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Griots, Satirical columns, and the micro public sphere

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ABSTRACT

This reflexive study examines the idea of African storytelling. It sheds light on a specific university newspaper column, The UKZN Griot. A critique of neoliberal managerialism backgrounds the discussion of the satirical column that examines the local in relation to global issues of academic governance. The Habermasian theory of the public sphere frames the discussion. Responses to the column are analysed in terms power relations, resistance and democracy.

Keywords; public sphere, griot, imbongi, newspaper column, satire, managerialism

The UKZN Griot is a monthly back page column published in *UKZNdaba*, a weekly issued by the Corporate Relations Division (CRD) of the University of KwaZulu- Natal (UKZN)^[1]. The UKZN Griot occupies a full page that satirically focuses on issues of governance, accountability and the academy within a global context. CRD had invited an irreverent column to attract readers back to the paper due to its being seen as an institutional propaganda vehicle following the merger between Natal and Durban-Westville Universities in 2004. Its author, Keyan Tomaselli, was initially apprehensive as critics of institutional Authority during and after the merger had been harshly dealt with by the new UKZN executive. After some months of discussion he was assured that his critical role and authorial independence would be respected by the institution. This agreement that he would be authorised to offer critique occurred in the context of post-apartheid 'transformation' and increasing global demands for 'public accountability' from the tertiary sector. South African universities were addressing both processes simultaneously, the former being politically driven, the latter arising out of neoliberal ideology. Transformation is for the *griot* a hooray word for Africanisation, but which he argues is actually code for race-based neoliberalism, managerialism and autocracy.

The authors of this study are drawn from UKZN, and thus occupy an (insider) research position. The study arose as a result of an extensive structured interview conducted with the *griot*. The original interview has been here elaborated into an autoethnographic narrativised relationship (see Ellis and Borchner, 2008). Autoethnography enables analysis of Same-Other relations via personal contextualised lived experience.

The question examined is: in what way, if any, does the column constitute a micro-public sphere within a highly autocratic institutional environment that followed the merger between the two universities in 2004, within a post-apartheid global context of the corporatization of the academy globally?

Overnight, in the mid-2000s, UKZN had become a mega institution with five campuses in two cities on a minuscule budget, playing catch-up between administrative systems and fundamentally reconfigured structures and different campus, union and academic

cultures. Now embedded in the global tertiary education industry, the nature of UKZN's structural adjustment is the primary issue under scrutiny by the *griot*.

The Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas's (1989) theory of the public sphere has been intensively promoted by Northern academics in the African context, so much so that it came to be resisted as 'not-African' (see Rønning 1997). The concept however offers a way of protecting democracy, ensuring political accountability, and of limiting corruption. The concept may be Eurocentric and idealist in its original formulation, but in the aftermath of Nazism and apartheid it was a crucial conceptual intervention to ensure the health of the political dialectic. Like any concept, it has been refined, re-invented and promoted in many different contexts

The bourgeois public sphere is traced to the 19th century tradition of coffee shop discussions and pamphlets: "A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body...." (Habermas 1974: 49-50). Such spheres integrate to form a larger 'montage of publics', comprising a "vernacular discourse". These spheres are rhetorical and focus on particular issues regarding which participants may have conflicting interests. Public spheres coalesce around issues rather than groups of individuals and 'reticulate' a public sphere (Hauser 1999:109). Reminiscent of Habermas' use of the word 'nodes' to describe the different sites of public discourse, many spheres are inter-linked. Public opinions are embedded in on-going dialogue in which classes, races, religions, genders, generations, regions, and a host of other significant discriminators interact with each other. These problematize assumptions about meaning, and create discursive spaces (i.e. public spheres) in which new interpretations emerge. These enable intersections that provide collective expressions of shared sentiments (Hauser 1999: 110).

Griots, Imbongis and Bards

A contemporary definition of the *griot* is one that also applies to the Xhosa *imbongi* and European bard. An *imbongi* is an artist who "was, and still is" observer, commentator or councillor of the past and passing scenes (Palmer and Jones 1988:1). These performers are situated on a continuum of orality and literacy, no longer purely 'oral' but may also inhabit video and print in the form of electronic or secondary orality (McCluhan 1964:17). The contemporary *imbongi* could therefore be redefined as a

... man or woman who is involved in the oral production of spontaneous poetry in any given context (but often writes poetry as well, using the traditional styles and techniques), who is in a position to act as mediator, educator, praiser and critic between an authority and those under that authority and who is accepted by the people and the authority in question (Kaschula 1993: viii).

That is, the *griot* is an individual who is authorised by 'Authority' to make fun of key figures, to act as their (ironical) praise singers and, in modern idiom, to take on the role of critical editorial writer.

Habermas (1974:78) casts the sphere as "a conceptual device which, while pointing to a specific social phenomenon, can aid in analysing and researching the phenomenon" (Dalgren

and Sparks 1991: 2). ‘Public opinion’ refers to “the tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally – and, in periodic elections, formally as well – practices vis-à-vis the ruling structure organized in the form of a state” (Habermas, 1974: 29). Such opinion is explicitly distinguished from “mere opinions’ including “cultural assumptions, normative attitudes, collective prejudices and values’ in that ‘public opinion can by definition only come into existence when a reasoning public is presupposed” (Habermas, 1974: 36).

For the *griot* the public sphere is “the space of communicational ideas” that emerge from academic life addressed to the decision makers of his institution (Castells 2008:78). “Strong publics” are the spaces of institutionalised deliberation whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making. “Weak publics”, where The UKZN Griot resides, are spaces whose deliberative practices consist exclusively in opinion formation, *sans* decision making (see Fraser, 1990).

The UKZN Griot raises critical issues facing the university as a global institution, though reader responses tend to be sent only to the author, rather than the blog or the publisher. These are compiled and then submitted to CRD and/or uploaded with correspondent permission by the *griot*. These written comments are indicative of much corridor and backroom talk on all five campuses, an observation made in the column that concluded the year 2009. The UKZN Griot is part of a micro global journalistic practice or micro global ‘journalism’ (Rantanen 2005). Micro-public spheres are, therefore, scenes of the political within whose imagined bounds power conflicts and controversies erupt and unfold before readers’ eyes and ears. In the end, the journalistic practice of non-violently monitoring the exercise of institutional power takes root as a result of such micro-public spheres. These micro global public spheres are sites within global civil society where power struggles are waged and witnessed, narrated and imagined (Hauser 1999).

A griot^[2] or *jeli* is a West African storyteller, praise singer, poet and musician, a repository of living memory (Oliver, 1970). He improvises on current events, chance incidents and the passing scene such that “his wit can be devastating and his knowledge of local history formidable”. *Griots* can be likened to *imbongi* (praise-poets) in Southern Africa (Mphande 2004) and the bards in European (especially Irish) tradition. As such, *griots* are storytellers, historians, educators, politicians, satirists musicians and comedians.

The name of the *UKZNdaba* column arose from Tomaselli’s research on African story telling in the form of cinematic *griots* in west African films, and via analyses of *imbongis* in popular South African theatre and TV documentaries (see Tomaselli and Eke, 1995; Tomaselli and Shepperson, 1995). *Griots* are like pre-Enlightenment travelling bards of Europe, now incorporated into TV as the “bardic function” (Fiske and Hartley, 1978), and in cinema, they are usually imaged as contemporary social critics who take on Authority. *Griots* are individuals who are authorised by Authority to make fun of key figures, and to act as their (ironical) praise singers. Given the conflictual institutional conditions existing at UKZN at the time of writing the first column, Tomaselli chose the term, *griot*, with a deliberate tactical objective in mind - to create a space for critical comment in what was seen to be an unforgiving managerial environment (see Makgoba and Mubangizi 2010) that claimed the mantle of Africa’s ‘Premier Institution of African Scholarship’ as it tackled the conflicts and contradictions arising from the merger .

Griots, like artists, are able to transcend time and place, provide new insights, and open new ways of seeing and doing (see, e.g., Stoller, 1992). Tomaselli also wanted to use an internationally recognised term to signal to his colleagues that he identifies with the university as “African”, though **not** with essentialisms that are associated with the common

sense assumption that ‘Africa’ is one place, one culture, one ontology, one race, connected by single value and knowledge systems.

Griots and the power structure

Like *griots* in West African story-telling and in their representations in film, The UKZN Griot’s self-defined role is to work within-the-possible to achieve the not-yet-possible. His assumption is that everyone is implicated in relations of power and exploitation. Even vice-chancellors are embedded in policies and demands of state on which they are required to deliver. If those inhabiting the micro public sphere recognise their respective locations, and how they can manoeuvre through the contradictions that confront them, then they might be able to make a little difference, to re-open up small but systematic spaces for broader dialogue. That public sphere had been squandered by the institution during the merger. The successor CRD top management in 2009 realised that they needed to restore something of a critical voice, to revitalise UKZN media and recover their popular legitimacy. The Griot column, as the section that attracted previously alienated readers back to *UKZNdaba*, was one way of redressing this awkward legacy, of re-establishing a readership lost when the paper was little more than one man’s bugle^[3].

In agreeing to write the column Tomaselli requested from the CRD Head, who served on the University Executive, that he would have the ‘protection’ of her division. He was reasonably sure that this would be forthcoming as the journal he edits, *Critical Arts*, had previously published a systematic critique (Williams 2000) of Prof WM Makgoba’s book, *Mokoko* (1997), on his interpretation of his struggle at, and dismissal from, University of the Witwatersrand. Makgoba’s response at pre-publication stage was affable^[4]. CRD as publisher has stood firm whatever the objections. One ex-staffer who had a particularly fractious relationship with the UKZN executive, concluded however:

Just read the nov/dec issue where you try to defend yourself from being a voice of Corporate Affairs. The assertion itself is laughable. For some reasons thought, given the nature of suspicion and the polarity of positions and views at that space, one would understand why anyone who would contribute to that particular newsletter could be seen as speaking FOR power.

This is the only known politically negative response, and its determinism reflects a static analysis of power relations. Certainly, as an authorised columnist, writing in an authorised institutional publication, the *griot’s* contribution functions as a safety valve as far as management is concerned. If an authorised staffer is, however, enabled to let off steam and draw attention to pressing issues (reflecting the general experiences of the subaltern public spheres), then such communication is placed on the public record. Columns are debated by students in seminars. One on international relations was revised from an address offered at an official university conference. A third was used by the Research Office to generate discussion on issues of ranking of scientists, while another backgrounded a workshop on publishing. The column was referred to by Prof Johan Mouton during his presentation to 2015 scholarly editors’ organised by the SA Academy of Science. This use filters the column into day-to-day debate.

The *griot* has no illusions that his column will change policy or recover a lost humanism. Some academic colleagues, he argues, are just as much responsible for the conditions under which employees find themselves as is any overarching authoritarian management structure. A recurring theme is the need for mutual respect. But, also, academics need to take their opportunities with regard to the many incentives offered by the institution when doing research.

Content

The UKZN *griot* points his finger without fear or favour. For instance, in the September 2011 issue ('Of Audits and Plaudits', a title suggested by an alienated ex-UKZN lecturer) he mentions the controversial Council for Higher Education report that was critical of UKZN that was suppressed by Makgoba via a legal technicality. In the same number, the vice chancellor is featured on the first page, with a picture and a headline of him receiving an award. Ironically, the back page, the paper pokes fun at 'plaudits'. He criticizes The FIFA world cup for 'brand imperialism' (July 2010) alongside a feature about 30 UKZN students who benefitted from the World Cup. In the April 2010 issue ('Of Entrances and Exits'), the *griot* says 'We have a new head of Corporate Relations, or whatever they are calling themselves now', a comment on endless restructuring, peer-reviewing, staff demoralisation, traffic, ratings, rankings and PR. He pokes fun at management, ('I am not sure if I will survive this column' – March 2010).

The idea behind a micro-public sphere is to effect and protect dialogue, and to work with and through institutional structures in creating spaces for the expression of a variety of viewpoints in order to strengthen the idea that the university should be a dialogically-managed open-ended organism rather than a closed-ended factory production line. The *griot* moves from criticism of authorities to criticism of his fellow academics, student culture, Durban Metro police, road-name changes, taxi drivers, the sciences, the humanities, the push to publish, productivity units, financial management and even himself, amongst other subjects.

Responses

The following responses were compiled from a purposive sample conducted in 2010 and from hundreds of unsolicited reader-responses sent to the *griot*. A few respond in depth, most offer encouragement. The most incisive comments stem from those not in the employ of UKZN. On occasion, lengthy in-depth essays are received, and these are placed on the blog. A professor of literature (Respondent 1) observed: "The 'right to criticise' is intertwined with the true bardic function. There is need for this kind of 'bardic' / *ukubonga* criticism. A society that stifles criticism self-destructs. The column has taken up the legitimate praise-and-protest duties of the *imbongi* of old. The Griot column is by far the most popular topic of discussion in the whole UKZNdaba paper which few people really enjoy reading."

"I personally do not find UKZN campus newspapers of any significance; few, if any of my colleagues, read *UKZNdaba*. Its general content appears to bear little reference to the lived experience of an imploding institution" (. 'The only part of *UKZNdaba* I do occasionally read is the 'Griot' column as it, at least, voices a more adversarial narrative stance. A columnist should not be neutral as he/she is voicing an opinion and develops a readership and following, precisely because of this. Rather than applauding Corporate Relations for allowing the slightly more subversive *Griot* voice, I think the column is co-opted to demonstrate the so-called 'freedom of speech' permitted at the institution' (R3).

I read the UKZN newsletters to follow the new trends in self-hugging, self-promotion, the science of patting one's back - and all those things now formally classified as corporate image development and public relations ... I find humour in a lot of the interpretation of statistics and the capacity to grab moments for glory. The arrival of the Griot, with its satirical approach, was even an added bonus (R4). Well, this guy's writing is so old school but in a modern interesting kind of way (R5). I think he is doing a good job just speaking on our behalf. We are very frustrated as academics and he is usually right on the money on the

critical issues. I think he should keep going if he can. Hope he doesn't lose his job over it though! He mustn't start feeling that he can change this institution" (R6).

"I think he should put all those anecdotes in a book with a comic-take about University experiences from the point of view of a grumpy old professor" (R7). "It is so out-of-the-box. The stuff about the coffee shop being a useless meeting place is so one-sided. But then, the way he tells it is just crazy you can't help laugh at yourself. I like his anecdotes and analogies to movies and popular culture and all (R8)". He should listen in when students are sitting at the coffee shop, instead of just criticising them. A lot of what he writes and a lot more other important stuff is spoken about at the coffee shop. We are not just making noise" (R10). Coffee shops in Habermas public sphere are considered key nodes discussion and debate. At UKZN, however, they are noisy, smoky, places typified by screaming, card playing, loud music and other activities that have no relation to political discourse (see Issok 2013). The very crowded coffee shop on the Howard College campus, then in a courtyard, was the only place where staff and students could gather for refreshments, but was lost to the public sphere for the above reasons – students redesignated it as an all-day party.

"Sometimes it is quite funny to read and quite engaging. Other times however it reads like an extended complaints-to-the-editor section" (R11). "Well, the column is a great read, especially the way the writer connects so many disparate dots. He has a very good memory about different subjects and the university in particular. At least he gives an interesting spin on everything (R12).

"Wow, this is absolutely brilliant! I wish you were on our campus (university in another city). I've never seen writing remotely like this here and our staff/campus publications don't seem to publish stuff like this ... just how great we are at research. It would be such a breath of fresh air if we could inject some humour here. I get the impression staff are way too serious and angry here!"

WHAT THE GRIOT HIMSELF SAYS

Tomaselli chose the term *griot* to create a space for critical comment in an African idiom. Despite the above comments, as he saw it, there was still space at UKZN that could be re-appropriated for public-sphere-like purposes. He admits to being a subject of Authority (the system) even though he may question its procedures, values and intentions, and indeed, Authority itself. That is, he argues that we are all subjects of Authority and, importantly, we need to find ways of negotiating Authority. The *griot's* column offers one platform for effecting discussion of, and with Authority, responses to it in ways that are engagingly entertaining.

He admits that a micro-public sphere is ambivalent and that it reproduces the contradictions of the macro and meso public spheres. It is critical for everyone to recognise their respective locations and to seek to manoeuvre through the contradictions that confront them. Only then is one able to make a little difference, to re-open small but systematic spaces for broader dialogue, a micro public sphere. As the authorised *griot* he has greater leeway in articulating criticism while others who have been at times critical were treated less kindly. The point is to effect and protect dialogue and to work with and through institutional structures in creating spaces for the expression of a variety of viewpoints in order to

strengthen the idea that the university should be a dialogically-managed open-ended organism rather than a closed-ended machine-led factory production line.

The griot treads a fine line between criticism and praise. Having worked at two big American universities, he realises that corporatisation and bureaucratisation are global phenomena. Policing mechanisms and productivity incentives, for example, should not be confused with each other as they have been at UKZN. He argues that we need to acknowledge that we are living through difficult times in a kind of IMF-like structural adjustment programme applied to the educational sector and that pressing issues need to be addressed. It is thus the nature of columnists (and cartoonists, satirists, comedians) to fasten on foibles, to mock and pillory seeming official stupidity. He believes that, however, unlike early *griots* and *imbongis*, no-one is going chop off his head or banish him to the wilderness.

The *griot* links the ‘factory-production line’ issue with the notion of ‘accountability’, which leads him to explain why he thinks authorities need to be held accountable. The term ‘accountability’ underpinned the Mass Democratic Movement ethical framework during the late 1980s. Accountability is both a boon and a bane, as it is not always clear who is accountable to whom, who determines who is accountable to whom, where the line of accountability ceases, and why and with what effect accountability is being imposed. Accountability easily slips into tyranny when the lines get fudged. He tries to hold everyone accountable including himself to the notion of a university as a key institution in society working towards broadly common democratic, education developmental purposes. The *griot* encouraged every staffer and student at UKZN to read Makgoba and Mubangizi’s (2010) anthology on management’s perspectives of their experience during the 2004-5 merger. In this book staff, students, unions appear to be constructed as ‘other’, with smaller groups accused of ‘resisting transformation’ – i.e. bureaucratisation, autocracy and surveillance. As such, accountability is now globally conceived of as compliance to instrumentalist imperatives other than what the columnist calls ‘Enlightenment values’ and that of *ubuntu*. In his view, this ‘Thatcherist auditing’ is measured in terms of compliance to research output goals and other performance indicators. While many of these are laudable and some are regrettably necessary to energise what Makgoba and his colleagues’ label as “deadwood”, they may have tended to turn even the top academic performers into mere office workers.

The *griot* realises his position as ‘guardian’ of the network of micro-public spheres that exert small bits of influence on the larger network of macro and meso public spheres. For instance, individuals connected to micro public sphere interacting with social movements are what bring about change in societies. His column is but one element in any such network. These are the channels that make up the different layers of interacting public spheres. Take these elements out of the equation and the result is dictatorship, he says. He observes that the role of columnists is complex – it is to write, probe and challenge in the style of science fiction, unconstrained by the conventional rules of genre and known science.

Writing Style

The Griot’s writing style would be very unusual for any other academic, but makes sense for an ethnographer with an interest in reflexivity. He revealed in an interview with Sakarombe:

I mull over small and big issues that bother me, I try to find angles, small things that I notice or hear when interacting with colleagues, walking corridors, and attending

meetings. Sometimes I respond to suggestions sent me by colleagues and correspondents and often, an entire column quickly materialises from an off-the-cuff remark made by a colleague in the men's room, at the tea urn, etc. I then identify a single likely reader – a real person – for each column. I speak directly to that person – who is never identified – as an exemplar perhaps of wider groups of readers who are grappling with similar issues or who take similar or counter positions. This has worked well in the sense that, as I explained in one column, Corporate Relations has received the odd complaint from individuals I did not name and perhaps do not even know, about my supposed criticism of them personally. That tells me that my readership is reading my column, they're reacting to it, and I am connected to my readers – whether or not they agree with me. I am not writing in the abstract for unknown communities of readers. I never mention names negatively, but I tilt my lance at collectively constructed hybrid personalities, who are exemplars of particular ways of thinking and doing things.

The style of writing has matured over a long period of time, starting in the early 1980s when the *griot* was trying to make sense of his experiences of the liminal (out of the ordinary) as a documentary film maker. Conventional science seemed not up to the task of delivering appropriate conceptual frameworks or writing styles that could address these often extraordinary experiences where all sorts of scientifically unexplainable occurrences were unfolding in front of the camera. In seeking ways of explaining, or at least describing his experiences as an observer of the noumenal, the uncanny and the unknowable, the *griot* first drew on documentary film theory, then surrealist visual anthropology, and then autoethnography. All these approaches examine the relationship between Self and Other in documenting what's happening.

As such, the *griot* takes an intensely personal issue – like whinging about the noise, smoking and chaos at the coffee shop courtyard (now relocated) which negatively impacted the lecture theatres and offices that surround it – and relates it to the level of the institutional as a means of metaphorically explaining something else that is of a possibly structural cause. In the process he is building a continuous narrative of his own relationship with the University at large, from the micro to the macro, from the ordinariness to the exceptional and from anecdotal to the theoretical. He invites others also at the University to participate in the narrative via the processes of their reading and responding to the column, and via their identification with aspects of his vignettes, arguments and examples. One has to be a fly-in-the-soup to make sense of UKZN. Once one is in the soup it is difficult to get out as it is all-enveloping, he observes.

The discourse that the *griot* has developed is a mixture of autobiographical, auto-ethnographic, and the satirical, humorously laced with theoretical and philosophical references – an attempt to create an entertaining academic style. The intention is that, if we get to laugh at ourselves, then we can also better deal with ourselves and others, our hopes, fears, anxieties and problems. His writing comes in waves of consciousness once he develops an 'angle', via which he is able to satirically but seriously address an issue that he thinks will find reception across the institution. For instance, most of the laws that he refers to in the column (taken from Martin's *Malice in Blunderland* (1973) are actual laws derived by academics and businesspeople in management, economics, education and so on. A few others he made up himself. A style that defamiliarises the familiar, from all fronts is adopted with regard to all constituencies within academia at large. Via this prism he also sees himself as something of a repository of institutional memory, excavating layers of remembrance that often get lost in restructurings, mergers and structural adjustments, as indicated by one respondent. This is the historical subtext of his writings.

Theorizing Practice

Using humour and anecdotes to illustrate theory also permits one to stretch the boundaries and to go where no-one has gone before. That is, it is all about exploration and how to get there – to use the possible – to safely chart the unknown to make it known, then to defamiliarise what comes to be known, and again then to change the known for the better. Theory, he argues, is not just impenetrable sentences written in a book, learned off by heart, and then jargonised all over an exam paper. Rather, theory is practice. The *griot's* practice, he says, is theory. It is explanatory and it connects the dots in his column.

A column cannot change anything but, like the Frankfurt School's sociology, it can, in conjunction with other initiatives, keep the dialectic alive during challenging times. Only the constituencies that comprise an organisation are able to change it, in light of always shifting structural conditions. That is, in Marxist vein, we can make a difference even within the conditions through which we have to manoeuvre but over which we may have little, if any, day-to-day influence.

The subaltern will always develop and sustain micro public spheres in one form or another. The issue is how to productively intersect the different spheres operating at different levels of the institution to interact intelligently with each other. However, when internal constituencies within the institution are constructed as other and unauthorised on the one hand, and other groups as authorised as legitimate on the other, then communication is both limited and limiting. Factionalism may then take over. Every inclusion is simultaneously exclusion. Communication ceases and power plays (to use a sporting metaphor) are substituted for the dialectic. In this scenario, competing, rather than cooperating, public spheres then emerge. That, in his view, has been the problem at UKZN.

It may be possible that we may all need forms of exorcism and anxiety alleviation 'just to get through the day'. That is, he observes, everyone vents in different ways. At UKZN, many pro-active staffers work with one of the four unions while a minority of academic staff are actually union members. The majority are thus, it seems, squandering these platforms. Certainly, some withdraw from participating in institutional governance and from symbolic ceremonies like graduation ceremonies, from school seminars and other official activities and many even resist official instructions to produce research, measured by 'productivity units', as part of their conditions of service. A significant number of academic staff in the Humanities refused to populate their KPAs while some were happy to sacrifice their promotions and salary notches in responding thus. Many retreated into silence while some express their venting by hyperventilating during school meetings, so agitated do they become at what they perceive to be institutional obstruction. Many take sick leave, or other kinds of leave, simply to distance themselves from the institution. Others simply do their teaching and then go home. Lots of venting, therefore, is done at lower level meetings with no real sense of strategy on how to deal with exhaustion, alienation, severe stress and institutional incompetence. These are all below-the-line forms of venting that lack formal communication mechanisms to bring them to the attention of top management. In contrast, the *griot's* column vents above-the-line, tackles issues publicly, and connects the dots between below-the-line and above-the-line discourses. That is, above-the-line venting contributes to a healthy public sphere as this may be the only way to communicate upwards.

Democracy cannot work in environments typified by fear, censorship, the closing down of the public sphere and of the killing of the dialectic. It cannot be protected and legitimated

when the venting is kept below-the-line. The role of columnists is to write, probe and challenge. Dialectical materialism is one of the conceptual benefits of Marxist philosophy, so when the *griot* hears South African Communist Party leaders like Jeremy Cronin allegedly talking about our polity “regressing into democracy” (*The Daily News* 22 May, 2012), he despairs.

Conclusion

UKZN adopted a particular path that is different to ‘transformation’, for example, to the University of the Free State (UFS). Both were grappling with the same issues. In many ways UFS started from a much more difficult conflictual base, not to mention the globally negative publicity relating to the racist Reitz video incident. However, UFS’s PR strategy now garners near universally positive publicity for itself no matter the stresses it is negotiating. The morale at UFS is high. UKZN in contrast, more often than not, needed to *purchase* good publicity via its CR division in the face of endless negative news about it. It’s a question of strategy and how top executives plan and negotiate with staff in consultation with all constituencies. Exclusion from, or demonisation of, individuals or groups participating in dissident micro public spheres resulted in them taking their arguments to the macro sphere – the national press. Most paid a price for this. Determining structural issues can be commented upon, but not changed, by a mere monthly column. And, as is clear, neither were they changed by debates in the macro sphere. Calls for change must work in terms of structural historical conditions, while protecting the dialectic and expanding the public sphere at all levels.

Change for the better requires participation at all levels of an organisation over medium-to-long terms. The ANC, for example, was established in 1912, but only took power in 1994. Individuals connected to collectives interacting with social movements are what bring about change in societies. The column is but one element in any such network. For example, one of the columns dealt critically with productivity units and its marginalisation of much Humanities-based work. It discussed an extract from a document written by a member of staff. The full document was then debated at School and Faculty levels, and subsequently presented by its authors at a university research committee meeting. A continuous narrative starting with the initial reporting in the column prior to the full document’s entry into formal university structures contributed to the Research Committee’s realisation that what was intended by the Research Office as an incentive, was being simultaneously misappropriated by HR as a performance policing mechanism. If nothing else, the contradiction was identified and brought to the attention of higher Authority and all readers of *UKZNdaba*.

As is clear from the anthology on the merger written by Makgoba and his colleagues that what is considered ‘democracy’ and ‘accountability’ for one constituency is seen to be ‘resistance’ and counter-ideology for another. Absent from the book are chapters by academics, administrators and support staff, students, unions, convocation and parents. At root, how the different impressions can be negotiated underpins the column. Corporatisation and bureaucratisation is a global phenomenon in the Anglo-Saxon world and is inevitable the management of large and complex institutions like UKZN. Whether we like it or not we all have to adapt, though we should not lose our humanity in the process, is a common theme coursing through the columns.

Accountability is now globally conceived of as compliance to instrumentalist imperatives other than Enlightenment or *ubuntu* values. This neoliberal Thatcherist auditing regime is measured in terms of compliance to research output goals and other performance

indicators. While many of these are laudable and while some are regrettably necessary to energise what Makgoba and his colleagues label as “deadwood”, they have tended to turn even the top academic performers into office workers, doing office-type auditing and reporting jobs, and identifying students as “clients”, just products to be shuffled over a conveyor belt to meet pre-determined enrolment targets.

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