries" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 116). Karina continues saying, "without our knowledge, he (Alvin) sent his staff to specifically investigate the Coltan mines in the DRC and the abuses inflicted upon the local people and the environment at large. We did everything we could to dissuade him from continuing with these activities…but he remained adamant" (*Ibid*). With

finality, "we proposed to our man in the *government* [my emphasis] that the young man is silenced permanently. Our man approved […] we had learned that Sharon had a brother called Lawrence, who is HIV+ and hungry for success. We imagined we could use him to carry out the plan" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 117). This extended excerpt illustrates the various levels at which the state exercises its power. As the story exemplifies, in the face of corruption, self-driven interests are staged at the expense of human life.

Let us recall the Bianca Coltan Mining Company and its operations in the Eastern Congo. In that case, we can agree with Soyinka-Airewele that one of the dimensions of necropolitics is to allow the corporate and business world to step in and normalise the processes of necropolitics. The narrator in *It Can't Be True* attests: "…the pastor came for his cut from the Coltan consignment that was delivered to this very farm two days ago from the DRC" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 113) and that the Coltan is "used in cellular phones, computers, jet engines, missiles, ships, and weapons systems" (*ibid*.). While communicating what Mbembe calls the "contemporary experience of human destruction" (Mbembe 2003, p. 14), nourished in technological-mediated tropes, the excerpt foregrounds the complex relationship between Pastor Sebina and Karina or Bianca in the face of normalising death while making a profit. It communicates that Pastor Sebina and his allies are agents of the Western capitalists and their governments that buy minerals from the Democratic Republic of Congo. In protecting their interests in Congo, apart from bribing the African governments, they impose some control mechanisms, including legalising killings to maximise profit in their mining business. In this case, the interaction between Pastor Sebina and Bianca may suggest how governments in Africa and abroad are associated with private armies, which become the accomplices of the sovereignty of the Western capitalist economy.

A Tanzanian novelist, Paschally Mayega, in *The People's Schoolmaster* (2004), shares similar views about neoliberalism as a socio-economic ideology in Tanzania. The portrayal of Frederick de Witts, a foreign investor in Tanzania, operating a beef canning factory with disregard for human and environmental health, resonates with what we experience in Bianca's project. Behind their dealings, a government hand protects them. Although Mayega boldly mentions the Prime Minister, Kafriko Mchumiatumbo, as

the one responsible for preserving this ill-fated mission of foreign investors, Mwakyusa refrains from mentioning the accountable person. He ends up using a common noun, 'our man in the government', the same way Ayi Kwei Armah uses the character, Man, in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969). Like Armah, Mwakyusa might be aiming to avoid pointing an accusing finger at a particular individual in the government. He wants to tell us that the whole government system is liable to enforce unconstitutional deeds through corruption to protect foreign investors. Therefore, in this context, it is logical to say that the government permeates through "the management and capitalisation of the death process" (Sayak Valencia 2019, p. 185) to private armies. It makes private armies have the audacity to exterminate other people's lives, thus making them co-authors with the government in exercising one of the central pillars of necropolitics: deciding who to live and who must die. Whereas Mayega in his narrative demonstrates the use of what Robin Nixon calls 'slow violence' to mean "violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space[3](Nixon 2011, p. 2), Mwakyusa uses direct killing by involving government machinery. He has crafted his narratives in a way that communicates how Western capitalists, through 'our people in the government', plunder the sovereignty of postcolonial governments, thereby having the power to determine who should die for the maximisation of capitalist profit.

Grace Musila in *A Death Retold in Truth and Rumour: Kenya, Britain and the Julie Ward Murder* has a similar observation about rampant death committed by plutocracies in Kenya that brings about "coining new terminology: *wananchi* (ordinary citizens) and *wenyenchi* (owners of the country)" (Musila 2015, pp. 1-2). On the surface of this coinage, there is an excess of power that normalises the everyday tragedies inflicted on human bodies. The murder of Julie Ann Ward, "a 28-year-old British tourist and wildlife photographer who visited Kenya's Maasai Mara Game Reserve in September 1988, to watch and photograph the annual wildebeest migration from Tanzania's Serengeti National Park into the Maasai Mara" (Musila 2015, p. 2) and many other litany of murders in Kenya exemplify what Musila calls the 'soundtracks' of the postcolonial tragedies. Taking the experience of Kenya about this murder trope, Uganda, as fictionalised in *It*

[3] This refers to the impact of air and noise pollution coming from the fictionalised beef factory. Such impacts cannot be realised within a short period of time.

Can't Be True, is no exception. The same series of killings is evinced in the fictionalised Uganda to warrant re-reading Mbembe's conception of necropolitics. For example, towards the end of the novella, we are introduced to Sharon's father, who "fell out with the government. It was alleged that he had joined the Uganda National Patriotic Alliance rebel group led by a renegade Brigadier…no-one knows exactly whose bullets shattered Sharon's daddy's head" (Mwakyusa 2017, p. 74). The untimely death of Sharon's father sends us to the trajectories of death anchored in the trope of necropolitics, where individuals who appear to challenge the plutocrats are silenced by pushing them to the margin.

Mbembe warns us against reading necropolitics as a one-directional concept that considers the right to kill as a reserve of the state. He would like to read it as a multi-dimensional concept that involves different players. It can involve "urban militias, private armies, armies of regional lords, private security firms and state armies" (Mbembe 2001, p. 87). The nature of the deaths represented in the novella encompasses various agencies and manifestations of necropolitics. While the murder of Albert's parents and Alvin Kasalirwe (as I discuss below) can be put in one pot of private armies, that of Sharon's father is a state-imposed death that galvanises the biopower nature of the state. I consider this kind of murder private because it involves a paramilitary force that appears to be controlled by a private person, and it operates along lines of revenge. It treats death as a means of revenge, and since the killer is among big 'potatoes' in the government, he is assured of being protected by the state. On the contrary, the murder of Sharon's father foregrounds the 'unquestioned' nature of the postcolonial state. As Miriam Pahl puts it, "even though African literature is often understood as political, either constituting the nation and thereby supporting the state, or as criticising it in a didactic manner, the state's authority is never fundamentally questioned" (Pahl 2018, p. 86). What Sharon's father does in this context is cross the border set to separate 'ordinary citizens' from 'owners of the country'. Since the owners of the country would like to lead a life free from competition, anyone who encroaches upon them is liable to death. In this case, death becomes a political weapon used by the state in exercising its power and control.

Retold Truth about Death in *Yes, I Did It*

Yes, I Did It is Mwakyusa's second novella, published in 2022. It is a continuation of *It Can't Be True,* as it grapples with the changes in Albert's life pattern after his marriage to Esther, the challenges he faces with his new boss, Major General Elvis Kyomuhendo, at the Urban Anti-Terrorism Unit (UATU). It is from this novella that we get answers to a sequence of events that happened in *It Can't Be True*. Albert kills his boss, Major General Elvis Kyomuhendo, after learning that he is the one who engineered the killing of his parents. This killing of his boss results in Esther quitting her marriage. Also, the rescue missions of the culprit, Lawrence, are underway, and Pastor Sebina frequently sneaks from prison at night and engages in the child sacrifice mission, assisted by Kalule. The story is straightforward, narrated in the third-person omniscient perspective.

I am excited by the title of the novella, *Yes, I Did It,* which holds centre stage in my discussion in this section. The title implies acceptance, confession, approval, divulgence and other forms of agreement that clear doubts or rumours. In this section, I am interested in discussing how stories about murder are being retold in a manner that discloses the culprits. In so doing, it complicates the understanding of the concept of necropolitics, as conceptualised by Mbembe. On one hand, Major General Elvis Kyomuhendo uses state power as a shield to accomplish his mission of killing Albert's parents and other citizens for his interests. On the other hand, Albert uses the same state power to avenge by killing Major General Elvis Kyomuhendo. Pastor Sebina Mwesigwa uses the same state power to engage in child sacrifice and to plot the killings of innocent citizens who appear to be dedicated to protecting the well-being of fellow citizens. The argument deduced here is that the sovereign state exercises its power to rule and control in different disguises. It sometimes operates as a two-way traffic. In justifying this argument, I discuss Pastor Sebina Mwesigwa's involvement in the killings of innocent people, Lawrence's testimony in the killing of Alvin Kasalirwe and Albert's killing of Major General Elvis Kyomuhendo. In my discussion, I consider Albert as a master planner and a voice for the marginalised. He determines to deal with culprits who seem to tarnish the image of postcolonial Uganda. By marginalised individuals, here I mean innocent characters from different walks of life killed by Pastor Sebina and his allies.

In different ways under the torture of Albert, these characters give their testimonies on how they were involved in murdering innocent people in

the face of fighting for 'peace', personal revenge or thirst for power. For example, when in the cell, Lawrence says, "You are a coward, Sebina! You made me help you get rid of that amiable brother Alvin Kasalirwe. You should have done it yourself and saved me this agony" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 15). This testimony takes us back to the history of Pastor Sebina before he became a Pastor. He "was once a member of the Uganda Police Force" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 13). One of the moments he remembers, and it keeps on haunting him is that, when he was a police officer in early 1980s, he involved in murdering a man and his wife suspected of collaborating "with the rebels by supplying them with cereals and stocking guns that were brought into the country from Nairobi in Kenya and Bukoba in Tanzania" (*ibid*). This moment teases out the remnants of inter-state tension in the former East African region (Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda) following the Tanzania-Uganda war (1978 - 1979) but, after finding out that the deceased's bedroom had only "a bible in Runyankole language" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 14), the narrative turns out to be a story of hate to Sebina. It is out of hatred for Sebina that the remaining part of the story sings a litany of murders committed by Sebina. Therefore, his torture in a cell under the hand of Albert is a response to his evil deeds against the innocent people in the fictionalised postcolonial Uganda.

The death of the retired teacher Kajunjumele, the one who reports to police about seeing Pastor Sebina (in disguised form) at night, adds further evidence about Sebina's lethal behaviour. The narrative says that a few days after Kajunjumele had reported about Pastor Sebina being seen in Katwe village, Kajunjumele's body was "found floating dead in Katwe River" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 115) and that his call to police and his death are strongly connected. It is regrettable that the warden of Luzira Prison Service, when asked on the phone "to see whether or not the pastor was in custody" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 114), he quickly responds "that he was there" (*ibid.*) while, as readers, we know for sure that it is a lie. The conversation between Pastor Sebina and Kalule (a character from Katwe village who lives alone in a shack and has never married or sired a child) gives another indication about Sebina's murderous behaviour: "But you are supposed to be in…" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 96). The narrator says, Sebina was "looking for a four-year-old girl with a light skin complexion for sacrifice" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 97), and this is "not the first time these two persons had engaged in this nasty business" (*ibid.*). We later learn that all these misdeeds involving Pastor Sebina were committed under the protection of specific

individuals in the government. Pastor Sebina tells Kalule, "For your information, I'm still in Luzira Maximum Security Prison. I was able to come here through the intervention of my big man, and I am supposed to return before dawn" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 98). These descriptions of Pastor Sebina and his involvement in various murderous acts, as depicted in the novella, help readers examine the different levels at which the postcolonial state exercises its power through its agencies. As I discuss below, the descriptions appear to strike a balance between *laissez-faire and proactive leadership,* necessitating a revisit to the concept of necropolitics in crime fiction.

What can be termed as a turning point of the narrative structure is when an intruder, purported to be Albert, "a well-built young man stepped inside [pastor Sebina's cell] with a small bag on his back" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 147) aiming at getting an intensive information about his, pastor Sebina, involvement in killings and who is behind him in all these killings. Here, the novella prompts us to recall what Albert advised the police: that these culprits (Pastor Sebina, Lawrence, and Karina or Bianca) should be put in separate and special rooms, because he knew that time would come for each one of them to be interrogated individually. At the same time, Kyomuhendo confirms that he "allowed Pastor Sebina to leave the confines of his Luzira Prison cell to go and visit a witch in Kibira Forest and carry out other devilish errands" (Mwakyusa 2022, pp. 153-154). The juxtaposition between laissez-faire and proactive leadership becomes more vivid here. In *Necropolitics: Living Death in Mexico*, R. Guy Emerson has a similar observation regarding state power in exercising its right to kill or let live. Taking the context of Mexico, Emerson argues that there is "no clear-cut hierarchies or mechanisms of rule" (Emerson 2019, p. 2) because the police, which is the state machinery, functions as "an armed extension of cartels" (*ibid*) and the cartels "undertake administrative functions" (*ibid*.). In such a chaotic scenario, the victim is often an ordinary citizen who lacks the power to exert agency in challenging the existing state's mismanagement. It infiltrates the culture of fear and intimidation. Thus, the silenced bodies of Albert's parents, Kajunjumele, the unnamed man and wife suspected of collaborating with rebels, and those of children, on one hand, and the murder of Kyomuhendo, on the other hand, become sites through which to visualise the politics of death and state agency.

Soyinka-Airewele looks at necropolitics as a concept that operates in four critical dimensions: it constructs the terrain of its power and resource base, using legalistic, religious or other forms of constituted authority to define and secure the economic base of its controlled space; necropolitics agents configure the terrain in a manner that represents the ranks of the disposable and of beneficiaries of the system based on class, race, ethnicity, religion or a mixture of these calculations; the militarized wings, police or insurgent militias, are engaged to force subjects into compliance; the corporate or business world steps in to normalize the consumption of the necropolitical process, fueling and channeling profits to those who will sustain the violence (Soyinka-Airewele 2015, pp. 20-21). Soyinka-Airewele's ideas resonate with the terrible brutality of the innocent Ugandans murdered, variously, in the names of desire for wealth, forced compliance, and revenge. It is a calculated move designed to eliminate those considered inferior or a threat to power. The use of Pastor Sebina, a spiritual and church overseer, as a master planner in steering the move to plot the deaths of innocent citizens might appear to ridicule Christianity. However, on the contrary, the narrative strives to achieve a literary agenda of unveiling the emerging trajectories of death woven into the fabric of affinity. It is from this power, backed up by state authorities, that innocent citizens (like Kajunjumele) are subjected to compliance; they don't have to report the appearance of Pastor Sebina at Katwe village during nighttime hours. This means Pastor Sebina has his own space to control and exercise power, which mainly works to the detriment of the people. In this case, religion becomes a shield to protect murderers.

Towards the end of the narrative, we encounter a different Albert. He is well-informed about the various killings committed in the fictionalised state of Uganda. He trusts his sources of information. For example, Sharon, his former girlfriend, in her attempt to convince Albert to release her brother Lawrence, tells Albert: "I know the killers" (Mwakyusa 2022: 86) of your parents. Albert has also visited Katwe, a village known for child sacrifice, and has first-hand information about the killer. One villager says, "that man is going to finish us" (Mwakyusa 2022: 132) … "He has connections that reach the top" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 133). Albert, who is introduced as an intruder in pastor Sebina's room in custody, tortures the pastor until he tells him the truth about his participation in killings. The narrator says, "Sebina opened up. He spit everything he knew about what had transpired years ago, the intruder recorded everything on a recorder"

(Mwakyusa 2022, p. 149). One of the embarrassing moments is when he visits his hometown, Mbarara town, after a 30-year absence. He collects enough information about his parents' deaths. One older man tells Albert, "Your father had a love affair with the wife of a big man in the police force…The word is that this senior policeman sent junior officers to do the job. They spread rumours that your father was collaborating with the rebels" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 64). This knowledge fuels Albert's anger. Worse still, he is told that the senior policeman being referred to here was Elvis Kyomuhendo, who is Albert's current boss.

The firsthand information Albert solicits about the deaths of some characters in the novella highlights an overlap between state and social values in the face of truth. I am using the term 'social value' in this context to refer to the codes or standards established by a particular society that define what is considered right and wrong. Such codes or standards shape the nature and form of that specific society. Denis Muhamba and Boniphace Shimba Francis in "Deconstructing Reality: A Postmodern Analysis of the Concept of Truth" argue that truth is a social construct. It doesn't have to be verified through objective means. It is somewhat "shaped by cultural, historical, and linguistic factors and that no universal truth exists beyond our individual and social experience" (Muhamba & Francis 2023, p. 33). I read this narrative, in this context, along and against the grain, underlining the textual simplification of evidence about the committed killings. The narrative appears to suggest that one does not need a witness to justify the truth about a particular matter. In short, it refuses objective truth in favour of socially constructed truth. An assortment of information collected by Albert about the killings justify the narrative's effort to embrace diverse voices by recognising "local narratives and individual perspectives" (Muhamba & Francis 2023, p. 34). Albert's visits to Katwe village, Mbarara town, and Luzira Prison, along with the information he gathers from individuals such as Sharon, convey the interface among historical, cultural, and linguistic aspects that galvanise what comes to be the truth about the committed killings. He navigates through these spaces to ascertain that truth will be brought about based on a particular established intellectual tradition in which different voices play a part in constructing it.

However, Mwakyusa deviates slightly from Muhamba and Francis by making readers have an eyewitness to the killing of Elvis Kyomuhendo. He crafts his narrative in a way that appeals to the reader's senses of sight and hearing about Albert's anger. Probably, he wants to demonstrate the

aggravated atmosphere Albert is in due to the terrible killings of his parents. After sneaking into Kyomuhendo's bedroom at night, Albert tells Kyomuhendo: "Those people you murdered were my parents. You made me an orphan (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 155) … I am going to end your long stay here on earth this night" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 156). We know for sure that Kyomuhendo's residence is under security control, but Albert, using his military training, manages to kill him in his bedroom without the knowledge of his guards. The killing of Kyomuhendo happens the night before the court hearing of the murder, terrorism and economic sabotage case implicating pastor Sebina, Bianca, Lawrence and the witchdoctor. It is unfortunate that after hearing the case, it was announced publicly that Kyomuhendo has passed on. "He was found dead this morning in his home at Plot No. 006" (Mwakyusa 2022, p. 166).

These two events—the imprisonment of the culprits and the death of Kyomuhendo—speak volumes about the narrative's engagement with the politics of necropolitics as a political and social space that locates human beings in the in-between of life and death. They underscore Antonio Pele's contention that, in the necropolitics world, "individuals are governed through their direct and indirect exposure to death" (n.d.) in the sense of being silenced. While the imprisonment of the culprits may mean 'social death' to mean "[temporal] elimination of individuals from their current society" (Sebastian Yuxi Zhao 2022, n. p.), the death of Kyomuhendo implies total elimination of individuals who use the state power as a cover to exercise their wishes. Thus, death, whether social or physical, becomes a space through which to visualise the contradictory and intersecting roles of the state. The state is (mis)used in different ways by individuals to legalise the death of some individuals under the pretext that they are a threat to their survival (Alvin and Kajunjumele), a source of their success in power (sacrificed children), and personal revenge (Albert's parents). It is through the same state that Albert exerts urgency to counter-narrate its power and how it manifests elements of protecting the right to live among innocent citizens. Although it insinuates some aspects of ethical dilemmas in the fictionalised society of Uganda in terms of committing death, the ruthless killing of Kyomuhendo is not mourned for. The killing is aimed at restoring peace throughout Uganda. It is a means of ending child sacrifice and corruption, which, as the novella justifies, ruin the state's economy and accelerate the state's descent into lawlessness. This approach diverges from Mbembe's concept of necropolitics in the Western market economy. It

instead highlights an ideal poetic justice, where culprits are killed for the sake of the majority's survival.

Conclusion

The two novellas, *It Can't Be True* and *Yes, I Did It,* provide a continuous story of the protagonist, Albert, who unveils the crime fiction nature of the story through his experiences with death. Using Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics as a focal lens for reading these two novellas, the paper examines the different ways in which death is represented as a complex phenomenon that navigates through political and social spaces. While the political space is looked at based on how the state is used as a cover to legalise killing, its social counterpart has been examined based on revenge. *It Can't Be True*, on the one hand, delves deeply into the root cause of death among characters by portraying the interface between social and political spaces in terms of power. It lays the foundation for understanding Mwakyusa's second novella, *Yes, I Did It,* which responds to most of the questions that were left unanswered in *It Can't Be True*. *Yes, I Did It*, on the other hand, apart from responding to the pending questions, it clears doubts on rumours about the killings committed. Thus, this approach to writing not only makes reading a continuous process of interrogating society but also implies the intertextual nature of narratives in speaking about or within society. The two crime narratives make necropolitics a perfect socio-political lens that can enable readers to understand the motif behind the crimes committed in crime fiction. The narratives seem to suggest that all killings committed in crime fiction should not only be considered one of the predominant features of the genre, but they should also be examined from a socio-political perspective, underscoring the social and political motives behind the life or death of an individual. Thus, the paper has unveiled power mongering, desire for wealth and prosperity, as well as revenge, as aspects of necropolitics depicted in Mwakyusa's novellas. In all these aspects, the government plays a central role in either being actively involved in the killing of innocent citizens or individuals using state power to legalise killings for personal interests.

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