SYMPOSIUM

on the work of
sur l'oeuvre de

PATRICE NGANANG

With articles by
Avec les textes de

Bénicien Bouchedi Nzouanga
Peter Wuteh Vakunta
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ZIGZAG WRITING AND THE *RUES* OF IRONY : NGANANG'S ALPHABETS

D. Vance Smith

(Princeton University)

Nganang's fierce and uncompromising 2007 *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine: pour une écriture preémptive* opens with a trenchant—penetrating and cutting—reading of V.Y. Mudimbe's influential *The Invention of Africa*. At least one reviewer suggested that Nganang's reading might be a bit unfair, but the first word in the title of Nganang's book, after all, is « manifesto. »[1] But it is because Mudimbe is, ultimately, a metonymy of African thinking, and of a deeply historical and recuperative kind, that he is the object of Ngangang's vociferous critique. It is not so much the content of Mudimbe's work that is problematic, but its shape: the vast body of knowledge that Mudimbe shows has been there all along is merely assimilated to the burden on the contemporary African search for an original authenticity that colonialism has made impossible. But, Nganang argues, genocide fundamentally changes—even shatters—the hope that any kind of return, reparation, or restoration of « authenticity » is possible. Not just colonial

[1] Michael Syrotinski, « The Post-Genocidal African Subject: Patrice Nganang, Achille Mbembe and the Worldliness of Contemporary African Literature in French, » n A.G. Hargreaves, C. Forsdick, and D. Murphy, eds., 2010, Liverpool, Liverpool UP, 276 n.6.

knowledges but even the traces of precolonial thought are now irrelevant. Genocide changes how we think, and where we go next.

One of the many paradoxes, the *zigzags*, of Nganang's manifesto is that this route lies through the archive of Western philosophy, because that is where we have been abandoned.

It is, in fact, the very devastation of former ideas that is also a new beginning, « à partir de lieu morbide. » This is a path out of what Nganang calls a labyrinth—or an endless library, as Borges imagines it--and so this path is a somewhat labyrinthine way. While Nganang tends to use the word « labyrinth » to describe the dead end at which other African thinkers find themselves, he characterizes his own path—and here I mean the path of his own writing—as a zigzag. Indeed, this essay will proceed by zigzags, because in a profound way this is one of the modes that Nganang ultimately heralds in his novelistic writing: the zigzag of the *rue*.

Each of the chapters of the *Manifeste* begins with a *diton* from the *rues* of Yaoundé. The writing of the streets, quite literally, comes before the manifesto itself, before even the prologue.[2] This is the arrival, already, of pre-emptive writing, the living language of the streets. On the other hand, the manifesto's exposition begins in the labyrinth, with Mudimbe, the metonymic African thinker/writer « asleep » in the labyrinthine « bibliothèque africaine », a quiescient

[2] Patrice Nganang, *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine: pour une écriture préemptive*, Limoges, Presses Universitaires de Limoges, 2017, p.17.

figure in the custodianship of Western knowledge.[3] This is not because there is no desire to escape the library, but because the library contains everything except directions to its exit. For Nganang, the paradox in Mudimbe's archeology of knowledge is that this other African library is also a « starting point. »[4] It does not start where the other library, the library of Western thought, ends, but precisely within it. It is the trace of a long historical loss that the library registers and preserves, as in a crypt—a « refusal to vanish, » not a beginning. Mudimbe's book ends by imagining not the first volumes of a new writing, but an even more expansive library: an « absolute discourse » that, in the end, is simply another volume in the story of the quest for the universal subject, the spiritual library of the Hegelian absolute, or the messier infinite library of Borges. That is to say, still the library of European thought and literature that claims to be the repository of the universal subject. Can an absolute discourse ever be a discourse of Africa?

That is precisely the importance of Nganang's opening argument that the horror of genocide is so absolute that it constitutes a « philosopheme. » On the face of it, Nganang might seem to be offering a version of Mudimbe's absolute discourse: philosophy has overtaken history. It might be an even more tragic afropessimsim, because it dismisses the possibility that genocide is a mere historical aberration. That is, genocide might not be an absolute discourse but the end of the absolute, what Blanchot called the immense hecatomb of signs of endless mourning. Except Blanchot imagined only

[3] *Manifeste*, p.38.

[4] V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988, p.213.

the possibility of trying to overcome mourning, of coming out of it like Orpheus leaving the underworld. Blanchot's fiercest critic, Gillian Rose, had an answer for Blanchot's fantasy of leaving the underworld behind: *« Keep your mind in hell, and despair not. »*[5] That answer is close to Nganang's answer to the philosopheme of genocide, except his is more practical, immediate, and more *vital* than Rose's—while still focusing on the immense « fosses communes » of Rwanda: *« Une catastrophe peut s'inscrire dans une époque autant comme clôture traumatique que comme une promesse de rénouvellement: comme promesse d'une sursaut de l'intelligence; ouverte donc sur un nouveau matin. »*[6]

But it is still a philosopheme, still an *inscription*—and an inscription within what Nganang still refers to as the « bibliothèque universelle. »[7] How is this inscription different from all those already within the library; how is it not the discovery of the trace of history that is recorded there? That difference is precisely Nganang's point. The genocide does not have a genealogy, an archeology of knowledge that explains it, and that informs us where it can be placed in the universal library. It is a new inscription, a destruction that we must continue to account for, the « dorénevant » of « notre 'préhistoire.' »[8] In other words, this is a *new* prehistory, which from now on will be the time that came before the Rwandan genocide.

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[5] Gillian Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life*, New York, Schlocken, 1995. 105.

[6] *Manifeste*, p.32. [A disaster can inscribe itself in an era as a traumatic closure just as much as a promise of renewal: as a promise of a leap of understanding; open therefore to a new morning].

[7] *Manifeste*, p.32.

[8] *Manifeste*, p.32.

Nganang's metaphor of catastrophe as an inscription in the universal library is really both an allegory and, in the literal sense, literal—a matter of *litterae*. Allegorically, this disastrous philosopheme is *like* the influence that Kant had on all subsequent European thought: invisible, but so profound, and inscribed so deeply in the culture, said Goethe, that it was not necessary even to have read Kant to be influenced by him. Goethe's metaphor of inscription is, in the hands of Nganang, an *allegory* of writing after the catastrophe.

The most consequential result for the burgeoning project after Kant is perhaps the very configuration of colonialism as a project of thought. Or, perhaps more precisely, the configuration of thought as a form of colonizing, of thought as the very invention of space as the stage of thinking. This originary idea unfolds, for Nganang, in Kant's short work « What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking? » Already in the title thought is staged as a mapping of the entire world, and one in which the West is the implied, the default, ground of observation: toward the Orient, not in it. And the ground of thought is, again, implicitly, the West. The opning of thought is also the opening of space, the establishment, says Nganang, of an essential relation between « l'espace et la raison. »[9] The establishment of a dialectic of space is also the establishment of colonial reason, the *ratio* that can only imagine the extension of itself as an extension into, and a domination of, space. It is what the band *Nirvana* described succinctly as « territorial pissings. » To accept this originary determination of « reason » as space is to become trapped in the labyrinth—and the labyrinth as not just a metaphor of the endless branching of knowledge, but

[9] *L'art*, p.77.

the labyrinth as a metaphor for colonial domination as the very presupposition that space is foundational, inescapable, a labyrinth out of which we will never exit. It is not just Mudimbe or Mbembe, of course, who finds themselves in it, but even the most radical of African philosophers, Frantz Fanon, who, Nganang argues, is trapped within the Hegelianism of his intellectual formation. Fanon's infamous passage in *Wretched of the Earth* that describes the *villes* of the colonizer and of the colonized is an inescapable Manicheism precisely because it simply traces the colonial imperative of a spatialized thought, the determination of difference as a founding act of orientation.

But how is the story of Kant's influence everywhere—in all subsequent thought, in the territories that are invented and designated by the force of an originary *spatialization* of thought--different from the genealogical inscription of a history of ideas—the self-sustaining guardianship of a European patrimony? Stunningly, for Nganang it is the very *incoherence* of influence that provides the model for writing after a catastrophe—not the catastrophe of Kant, but of the pure annihilation that is the event of genocide. Even the influence of Kant is, says Nganang, *« inscrite jusque dans les balbutiements de la parole analphabete »*: the annihilation of, or, better, the prehistory of, the alphabet.[10] But what comes before inscription after genocide is not the mutterings of half-remembered, unacknowledged snippets of Kant. It is the voices of multitudes who reverberate in silence. The muttering is not itself the stammering of influence, but the very stammering, the analphabetic beginning, that we are left with. This beginning, the prehistory of an alphabet that

[10] *Manifeste*, p.31.

gives us the ability to speak of it, is, for Nganang, where preemptive writing situates itself. Paradoxically, and in every sense of the word, it stands *before* writing, preempting the possibility of writing itself before it is too late. This is the transformed anxiety of influence: not grappling with Kant and all he stands for, but trembling, stammering, before the horror of a catastrophe that is also a commencement.

The analysis is fascinating, rich, and complex. But does it leave us any better off? Does it leave us with a sense of how to commence? Its danger is that it anesthetizes horror by making it into the complex Kantian aesthetics that Nganang's allegory of influence is trying to escape: Horror merely becomes the sublime, the final dissolution of the subject. Another way of putting this is that we forget the danger of forgetting the subject. This is the point at which Mudimbe's book ends, with what he calls the «good news"—of Foucault's proclamation that he has deprived "the sovereignty of the subject of the exclusive and instant right to discourse."[11] One can hear in these closing words of Mudimbe the echo—the stammering—of the influence of political theology, the Gospel («god-spel, » literally »good news») of precisely the «starting point of an absolute discourse. »[12] How to avoid reinscribing what is, after all, an onto-theology of discourse?

For Foucault, it is the competing forms of rationality that undermine the very possibility of a « founding act of reason. » Mudimbe's book, of course, undermines the ontological security of the Enlightenment rationalities that

[11] *Invention*, p.212.
[12] *Invention*, p.209.

cast Africa as the site of unreason and the unthought. But the appeal to an absolute discourse also conjures the ghost of the founding act. It is established when, says Mudimbe, we can « unveil the social and cultural archives of a society » and, through « the pure reflection of consciousness in a pure language » will « universalize » them.[13] « Pure language » is an echo of the Kantian archive and its obsession with purity: pure reason, pure judgments, pure concepts. But the phrase itself is a formulation of Walter Benjamin's. In « The Task of the Translator » he argues that the act of translating from one language into another is like a triangulation in which we glimpse the totality of all speech and all being at the barely visible apex.[14] Benjamin imagines « impure » language, the language of the monoglot, as a kernel that ripens when it finds equivalents in another language. It's a metaphor, in short, of development, a vision of language as teleological. For Benjamin, all languages are partial, waiting to be fulfilled by and in other languages until the whole is complete. In many ways, Benjamin's essay is a prospectus for comparative literature departments, especially in their humanist postwar form, deracinated of philolological nationalisms by exiles from Nazism. Benjamin's vision of a messianic future for each particular language is also a rebuke to Hegel's sneering dismissal of non-European languages as incapable of development. By language, however, Hegel means writing—because he is principally interested in history as the trace of the dialectic. Writing, rather than speech, is its archive. Hieroglyphics provoke Hegel in particular because they come

[13] *Invention*, p.212.

[14] Walter Benjamin, « The Task of the Translator », Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 1. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings, Cambridge, Belknap, 1996, p.261.

so close to what he imagined to be the true philosophical/spiritual work of language, but fail so spectacularly.

Hieroglyphics fail because they still have the shape of « brute form »: they are partially representations of animals (dung beetles or falcons).[15] They are still like brutes, and Hegel imagines everyone who used them—and, to be quite clear, here he means Africans—to be like brutes themselves. The "brutish" element of hieroglyphics is remarkable precisely because it somehow is also the kernel of what European languages would later develop. Hegel marvels over the way in which hieroglyphs came so close to "pure" writing despite being in the « vicinity of African stupidity. »[16] It's this African element that holds hieroglyphic writing back, like « an iron band » around the « forehead » of Spirit.[17] Hieroglyphics fails at development because the body holds it back, stuck on the sensuousness of its forms. But they also remind everyone who reads them of their continual proximity to "barbarous sensuality with African hardness, Zoolatry, and sensual enjoyment."[18]

In every sense hieroglyphics, « African » writing, is, for Hegel, a deeply « impure » writing. It is a form of hybrids, made up of animals and humans, and of the admixtures of what he calls « Africa proper » and whatever Egypt might be, in history and in his own day (indeed, the question of what race Hegel imagines Egyptians to be is itself quite murky).[19]

[15] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, Kitchener, Batoche, 2001, p.233.

[16] *Philosophy of History*, p.223.

[17] *Philosophy of History*, p.226.

[18] *Philosophy of History*, p.239.

[19] See Robert Bernasconi, « The Return of Africa: Hegel and the

Above all, however, it is impure because it can never develop beyond its animal origins, its fundament and inescapable nature as a "sensuous image, not the letter itself."

Pure language, on the other hand, emerges out of—develops from--the archive: it is the totality of languages. It is a project always in progress, waiting to be finished, compelted: a messianic project, still to come. It is the *idea* of language, but an idea that comes from the notion that writing is a supercession--that the truest, purest writing is a concept. This idea is partly the philosophical history of inscription itself, in Europe, which relegated African writing (to speak broadly) to an undeveloped state, the state of sensuality. To wait for an absolute discourse is to wait, with Europe, for the Hegelian absolute to arrive. And waiting is precisely the issue: even when Hegel discusses African writing--to speak broadly, hieroglyphics--he is impatient. He waits for what writing will become, and does not find it yet in Africa.

To think with Nganang about how Mudimbe and Mbembe think about genocide: they think of the (merely) sensuous in writing as a stage on the way to absolute discourse, in the same way genocide is an obstacle on the way to universalism, an allegation of animality to be repudiated. It is the *lack of an idea* in the Hegelian sense, and therefore the expectation of one.

That is precisely the coup of Nganang's call for preemptive writing. It starts and remains with the particular and quotidian, the stage that Hegel condemns as the iron band around the

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Question of the Racial Identity of the Egyptians. » *Identity and Difference: Studies in Hegel's Logic, Philosophy of Spirit, and Politics***.** *Proceedings of the Hegel Society of America***,** vol. 18, 2007, p.201-26.

forehead of Spirit. For Nganang, writing that would fulfill the Hegelian mission of African language would merely be to remove the iron band from around Spirit's forehead. Nganang would rather, just as he declared he would like to do with the tyrant Biya, put a bullet in its forehead than free it. The body is not something to be overcome on the way to the idea, but something that endlessly changes, that writes, or is, a language of its own.

Nganang's fundamental commitment, as a thinker, polemicist and novelist, is to the writing of the body—that is, writing about the body's actions, and writing *by* the body, especially in the wake of the vast immolation of bodies in the Rwandan genocide and, more abstractly, in the upheavals that European thought brought with it. In a talk he gave in Kigali about the genocide, Nganang reflected that *« a text is above all written by a living hand, by a head, by a body, by legs, by a human being. So that the human life is an extension of the text and a text is an extension of a life. »*[20] Written by a head: Nganang requested that the online text of the speech be accompanied by a picture of a skull with a name written on it, the only name that survives from a mass grave at Nyamati. That name is Patrice. It is a memento mori, as Nganang says, a particularly pointed one for him, a writing that points to his own death, but also to what writing keeps going: at least something that escapes genocide. There is a name, and because of that name an encounter with the living. Because of it Nganang was able to meet the sole survivor of the Rwandan Patrice.

This is almost too intolerable, so let me return to writing.

[20] « Necessary Doubt », July, 2008, trans. Cullen Goldblatt, https://www.african-writing.com/seven/patricenganang.htm

Writing, however, is not an escape, but a means of preventing catastrophe from happening, a means of saving bodies precisely because they are part of a vast archive that is still being inscribed, although unnoticed (argues Nganang) not just because it is so pervasive, like Kant's philosophy is for Goethe, but because it is outside what has passed for the sole archive. The passage to this "outside," is, however, fraught and paradoxical. It is not just *another* archive, but a site that we come to recognize *as* an archive because we have learned so well how archives work. He praises Mbembe's lucid declaration of the *voies* of the labyrinth of death—that is, his powerful mapping of the vast carceral continent by an inescapable necropolitics.[21] The way out of the labyrinth is, as I will discuss later, a literal and corporeal route, but it is also a route that takes us through the labyrinth of Western thought.

Let me follow the route written by pre-emption. There is a simpler one, but that will come later. In the spirit of the European *ratio/raison* with which and against which Nganang is engaging, I will turn to philology (as indeed Nganang does with the word in the manifesto). The word preemption comes from the Sanskrit *yamati*, to hold something.[22] To do something before this holding, to pre-empt, is to remain outside of the hold. The vast historical echoes of the « hold » have been recently and devastatingly set out in Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*: it is a word that comprehends hold of the slave ship,

[21] *Manifeste*, p.46.

[22] Franco Renditch, *Comparative Etymological Dictionary of Classical Indo-European Languages*, 2nd ed. Trans. Gordon Davis, Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2016, p.412.

the holding of neocolonialism, the holding of neoliberalism, of structural racism, of incarceration, of the racialized « inner city » in America. What is it to imagine a writing, and a history, outside, or before, this being held—a being held that is also, in the domain of literature, a being-written-about, or the act of reading what is already written?

In the *Manifeste* Nganang discusses preemption as an interruption: as the American suspension of local law by federal law, a potential interruption which is *« au coeur de la structure même du federalisme americain.* »[23] Not just a foundation, or not even a foundation, but a sovereign law that is constituted by its nature *as* interruption, or a potentiality. And a potentiality is an expectation, the anticipation of coming into being in the future. It is, Agamben argues, nothing less than a *faculty*, whether of vision, of speech, or of Death (as in Hegel's *Fähigkeit des Todes*). For Agamben potentiality comes into being as soon as we have to ask how a sensation exists in the absence of a sensation. Part of this aporia is cleared away when we realize that the word for sensation in Aristotle —âisthesis—also includes the meaning « perception, » « apprehension, » « noticing. » The problem, in other words, is a problem of pre-emption: the senses are already an apprehension because they contain a faculty. And we could add, following Nganang's pre-emption, the faculty of writing, of *écriture*. In Nganang's terms, how is the alphabet an originary action, a nouvelle action, not itself caught in the philosophical aporia of potentiality?

This is also the originary scene of *écriture* in Euro-classical philosophy. Aristotle says that at first there are no « proper

[23] *Manifeste*, p.194.

words » to convey this difference between « sense » and « sensation. » This difference, he says, « has no name. »[24] The problem is what to call the « affections of the soul » that are the motive for, the beginning of, and the content of, language itself. It's a problem of designation, because designation, the application of terms/words, is what follows from these affections: so what to call them? This is where language, finally comes in: « spoken words, » says Aristotle, « are the symbols of the affections of the soul. »[25] So spoken words are secondary, posterior, to these affections; and written words are even more belated: they are the symbols of the symbols that are spoken words. So: the alphabet of Western philosophy is thoroughly preempted by what it represents.

The suspicion of the alphabet is deeply inscribed within the tradition of Western hermeneutics. The origin of this suspicion, in fact, lies in Africa, 800 kilometres up the Nile from the Mediterranean, in the ancient city of Thebes. There, the god Amun warned the inventor of writing, Theuth, the god of the underworld, that writing would cause forgetfulness in the soul (so says Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*). As St. Paul would later say, the letter kills, the soul brings life.

All of this actually bears directly on Nganang's argument, indeed on what he actually says, in the second volume of *écriture preemptive*.[26] Two centuries of western exegesis,

[24] Aristotle, *De anima*, ed. Christopher Shields. Book 2, 418a, Oxford University Press; Clarendon Aristotle Series. 2016. Online 2020, DOI: 10.1093/actrade/9780199243440.book.

[25] Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, ed. J.L. Ackrill, Clarendon Aristotle Series, Book 1. 16a1, 1963.

[26] Patrice Nganang, *L'art de l'alphabet: Pour une écriture preémptive 2*, Limoges,

he says (although, to be sure, in the first volume of the *Manifeste*), have produced nothing but a « terre sterile. » The western exegesis, however, began in Africa and became an instrument turned against it. In the heady days of African Neoplatonism in Alexandria the art of rejecting the letter was perfected: allegorical reading became the way to uncover the hidden spiritual meaning within texts. But there was a struggle first over whether literal or allegorical reading would dominate the history of thought. It was fought between two African cities: Alexandria, whose civic reading style championed allegorical reading, and Carthage, which maintained an insistence on the letter, an insistence that the great literary critic Erich Auerbach would argue saved the value of history. Where Alexandria threatened to erase the particular in the pursuit of the abstract soul, in other words, Carthage insisted on the enduring importance of the quotidian. One could tell another story here, of how Carthage was also the thwarted base of an empire destroyed by Rome, and because of this became the site that haunts, and founds, the very constitution of the sovereignty of the Roman empire. Carthage is a specter that haunts Roman historical mythology and political theory from that point. That story of ruins is the story most famously told by Virgil, the story of how Aeneas abandoned Carthage. That story is a retelling of the melancholy of Carthage's destroyer, the Roman general Scipio Africanus, who wept over the ruins of the Carthage he had destroyed.

The sterile, scorched earth of Western exegesis indeed.

A continuation of this story is the implication of the

Limoges UP, 2018.

Roman alphabet in the legacy, the continuation, and the memorialization, of empire in the project of colonial empires, and in the shadow of neo-colonialism. Indeed, the traces of the « development » of writing could be said to appear in the reinscriptions of colonial and neoliberal projects of « development » on the African continent. Protestant missionaries in Kenya, for example, proposed an orthographic system for Gikuyu that was simpler than the one proposed by Catholic missionaries because they wanted Gikuyu to be easier to be assimilated to Kiswahili, one of the languages of administration and employment—and also an intermediate stage on the eventual path to the acquisition of English. The most famous response to this problem is Ngugi wa Thiong'o's insistence on using his first language, Gikuyu, as a way to both resist the weight of the colonial archive of English and to retrieve, or keep alive, forms of thought that would otherwise be expressed. For Ngugi this means that we need to learn to listen for what cannot be, or would otherwise be, inscribed and placed in the archive of colonial knowledge: the unforgettable and dangerously alluring literature of England that Ngugi describes reading in his youth. Instead, Ngugi argues, we need to listen for *orature*. In recent African studies, orature has been increasingly seen as the only mode of narration that resists, precisely because it pre-exists, the discursive forms of European knowledge. Nganang laments the hegemony of « orature » in African studies for two reasons. First, because it implies the championing of « tribal » languages as the receptacles of precolonial knowledges, it actually reinscribes an essentializing, abstract, and unchanging categorization of tribal demarcations by colonial policymakers. And, second,

Nganang laments orature because of its disciplinary roots in the originary metaphor of inscription: to reject inscription, it is assumed, is also to abolish forms of thinking that are the legacy of colonialismBut Nganang argues that this assumption is wrong, because, to quite literal, it is an *assumption* (something we accept from someone else or somewhere else) rather than a *preemption*. This assumption still has the shape of the Hegelian dialectic--it negates something only to find that it has become defined precisely against that thing: oral as opposed to written. This dialectical definition of orature against and within the logic of European thought is not only a strictly logical one, but one that also has played out in the European theory of African forms of representation since, as we have seen, at least Hegel. It is a continued insistence on the part of Europeans, argues Nganang, that Africans remain *analphabetic*, illiterate. We have seen how Hegel assumed that African forms of representation could not be real writing; it did not occur to Pierre Bourdieu, an otherwise sympathetic observer, that Kabylé life could include inscribed forms precisely because it was so important for him to represent the Kabylé as illiterate. These are stories from the annals of the history of European philosophy, but Nganang's account of Sultan Njoya's creation of alphabets (there were several) foregrounds a European reaction to it that is cruder, more forceful, and a more obvious form of the European insistence that Africans were without alphabets. The French administration eventually outlawed the use of Njoya's alphabets altogether.

One of the innovative arguments of *L'art de l'alphabet* is that the best response to the tyranny of the European alphabet is not to negate the alphabet, but to celebrate it. That is, rather

than reject the principle of the alphabet because the alphabet seems to be the very form of colonial knowledge, we can trace the possibility of alphabets like Njoya's that rethink, or even remake, the very grounds of alphabetization. I will discuss some of Nganang's accounts of how Njoya does this, and how Nganang's later writing is itself an extension of Njoya's original, originary project. Ultimately, for Nganang, the alphabet is not a gesture of exclusion, of demarcation in its territorial sense, but the expression of a logic of totality that Benjamin could only hope for in the impossible future of pure language, the global summation of all forms of expression and thought. Nganang says in *L'art de l'alphabet* that the dream of restoring what was lost in the fall of Babel is naïve. But it is not naïve, surprisingly, to imagine a pure alphabet. Indeed, every alphabet is, in a fundamental sense, pure.[27] It has a « raison » of its own, and which it fulfills in its use.

But because Nganang's insists on a quite rigorous literalism, a close attention to, and a care for, the letter, he first accounts for the philosophical legacy of the European letter. That is, after all, the alphabet with which *L'art de l'alphabet* is written.

There is both an internal contradiction in the practice of the letter in Western philosophy that produces its own sterility, and a vitality in Nganang's insistence on the sensuous, bodily nature of the letter that contradicts this very sterility. Again, this paradox follows Nganang's double mode of critique and care. The epigraph of the second volume calls for a care for the alphabet at this present moment: *« Necesaire est Durant la presente misere du monde: moins de literature, que d'entretien de*

[27] *L'art*, p.73.

l'alphabet. » This care is the subject of Nganang's book, and will take a path that is unanticipated in the epigraph, quite literally. In the first place, the racist Heidegger is hardly the person one would turn to for the words that open a book about an alphabet developed in Africa. In the second place, Nganang's epigraph opens an ironic *lack* of care for Heidegger's literal words in the standard French translation of Heidegger's « Letter on Humanism, » the source of the epigraph. There, « entretien de l'alphabet » is « l'economie des mots. » In Heidegger's German text what Heidegger literally calls for is more « Pflege des Buchstabens »: *care* for the alphabet, rather than a structuralist, self-sorting economy. *Entretien* suggests also a conversation with, not just attention to, an object that demands scrutiny. That is, more a turn to *écriture* than a reversion to the economy of Western allegorical reading.

This care for the alphabet is a *different* kind of care than the one that Heidegger describes. A word that recurs in the second volume is *nouvelle*: a new care for, conversation with, the alphabet. This novelty comes partly--or perhaps entirely--from the difference of this alphabet. It is not the one that Heidegger talks about, but the one(s) invented by Sultan Njoya.

The invention of the Bamum alphabet by Sultan Njoya is precisely what opens the way for an African literature, the « nouvelle » that is not just an assemblage from the library of epic and novelistic fragments of the European tradition. Neither is it complicit with the long history of (European) writing. And it is certainly not the act of reading what is there to be read, what has already been written. Indeed, says Nganang, « L'ecriture c'est la *raison* de la literature. » It is a

new and originary *ratio*, one inaugurated by the arrival of the alphabet. A new reason and a new writing demands that we reconsider not only the nature of literature, but also the nature of the reason that *is* writing—and offers a challenge to the sovereignty of Enlightenment reason in the library of African history. After all, *« le génocide, autant qu'une découverte au fond de la barbarie, est un pur produit de la rationalité! »*[28] In turning to the alphabet Nganang also gives a reasoning *for* African literature, an account of its very mode of proceeding.

Here it is indispensable to think of Nganang as a writer of the literature of the alphabet. Of course, his most sustained treatment is *Mont Plaisant*, among many things the story of Sultan Njoya's development of a Bamum scrips (or scripts), from the first, Lewa, which is pictographic, to the seventh and last one, Mfemfe, an alphabetic/syllabic script.

Late in the book the ailing Njoya returns to his first (pictographic) writing. His return to it seems to be a reversion, an interruption of the later systems, which develop into syllabaries. The history of Njoya's system otherwise seems to follow the development of Hegel's history of writing, with the emergence of what Hegel would call «der Buchstabe selbst, » the letter itself. For Hegel, the letter is the notation of the freedom of Spirit, the abstraction from, the overcoming of, mere sensuality.

Yet Njoya's writing is founded in, and returns to, a fundamental sensuality that is, indeed sovereign freedom: «when he wrote, Njoya was free, free and sovereign! » Njoya returns to life after his apoplectic illness by writing his first, pictographic alphabet, suspended in the moment before his

[28] *Manifeste*, p.36-37.

final version of the alphabet, which Mount Pleasant calls «his most important work.» *«Writing was his best medicine, letters the real components of his health. »*

Writing is founded in the sensual, and one returns to life through its sensual character. *«He wrote one word after another, one figurine after another, one story after another, revealing anew in his writing the sinuous fulness of life. »* And more: this sensual writing, which later writing does not supercede, but which always returns, is fundamentally, in the literal sense, pre-emptive. It is pre-emptive, first, in returning there before the Hegelian history of writing as the writing of the emergence of the absolute, European spirit; Njoya's writing returns to, pre-empts, also the Aristotelian theory of writing as an archive of the voice, the letter merely the trace of what was spoken—in Hegel's terms, of mere sensuality. It is precisely in turning to writing as a sensual experience that Njoya pre-empts all this: «Rather than a failed scribe, Njoya became an alert illustrator, and he began to look at the shapes he traced on his slate with surprise. Instead of taking beauty apart with his words, he discovered it in its original form… The eye is essential, » the monarch said, exultant…The ear comes second, in fact. »

Njoya discovers the primal, the originary, gesture within writing. Indeed, to speak philologically, it is already there, if overlooked in the Western hermeneutical tradition. Ecriture is from *scriptura*; *« -tūra is added to the supine form of a verb to create a first-declension noun naming the verb's action or the result of that action. »*; « [It]was originally used in the compound verbal predicate with verbs of motion --so ecriture was originally/ originarily a motion, a gesture of the body, a sensuous act. In English we still talk about a « hand » in writing, but we mean

the shape of the letters, not the hand that made them.

For Njoya, and for Nganang, writing is still, and always, a gesture. It begins with the hand—the *alphabet* begins with the hand. Nganang insists on the importance of the hand as instrumental in writing—indeed as elemental. It produces the « substances des mots, » [29]he says, borrowing from Aristotle's discussion of the first of the four causes, the material, which explains the « out-of-which » things are made. This is the alphabet itself, materially brought into being by the hand, a substance created by writing, and which brings into being the bodily substance of writing.

The hand is important also as part of the peculiarly African history of writing. Nganang quotes extensively from the medieval Tunisian philosopher and sociologist Ibn Khaldun's argument that writing is the human act that most distinguishes human from animal, the principal of the various arts of which people are capable. But, Nganang points out, Ibn Khaldun insists on the literal, embodied participation of the hand, not on its metaphorical or allegorical possibilities. Writing always reduces to the technique of the hand, the formation and outlining of letters, the mastery of *« lignes et la mise de points sur un espace. »*[30] It is this medieval, African, technique of embodied writing that Njoya will recapitulate, in a beautiful passage from the beginning of *L'art de l'alphabet*:

> *La constitution de la lettre orginale de l'alphabet de Njoya est un eloge a la main qui trace des lignes sur un espace vierge. Elle fait des courbes d'une seule ligne. Elle multiplie des lignes pour constituer une etoille. Elle s'arrete a mi-chemin du trait, elle forme une angle d'une droite*

[29] Ibid., p.18.
[30] *L'art*, 140.

cassee en son mileiue pour reprendre.[31]

Here we have both the insistence on the primal and continuing presence—indeed, the praise--of the hand in the formation of writing. And, perhaps above all, the writing takes exactly the course of the zigzag: it curves, it multiplies, it stops halfway through, it forms angles, it breaks, it rejoins. Writing is a continual gesture of the body in its complexity and even confusion, a dance and a zigzag. Letters are *« formes qui sont des lignes qui dansant….formes qui zigzaguent. »*[32]

Where Nganang's writing about writing in *L'art de l'alphabet* concerns the retrieval of the body in the practice of inscription, in the contemporaneous novels so much is about writing as a gesture of the body. It begins not with the split between sign/object, the importation of colonial mind/body, spirit and letter, but begins, as *Mount Pleasant* does, with the sentence *« She was already a boy, Sara was, when she arrived at Mount Pleasant. »* In the book, Sara's body is a preemptive one, one « already » what it does not seem to be: not/both/and/all. Sara is not the daughter of a Bertha, yet becomes Bertha's daughter/son named Nebu, and is also the living archive that another Bertha consults, and who is also the archival trace of the sculptor Nebu. She is the life that exceeds--literally, sur-vives--the archive. She cannot be fixed or categorized, the very function of the archive: to make available a past that has been regularized and sorted of confusion.

Not/both/and/all: not just the body, but also the writing *in Mount Pleasant* and the writing *of Mount Pleasant*. Not the

[31] *L'art*, 19.
[32] *L'art*, 26.

Aufhebung beyond sensual writing, but a return to it at the same time that writing achieves its goal (that is, the seventh, final, and « best» system of Njoya's alphabet). It might be useful to remember that zigzag writing in *L'art* does need poetry to be « remises en chant. » The writing of the book, its plotting, moves from one narrator to another, from one scene of action to the other, from one historical moment to the other. It is a book of interruptions. Or maybe better, a book of returns. «I'll come back to him soon enough, » Bertha says repeatedly. And so is the newest in the trilogy, *A Trail of Crab Tears/ Empreinte de crabe*, a story of return to what the principal character, who nevertheless stays in the US, calls both poignantly and comically: «the country back home. » The trail of the crab, is of course, a zigzag.

This is not just the shape of the plot, but the « empreinte » of Nganang's philosophy of writing itself: sideways, as a crab, perhaps. But he does, in fact, have a specific term for its modus procedendi, its mode of proceeding. A boa which has come to tell Sultan Njoya the story of how it swallowed an antelope is killed as it «zigzagged » along the walls of the House of Stories. This is how one traverses on the way to literature, in zigzags—as long as one escapes death. And this is how one traverses, again in *L'art de l'alphabet*, the absolute, universal library of Hegel that says nothing about Africa or African writing. Composing another genealogy, another archive/arche for African literature, *«ne dévient possible que dans le double geste d'une attention soutenue auz* zigzags *de la raison dans le quotidien de la vie africaine, unie a un commerce regulier avec la bibliotheque des idees.* »In other words, instead of the inevitable movement of *aufhebung* that is the conceptual version of the colonial annulment and abstraction of the indigenous

and the local—the zigzag. The zigzag is many things and none of them at the same time. It is a mode of irony in philosophy, certainly (Nganang calls it a «ruse d'ironie »), and it is a traversing of and between words themselves. Maybe this is a paranomasia only someone who is principally an Anglophone would notice, but «ruse d'ironie» suggests also the «*rues* d'ironie. » Even if this zigzag of the alphabet happens only for an Anglophone who is only listening in to French, it is nevertheless precisely the route that Nganang takes back into the possibility of an African literature. The zigzags of the «ruse/rues» of «raison» are possible only in the «vie quotidien, » above all the life that unfolds in the streets, as anyone who has read *Temps de Chien/Dog Days* knows very well.

In many senses, the «vie quotidien» is literally the way, the «rue» itself : «c'est de penser avec les rues»., it is to open the eyes «a la singuliere intelligence des paroles folles de rue." And every chapter *of L'art de l'alphabet*, indeed, begins with a «Dicton des rues d'Yaounde. » It's a writing of the streets (writing in the subjective and objective genitive—a writing about the streets and a writing by the streets).

These streets are not exterior to the library: they are the routes within it, or the «zigzante» route between the bibliotheque and the vie quotidien. Not a way to writing, but the way that is writing. This is precisely why Nganang does not talk about the beginning of African writing, or how the colonial exegeses and abstractions of [Africa] are the inescapable genealogy of African writing. No, it is specifically and precisely what Nganang refers to as a «*re*-ecrire»: a return to, a rewriting: already a boy, already the alphabet before the gesture of écriture begins.

And now, after *Mont Plaisant* has come out, we can't think of Sultan Njoya's alphabet as a mere example. It's the subject of the novel, and in many ways one can say that the multiple plots and the hetergoenous bodies, etc are aspects of Njoya's alphabet. Nganang has not only brought the alphabet to light, but also made a novel out of it. The novel is, quite literally, the writing that begins from that preemptive alphabet (preemptive also because it comes before the question of the novel in Africa, altogether). *Mont Plaisant* shows that there is already an archive of pre-emption; we are not so much doomed by having to decolonize as by our failure to recognize the *historical* attempt to overcome the inscription of colonialism before--or perhaps--as it begins.

SYMPOSIUM
on the work of /sur l'oeuvre de
PATRICE NGANANG

École normale supérieure de Paris (France), 24 mai 2022
Princeton University (USA), 6 octobre 2022

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