

Artspeak Postscript 73
Today, To Think To and Fro, To Live Together

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on "In the Meantime"
CHRISTIAN NYAMPETA

In 2016, at a symposium at the Collège de France called *Penser et écrire l'Afrique aujourd'hui*, the Ivorian writer Gauz noted the spectral presence of the French critic Roland Barthes. In 1977, Barthes was elected to the Collège, where he held the title Chair of Sémiologie Littéraire and, before his untimely death, gave three lecture courses: *Comment vivre ensemble*, *Le Neutre*, and *La Préparation du roman*. “He probably spoke here,” Gauz observed, “at this podium. He probably gave lessons—his wonderful lectures on semantics—he probably gave them in this room.” Gauz then noted that Barthes’s maternal grandfather was Louis-Gustave Binger, the nineteenth century French colonial administrator who presided over the Ivory Coast and, in Gauz’s words, “gave my great grandfather to France.”

I experienced the event of Gauz’s observation, his pauses for emphasis, the audience’s anticipation of the bomb he is about to drop, his facetious astonishment—“c’est formidable!”—from a distance: in English translation, voiced over an archival Flash video on the Collège de France website. And yet, at that moment the *aujourd’hui* in the symposium’s title swelled with meaning. The indexicality of that moment, the *hui* in the symposium’s titular *au jour d’hui*, collapses into the performativity of Gauz’s *here*, where Roland Barthes once pontificated, at *this* podium in *this* room. (*Hui* derives from the Latin *hodie*, a portmanteau comprised of the deictic *hoc die*—in English: *this day*.) Time and space thus crystallize around a site of enunciation, the scholar’s pulpit, as the indices *here* and *this* gather the attention of the room only to then disperse its centrality; “Africa,” proclaims Gauz, “is written in what is unsaid.”

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*In the Meantime*, an exhibition by Rwandan–Dutch artist Christian Nyampeta, gathers us in what the artist calls a “hosting structure,” consisting of a mural on one side and a wall-mounted bookshelf on the other of a large circular hand-crafted table. When I say that Nyampeta gathers “us,” I do so with some reservation, as I was only sporadically joined at the table by another reader during the time I spent with the exhibition. On the table sit hand-carved wooden sculptures. These hand-tool-sized objects seem to be on offer as paperweights for the essay-pamphlets on the shelf. In one of these self-published texts “Upsetting the Rhythm,” Nyampeta reflects on hearing music against one’s will in a public space and endeavouring to learn “how to dance with songs that are in discord with my own rhythm.” Another, on the music of Francis Bebe, argues that the Cameroonian writer’s practice of creating new languages and subjectivities through his anti-colonial indigenization of French also, in his music, “habituat[es] this new [indigenized] consciousness of the self, through concepts and habits that are proper to the writer’s conditions, in their own rhythm, but also in relation to the world, from the perspective and practice of their own home.” The bookshelf also includes Nyampeta’s personal translations of essays from *Penser et écrire l'Afrique aujourd'hui*, as published by Éditions du Seuil in 2017.

The hosting structure is joined in the exhibition by a video work entitled *Comment vivre ensemble* (2015), named after Barthes’s first lecture course at the Collège. It features interviews with four Rwandan philosophers, each asked to speak on rhythm—a key theoretical problem in Barthes’s lecture course and a word that has no direct equivalent in Kinyarwanda. These interviews constitute a conversation between the interviewees, though Nyampeta conducted the interviews with the four interlocutors separately rather than assembling them

in a common space, as the Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou had done when he organized *Penser et écrire l'Afrique aujourd'hui* at the Collège. They also constitute a conversation between the French philosophical tradition—ruminations on rhythm by Benveniste, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty—and a language in which that discourse is not quite thinkable.

One of the translated texts from *Penser et écrire l'Afrique aujourd'hui* included in Nyampeta's hosting structure, "Thinking from Language to Language" by the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne, elucidates the purchase of pursuing a Rwandan philosophy of rhythm to the larger enterprise of answering the question posed in Barthes's title: how to live together (a universal question, but also one of special significance to a country that Hutus and Tutsis must continue to both inhabit). For Diagne, translation, which he characterizes as a "practice of decentering" and as "reciprocity," is "the precondition for sustaining philosophical practice in Africa (and everywhere, moreover, not just in Africa)." To translate does not mean to think *between* languages (as in, the *mean* of two languages), Diagne argues, but to think from one language to another, following the French-Caribbean writer Édouard Glissant's formulation that "in the present context of multiple literatures and of the relation of poetics with the chaos-world . . . [I] force my language not into syntheses but toward linguistic openings which permit me to conceive of the relations between today's languages on the surface of the earth—relations of domination, connivance, absorption, oppression, erosion, tangency, etc.—as the fact of an immense drama, an immense tragedy from which my own language cannot be exempt and safe." *Rhythm*, here, conceptually models the utopian practice of living together (how different rhythms, for instance those of two languages, can co-exist).

At the same time, as a term to be translated from one language, one epistemology, one worldview to another, it also serves as a test case for the phenomenology that Diagne describes: to think to and fro.

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"French," Diagne writes, "is an African language." In light of Gauz's contribution to the same symposium, this statement takes on a meaning deeper even than Diagne's intention to invert the acculturation of colonialism and decenter the colonial *logos*. Roland Barthes is an avatar of French scholarship and intellectual life, but at the same time, *S/Z* is an African book; the heroine of *Camera Lucida* is an African heroine; *How to Live Together* is an African course; and the Collège de France is an African institution.

The *here* of *In the Meantime*, then, is diffuse, particularly as Nyampeta's larger project of which the current exhibition is one part is dispersed around the globe, as is commonly the case in contemporary art practice. Conventionally, one uses *meantime* to suggest synchronic events across a spatial distance: events that share a common time. *In the Meantime*, often experienced by its audience in separate and at different times, challenges the meaning of the *mean* in meantime—a challenge of a piece with millennial ruminations on the contemporaneity of contemporary art by Okwui Enwezor, Joan Kee, Terry Smith, and others—in pursuit of an alternate conception of assembly.

In his course, Barthes theorized kinds of domestic spaces that offer to their subjects what he calls *idiorhythm*, a rhythm in which one's relation to the other diverges from the normative social form of

co-dependent and interdependent habitation. (He defines *idiorhythmy* as “solitude with regular interruptions: the paradox, the contradiction, the aporia of bringing distances together.”) Barthes’s model for these spaces in which to disassemble living *en semble* are the Byzantine monasteries of Mount Athos, a pre-Benedictine order in which monks were “both isolated from and in contact with one another within a particular type of structure . . . idiorhythmic clusters. Where each subject lives according to his own rhythm.” Barthes counterposes this sense of *rhythm* to our usual sense of the word, and also to our usual understanding of monastic life, in which “the life-rhythm of a coenobite, or a phalansterian . . . [is] scheduled to the nearest quarter of an hour.”

To this North American observer, it was striking that two of the four philosophers interviewed by Nyampeta hold ecclesiastical titles at their respective universities. Rwandan philosophy therefore retains, to some degree, the civilizing mission of the colony. The universities at which Rev. Dr. Obed Quinet Niyikiza and Rector Fabien Hagenimana work are not monastic institutions, per se, but one might surmise the institutional supports for philosophical work in Rwanda to nonetheless be holdovers of the rhythmic regime—that of the Benedictine monk, and more broadly of imposed Christian time—against which Barthes theorized.

But the *today* of *Penser et écrire l’Afrique aujourd’hui*, especially as animated by the lectern from which Gauz speaks—a pulpit doubly haunted, by Barthes and at the same time by Binger—is not a synchronic phenomenon. Neither is our experience of Nyampeta’s pamphlets and video within his hosting structure. The Meantime is a constellation of quasi-events in pursuit of eventfulness (Nyampeta borrows these terms from the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli,

after whose study on linguistic tense in *Economies of Abandonment* he named his hosting structure *Infrastructures for Quasi-Events*). Here, time is multiple, and what is held in common is instead the emphatic spectrality of the moment crystallized by Gauz: temporally disparate events that achieve, provisionally because paradoxically, an unsynchronized co-presence.

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Postscript (in the meantime...)

Nyampeta divulged to *Frieze* in an article posted on December 19, 2017, that he had originally intended to translate Barthes’s *Comment vivre ensemble* lectures, recordings of which are now available as free downloadable MP3s on the UbuWeb archive. Meanwhile, Columbia University Press had prepared its own translation, of Barthes’s lecture notes for the course, prompting Nyampeta to abort his plans and instigate the current project.

Barthes’s title—in English, “How to Live Together”—was also borrowed for an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Wien in late 2017 that was largely a response to migration to Europe resulting from refugee crises, and to the complementary phenomenon of European far right xenophobia. As I write this, that exhibition’s curator, Nicolaus Schafhausen, has just announced that he will step down from his directorship of the institution, citing as his reason that “the reach, impact, and the possibilities of institutions such as Kunsthalle Wien seem to be put into question” by “the current resurgence of nationalist politics in Austria, and the situation occurring across Europe.” (The far right Kurz government took office in Austria on December 18, 2017.)

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