

DIAGNOSING THE CHIMURENGA CHRONIC

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In which ways do people live their lives with joy and creativity and beauty, sometimes amidst suffering and violence, and sometimes perpendicular to it? How do people fashion routines and make sense of the world in the face of the temporariness or volatility that defines so many of the arrangements of social existence here?

These questions loom over contemporary Africa. Yet most knowledge produced on the continent remains heavily reliant on simplistic and rigid categories, the bulk of it unable to capture the complexities and ambivalences that inflect so much of quotidian life here.

This failure illustrates what Achille Mbembe calls “a crisis of language” in writing Africa in the world and writing the world from Africa. Such writing is caught in a gap – a time-lag, even – between what Africa is and what we’re told it ought to be. It presents Africa as a pathological case, a figure of lack – and focuses on what Africa is not (yet) rather than what it is. We find this instrumentalised view of the world not only in official discourse (state, international finance, NGOs) but also among those who oppose their policies. It’s a discourse of relevance.

During 2011, *Chimurenga* proposed a way out of this crisis with the publishing of a once-off, one-day-only edition of a fictional pan African newspaper. Titled the *Chimurenga Chronic*, the project was published in collaboration with Nigeria’s Cassava Republic Press and Kenya’s Kwani Trust, and distributed across several African cities.

An intervention in both time and space, the *Chronic* embraced the newspaper as the medium best capable of inhabiting, reproducing and interpreting political, social and cultural life in places where uncertainty and turbulence, unpredictability and multidirectional shifts are the forms taken, in many instances, by daily experience.

Emblazoned with its date of publication, few contemporary objects are as potent a container of time as the print newspaper. A sign of the times, the newspaper simultaneously announces itself in the present while harkening

back to an analogue era, to the turn of the 20th century and the dawn of the machine age.

We had to rethink the newspaper for this digital era as time-based, not only as part of historical sequence or even as the consequence of procedures that have been animated, literally unfolding in time, but as a producer of time: a time-machine.

We were guided by the words of composer, bandleader and theorist Sun Ra – a long time ago, back when outer space was the place he said: “Equation wise, the first thing to do is consider internal linktime as officially ended...we will work on the other side of time”.

It has become increasingly clear that time, once thought continuous, is actually marked by radical disjunctions between numerous different temporalities, dispersed entanglements and overlapping time-spaces. And the tools at our disposal, particularly in the area of knowledge production, do not help us much to grasp that which is emerging.

So we set our time-machine to 18-24 May 2008. This was an arbitrary date, but also a significant marker: it was during the xenophobic violence that ravaged many of South Africa’s cities during that period. We wanted to place those events within a broader context and challenge the logic of emergencies that characterises media coverage of Africa.

We invited our writers, artists and editors to take the *Chronic* seriously as a time-machine; to re-consider the past as a territory to explore, and the present as a precarious and elusive entry-point through which, hopefully, a radically different future might make its appearance. We asked them to relocate in the middle of a social crisis in order to write Africa outside the crisis of language.

This straddling of the space between fact and fiction, we hoped, would allow for temporal stories and histories – discrete, distinct and possibly incommensurate accounts of the past and present to be told in ways that deny a sense of obligation (relevance) or sensationalism. Learning to read and write outside the prisons of fact and fiction would take time – the process of researching and writing *The Chronic* took over a year.

Employing reportage, memoir, satire and analysis to offer a detailed, vivid and richly textured engagement of everyday life, the *Chronic* told stories of a complicated ordinariness. Featured articles included Somali’s capital in Nairobi, a portrait of Juba, a new African capital city, the story of a border fence,



Cameroon’s bass culture, the adventures of Dr Evil in Dakar, the Kenyan long distance runner, a visual history of *Things Fall Apart* and many more.

The response was testimony to the success of the project. Accolades poured in. South Africa’s *Mail&Guardian* described *The Chronic* as “a cracker. The sort of newspaper you want to open at the end of every week.” Simon Kuper writing in the *Financial Times* described it as “better than *The New Yorker*”.

The congratulations were still ringing in our ears when we realised the irony. The *Chronic* may well have been the newspaper African readers wanted to open every week, but clearly they wouldn’t be doing that. The *Chronic* was a once-off – not a newspaper but an art project, the performance of a newspaper. Here today, gone tomorrow, it appeared as a spectacle that came dangerously close to perpetuating the very thing it sought to critique. It presented Africa as a land of never-ending present and instant, where today and now matter more than tomorrow, let alone the distant future.

This negated the true value of the newspaper, the very thing that drew us to the medium in the first place: its ability to be present, to create the effect of presence in the present while simultaneously moving through different temporal orders, instrumentalising

spatial fragmentation and creating a point of transition from the past to the future.

So why leave it there? We clearly do not lack the talent, the ingenuity or the voices to tell our own story. Nor do we lack the readership – Africa is hungry for intelligent and challenging writing that takes seriously the task of uncovering the stories that underpin our current condition. We have in place the networks of circulation to move ideas and distribute goods in innovative ways.

What is missing is the bravery to challenge prescribed modes of production that favour once-off projects. To do this we must take seriously the rules, regularities, the reproductive logics and the labour involved in making everyday life possible; despite the conditions of precariousness and uncertainty that continue surround us.

We need to draw on the way African societies compose and invent in the present and embrace our capacity to continually produce something new and singular.

We have to write the everyday, every day.