

English Academy Percy Baneshik Memorial lecture 2008 (peer reviewed article)

Making the Body Public

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Over the period of January to February 2008, while preparing this article for its first life as the English Academy of Southern Africa's Percy Baneshik Memorial Lecture, certain perturbations in my (then) new medium of Wits University, sharp objects on the surface of the gritty Johannesburg maze in this peremptory age, this congestion millennium, seemed to compel me into written expression on the topic of the 'Body Public'. I say 'written expression' – a second order of language, talking or writing about the practice of daily life as, itself, an act of ongoing expression – because, along with certain other scholars, I regard the very matter of living as an act of 'linguaging'. For me, and for my principal scholarly source in this article, the Chilean biologist and ethical philosopher Humberto Maturana, the practice of everyday life is an expressive performance in which one's entire body, in all its manifest complexity, its peculiar positional and responsive relation to its perceived world – like a boxer's crouch in his ring of contestation – takes on a communicative dance, a fluid signature of biocentric response involving bodily predisposition that is saturated with a sense of being in the world, or what some people prefer to call the multiverse.

They call it a multiverse, because it is not merely plural in the ordinary sense of the word, but because it is constantly being recreated, in every single negotiated moment in every individual's so-called consciousness, in a moving braid of perturbation, emotioning and linguaging. These fellow *dancers* with whom I have been in conversation also say that the force, the being, that does this dance of expressive enactment, this continuous coming into being, is not just a compacted system of diverse cellular material, some grey

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and pulpy, some red and fleshy – that is, a mind-body– but what they call a ‘bodyhood’ (almost like a ‘neighbourhood’). It is a relational being that does not exist alone despite being intensely self-producing, and self-reproducing. It cannot exist outside of its expressive coupling with other autonomously constituted beings. It sculpts itself into being in a relational mode of expression, expression as a metaphoric braid, a felt link, interlinked couplings in which languages are intuited, shared, negotiated, and in which explanations of the world become the world itself, become the body in public, the body making itself public, and the making of the body public.

A boxing ring – a place to fight things out – is one way of explaining this sense of the Body Public, and deliberations at a Wits conference called ‘Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Public Sphere: SA Democracy at the Crossroads’, certainly brought the boxing ring back into view as model of the SA Body Public. As I wrote in the *Financial Mail* at the time (De Kock 2008), the conference called forth a wave of dissidence against the ruling party’s widely perceived mobilization of race as an instrument of power, its cross-stitching of the party with the State in an increasingly brazen appropriation of SA’s constitutional revolution, for the benefit of a racially defined ruling elite. Writers, scholars and commentators of all hues at the conference repeatedly invoked a perception that consensual public spaces were narrowing, and that public discourse was again becoming a game in which restrictive rules were being applied as to who gets heard and who doesn’t (cf. Chipkin 2008, Frost 2008, Hamilton and Cowling 2008). So-called intellectuals were challenged to come out once more, and more forcefully, into the public domain, white intellectuals specifically included. There was a sense that people needed to break the quietude that seems to have taken hold of public contestation since 1994, a kind of dreamy political lassitude whose spell has now been broken.

Perturbingly, a piece I wrote heralding this ‘return of dissidence’ was taken up by the *Sunday Times* – by its Editor – and placed on the op-ed page for the edition of 10 February (I have a proof of the page) but the commentary-report was pulled following the Sunday Times’s Thursday conference on 7 February for undeclared reasons, giving rise in me to a sense that in the public media, too, restrictive rules apply as to who gets to speak and who gets spiked at the last minute. Racial factionalism is rife in our media.¹ So is anti-intellectualism, and I suspect that these elements, including a generalized prejudice against what media executives dismiss as ‘intellectual’ as opposed to ‘real’ content – an extremely vicious and reductive binary – is just as much a part of SA’s narrowing public sphere as is the ANC’s ethnocentric political discourse. Unfortunately, ‘intellectualism’ tends to be defined as anything that needs to be expressed in words of more than two or three syllables, completely ignoring Gayatri Spivak’s haunting reminder that ‘*clear thought hides, and plain prose cheats*’ (in De Kock 1992; emphasis added). That, by the way, is a sentence made up entirely of one-syllable words.

So, in a way, then, it is tempting to see the call for a renewed recourse to public expression, a re-energised return to the Body Public, in terms of a boxing metaphor, a roped-off ring, which sanctions the trading of blows under certain rules of refereeing.

It is a metaphor that makes possible a particular range of explanation, and therefore a certain constitution of lived reality. An alternative metaphor, however, revolutionary in its possibilities, would be dancing, more particularly improvisational dancing in which the parameters are set by the medium, the song – let's say 'Hello Dolly' by Satchmo, a song I have danced to on several happy occasions in real improvisational expressive space, such as the ones I now wish to invoke metaphorically. Whether real or metaphorical, however, the moves in improvisational dancing are created entirely within what I would call a feedback-loop, a space in which sensory-effector relations – detecting external stimuli (sensory) and implementing action (effector) – are thoroughly enmeshed in each other, are both self-determined and mutually determining, in a momentary, epiphanic braid of complementarity that, in the last resort, I would simply call joy. The French may go so far as to call it *jouissance*, but *joy* will do for me. That is because it is both profoundly simple and achieved, when one has it in hand, in body, a sudden gift of braided being, and profoundly elusive, when one tries to conjure it up out of frustrated lack. It's the difference between having one's pluck and losing it. It is really nothing more or less than that feeling of being alive, of being greatly, intensely alive. It is everything that depression and despair are not. I see no reason at all why dancing in a braid of complementarity should not be a guiding metaphor, an explanation and therefore a constitution of being, for the Body Public in this country.

This, however, is a capacity that may well be described as visionary. It involves self-making and world-making, but it requires something that seems to have become unexpectedly difficult under current conditions, namely a twin sense of validity as a human being and a profound confidence in one's capacity to be open to engagement with other living systems. To talk about such validity of being, and such confidence of engagement, I need to recall some elements of Maturana's base theory, which goes by the name of autopoiesis.

Autopoiesis literally means self-making. For Maturana, humans, like all biological beings, are constantly engaged in reproducing and maintaining themselves because that is the bottom line of biological survival. Siphon (for argument's sake) spends his entire day being Siphon, reproducing and repeating, in various different ways, the business and style, the vocabulary and the peculiar drift of being Siphon, so that he will be recognized and known as such, and so that he can grow more fully into himself, so to speak, becoming more proudly Siphon in his bodyhood, his self in relation to others. For Maturana, biological systems have a structure and an organization. The structure of the system's elements can adapt and change, but the organization remains self-enclosed in its autopoiesis. In a sense, then, self-enclosure is a base condition, a necessary precondition for survival, otherwise we might all dissolve into a formless plasma and dribble away into nothingness. In Maturana's thinking, therefore, biological systems entail a hardy self-containment, a strongly conditioned and bounded being that can interact with the world only from within its own distinct and autonomous system of being. Permeability is not easily achieved. Thinking and being and expressing oneself

as an autopoietic system is not something you do in an armchair with a Scotch at your side, considering your many alternatives before jumping up and getting into the car so you can go and be the person you've decided to be, for the time being. To the contrary, it is a relational mode of self-expression in which one is constantly engaged; it is the very way you language yourself into definition, the way you coordinate the coordinates of your being and your behaviour, the way you explain your world to yourself as an observer. External influences – 'perturbations' and 'triggers' in Maturana-talk – affect you only from within your own self-making, your own relational dynamics.

This is a philosophy that is strongly opposed to notions of objectivity. Explanations of the world are constitutive. They are not merely explanations after the event, they are indeed the making of the world, its languaging, its coordination from within the systemic, organizing capacity of the autopoietic individual who is always constructing, or coming into, his bodyhood, his self in the world, the body public.

'Knowing is in the doing,' says Maturana. Naturally, one's hold on such self-made languaging, such precarious even if magnificent, Don Quixotian versioning, such Lego-like world-making, or worlding, to use Edward Said's phrase ([1978] 1983), one's grip is bound to be tight; after all, every moment of achieving a hold is like a new grip on the rockface of the outer world and you're not exactly in a position to let go so you can shake hands with the chap next to you and exchange ideas about the best hand positions for grabbing onto essentially flat and quite possibly slippery surfaces. This is especially so in view of the fact that you might perceive yourself to be in a race with your fellow-climbers; you want to distinguish yourself from them, or at least get into a better group.

However, no matter how strong the glue of your self-bonding is, at some point, perhaps from a position of strength, you will feel the urge to ease the grip and to drift, take a justified rest, bask in your sense of achievement, your hold on reality, so to speak, or your mould of your world, cast in explanations that seem to work fairly well, for the time being. You've achieved a preliminary summit; there's a lake on the plateau and you encounter another, similarly intense being on its banks. The two of you enter into conversation and begin to drift off together, sharing and intertwining the language you use, along with the limbs that body forth this language and embody its special plasticity, its fluid signature. In Maturana-language this is called mutual drift or co-drifting, a structural drift which the two of you do together; it is also called co-ontogeny: the living system and its medium. Each of you becomes a medium for the other, like fish in water. Because the living system and its medium are operationally independent, says Maturana commentator Vincent Kenny (1985),² a drift or 'path of change is contingent upon the history of interactions in the medium'; the system and the medium change 'in congruence with one another'. They change their shape so that they 'fit together in a drift', and because the 'drift is contingent upon the interactions', 'unilateral steering' in Kenny's words is 'an illusion'. 'Without this co-ontogeny, certain behaviours . . . would not have arisen'; within the co-ontogeny, the behaviours of the conversing and

conserving partners ‘have become consensual’, or in Maturana-speak, they have ‘created a consensus about the coordination of their behaviours’, says Kenny. This, in Maturana-speak, is ‘Linguistic Behaviour’ or ‘Linguistic Interaction’.

Allow me to lay out this admittedly strange terminology a little further. For Maturana, what makes us human is languaging. ‘Humanity arises in the social dynamics in which languaging takes place,’ Maturana has written, citing the fact that feral children brought up by wolves are essentially wolves, despite having the genetics of *homo sapiens*.³ ‘Languaging becomes part of our medium’, we are like fish in water, we swim in language, and every thing we say is a move in our co-ontogenic structural drift, argues Kenny. Languaging interactions are powerful, ‘as powerful as physical interactions,’ he contends, they create a something wonderfully described as structural *perturbations*. To say to someone, ‘you are extraordinarily beautiful’, is like a caress, whereas to say ‘you look like something the cat just dragged in’ is literally *felt*, like a blow. It is indeed a blow, a physical hurt that one feels in the guts. In Maturana’s philosophy of being, the refusal of notions of objectivity is not merely a refusal of the idea that the world is simply out there, for all to see, with all that remains the act of more or less accurate description; it is also a refusal of the notion that language is either denotative or connotative, denotative language being the kind one uses for objective descriptions of the world, and connotative language being the kind that Plato’s enemies, the poets, the distorters and exaggerators, the emotional traffickers, tend to engage in so very gratuitously. Needless to say, I go with the traffickers because I am convinced we are indeed all in the swim of our emotional traffic, even, or especially, when we think we are being rational and objective.

Within Maturana and his early co-writer Varela’s understanding of things, as adumbrated by Fell and Russel (1994) as well as Mingers (1991), language is seen as connotative, in the traditional understanding of that term. Words are like darts, they pierce and they prick, they set up perturbations in the intuited, rational-emotional bodyhoods of selves and others, in the languaging crossflows in which people explain themselves to themselves in the first instance, and then to others, as a way of engaging the body public, or making the body public, which is a plangent, reverberating, felt medium. Meaning, say Fell and Russel, is not transferable, ‘it is formed individually in the course of conversation’;⁴ and culture, they add, ‘arises through networks of conversation leading to widespread agreement about concepts and values’. ‘We observe this in our languaging – which we now say is inextricably related to our bodyhood,’ they argue, citing Maturana’s use of the term ‘braiding’ as a metaphor of delicate and loving human work. If, as Fell and Russel argue, flows of languaging and emotioning are braided, it follows that ‘without emotional matching, a semantic connection or congruence’ would not be possible. ‘Only when we dance in the flow of emotioning of another can we experience understanding,’ they write. ‘Then we are moving in the same stream – cognitively flowing together.’ The roots of the word conversation, *conversare*, literally mean ‘turn together’, unmistakably suggesting dancing, the ‘dance of

human understanding', which is also the title of their essay. Equally, for Maturana we are rational-emotive animals, but it is 'not our rationality that distinguishes us from other animals'; rather, argue Fell and Russell (13), it is the way our rationality and emotions 'braid together', the way they are cross-stitched, as I would be inclined to put it.

It is important to stress the predispositional, braided basis of human communication because, often, when objectivity-hawkers seek to claim the high ground of authority for their claims to truth, the predisposing networks behind their arguments are conveniently kept below the line of sight, while it is precisely such networks of predispositional braiding that bring their observations and explanations into being, make them possible among some, but not all, communities of conversational bodies. In public debate, the tendency is to pass off such provisional cross-braiding as a greater, more encompassing explanation—the word 'truth' is sometimes invoked—than those arising from other, equally provisional networks of conversation. Ironically, the deeper level of communication is then abrogated, namely, acknowledgement of co-existence, of mutually overlapping folds of being, of complexity and diversity such as that which brings both roses and *fynbos* into existence in such diverse commonality. A more biologically inclined basis for public discourse, following Maturana, would be strong acceptance that alternative systems of braiding are intrinsically valid—their claim to reality-ness is identical to one's own. Indeed, their *raison d'être*, autopoiesis and co-ontogenic drift leading to the braid of emotioning and languaging as a living, straightforwardly biological imperative, is one's own reason for being, too. This is no mere liberal-pluralist armchair pontification; it is a precondition for survival, and it does not mean you have to submit to an anything-goes kind of wishy-washyism. To the contrary, it means intense engagement, dancing into co-existent streams of shaping and explaining, sculpting and delimiting, distinguishing the shape of one's own explanations and observations from those of alternate systems, alternating between different styles of dance, weaving through them, acknowledging the flow without ever surrendering one's shape, the organization of one's bodyhood and rational-emotional being, except when the lure is so great that we are tempted to improvise a few new steps, venture into a dance of exchange, modifying our own structure, before returning, slightly perturbed but somewhat exhilarated, to our more familiar shapes, now ever so slightly revised, and more alive. Always, this is the choice: to be more alive, or to contract inwards, and be less alive, less expansive.

To validate other explanations of the multiverse does not mean to give way to them. But to exclude them within an aggressive-defensive boxer's crouch is, literally, to shrink the world, to drain the colour from the rainbow, so to speak. And here I would like, briefly, to recall the valence of a term that is most perilous to utter in a scholarly context, namely 'love'. It is drawn from what I regard as a highly significant essay by Maturana, with Gerda Verden-Zoller, called 'The Biology of Love',⁵ and it has 'gotten' me into trouble on a previous occasion among academically-minded people, for many of whom the word 'love' is a mushy, squishy and quite undesirable term. Nevertheless, I am briefly going to do this dance again, at the risk of tripping over my readers' feet.

In the course of this explanation, certain ideas that have already been mentioned in this talk will surface again, but I think such brief recapitulation will be useful in making the general scheme of ideas clearer.

For Maturana, 'love' is quite precisely defined within a scientific discourse of biology, and I am going to cut a sharp line through his many and complex theorisations so that I can briefly sketch the idea, taking my cue from Maturana in the abovementioned essay, which is itself a foreshortened and unusually compact presentation of his otherwise lengthily-expounded ideas. Be aware, though, that at every turn of my summary there are networks of antecedent moves and arguments, theories and qualifying statements, so it might not all be quite as simple as it sounds.

First, then, the starting point of this argument: we humans are all what Maturana calls 'living systems'. For him, this means that we are 'structure determined systems' operating 'at every moment according to our structure at that moment'. This means, he avers, that 'nothing external to us can specify what happens in us as a result of our *interactions in a medium*'. External agents, he says, can only 'trigger in us structural changes *determined in us*' (emphasis added). This is key because for Maturana all 'objective' or 'transcendental' knowledge, all political rationalisations and religious abstractions of truth beyond mediation in languaging and emotioning in the human 'psychic sphere' are fallacies. What Maturana calls the 'psychic sphere' he defines as the '*relational space*' in which each human being lives out a sense of self 'as he or she exists in the systemic dynamics in which he or she conserves his or her particular identity'. And the manner in which an 'organism' lives its individual life, in this theory, arises 'in the *interplay* of the organism and the medium'. It is not genetically determined, says Maturana, or, one might add, determined by pre-existent, pre-narrativised parental, social, political or cultural schemas into which individual identities must then fit. No, says Maturana, the 'manner an organism lives its individual life arises in the interplay of the organism and the medium . . . it arises *de novo* in each individual life in the encounter of [these] two dynamically independent systems'. What we loosely call 'the world', then, is created anew, over and over, in every single human being in her or his operational capacity as a strongly, constitutionally independent 'living system' encountering, engaging with and being perturbed and systemically triggered by very particular, vastly varied mediums of interaction – other people as living systems, other conversational networks, other bodies of feeling, families or the lack thereof, indeed all manner of human systemic structures.

The next key point is languaging. Language, says Maturana, is 'a manner of living together in recursive consensual coordinations of consensual coordinations of behaviours', and 'must have arisen', he speculates, 'in the spontaneous coordinations of behaviour that take[s] place when living together; sharing space and food in intimacy'. This is fundamental. We are 'not only languaging animals', says Maturana, 'but we exist in languaging', we 'disappear as humans if language disappears'. Maturana's notion of languaging, based on the idea of consensuality and coordination of coordinations,

involves behavioural engagement in the first instance, and ‘oral languaging’ in the second, as a second-order kind of meta-languaging, that is, a further, increasingly reflective coordination of prior consensual coordinations, recursively and systemically creating the very conditions for the distinct complexity of being a *human* mammal. But languaging is not exclusively a verbal affair in the more conventional understanding of the word. It is thoroughly enmeshed with emotional matrices. What people commonly call ‘emotions’, Maturana explains as ‘kinds of relational behaviours’ rather than particular doings or mere states of mind. More specifically, he argues that ‘what we connote biologically as we speak of emotions . . . are *body dynamic dispositions* (involving the nervous system and the whole body) that determine what we or they can do or not do, in what relations we or they can enter or not enter, at any moment’. Different emotions, he says, can be characterized as what he calls ‘different domains of relational behaviours’ or as ‘dynamic body dispositions for relational behaviours’. Maturana gives this example: Love, he says, ‘is the domain of those behaviours or dynamic body dispositions through which another arises as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself’. Aggression, on the other hand, is what he characterizes as ‘the domain of those behaviours or dynamic body dispositions through which another is denied as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself’. So, love is not a virtue, not a pop song, in this way of seeing things. Nor is it even, in Maturana’s words, ‘something special’.

No, he says, it is ‘simply . . . a biological phenomenon as the domain of those behaviours through which social life arises and is conserved; it is simply the biological dynamics that constitutes trust and mutual acceptance in body and spiritual relations of nearness and intimacy’. And here he provides a biological narrative of emergence of ‘love’ as a human mammalian peculiarity. The origins of this ‘biological phenomenon’, this ‘domain of behaviours’, Maturana locates in what he calls ‘neotony’, which is the ‘expansion of the emotioning of the mother/child relation as a relation of total mutual trust in body acceptance into . . . adult life’. This, he says, has its origins some five to six million years ago, when the lineage of primates from which we apparently descend began a trend of ‘continuous expansion of childhood’ – meaning the emotioning peculiar to the exchange of love in the mother-child relation – to involve the whole human life span. The consequence, says Maturana, was the ‘constitution of a lineage whose evolutionary history was centred on love as the basic emotion in community relations, not aggression or competition as has happened with other primates like chimpanzees’.

Mammals, he says, are inclined to be loving animals, as can be seen in ‘how they become like children when they live in close relations of love with humans’. They get physically ill when they are deprived of love. Our evolutionary history is one, Maturana says, in which ‘the conservation of the relation of love in mutual trust and care proper to the mother/child as a life habit into adulthood, has been the peculiar feature of the manner of living in which both organism and medium have changed together congruently’. This, he says, came to constitute ‘the peculiarity that defines our lineage as a particular primate lineage’.

About four million years ago, according to Maturana, the females of the human lineage 'began to live an expansion of their sexuality that went from a yearly cycle of desire for sexual intercourse and pleasure in the intimate body proximity of the other, to a continuous desire that matched the continuous sexual desire of males'. This led to the condition, he says, that sexual pleasure became 'the most fundamental manner of relation between the members of a group', leading to what he styles as 'the arising and development of permanent intimacy in tenderness, sensuality, and individually oriented sexuality'. This then becomes 'the source of stability and joy of living together that resulted in a manner of living in small family communities of four to seven individuals'. Then, in the Maturana narrative of human development, the next significant landmark, at around three and a half million years ago, is the emergence of languaging, conserved, he says, 'generation after generation in the learning of the children of the small families in which our ancestors lived as a result of the expansion of the sexuality of the females'. Here is a key moment in Maturana's 'biology of love' theory. This, he says, heralded the emergence of what he styles as 'living in the braiding of languaging and emotioning that we call conversations'. Human living takes on the character of 'living in networks of conversations', so that, Maturana says, 'everything human takes place in conversations as a flow in consensual coordinations of consensual coordinations of behaviours and emotions'.

This brings Maturana to the point where he makes an important claim, and one that I feel is most important to us here, deliberating as we are on what the nature of our changing public sphere really is, or should be. The evolutionary history of our lineage, he says, being 'a history of the conservation of a neotonic trend in the biology of love', is a 'history of social life also centred on consensuality and cooperation, not on competition or aggressive strife'. As such, Maturana writes, 'our evolutionary history is a history of expansion of the capacities for consensuality, and, hence, of expansion of intelligence'. Importantly, for Maturana, intelligence is critically related to consensuality. For him, intelligence is decidedly *not* an instrumentalist, problem-solving operational capacity. Instead, Maturana defines intelligence as 'the capacity to participate in the generation, expansion, and operation in consensual domains as domains of coordinations of behaviours through living together'. Problem-solving, says Maturana, takes place as an operation in a domain of consensuality already established, so it is secondary to consensuality, not prior to it.

Languaging, or living in conversations, says Maturana, 'requires . . . an enormous capacity for consensuality'. Then Maturana makes a startling claim. 'We humans', he avers, 'are all essentially equally intelligent, and the differences in intelligence that seem to exist between humans are not due to differences in their capacity for consensuality, but in their emotioning'. In fact, he says, owing to the nature of intelligence as a 'relational biological phenomenon', different emotions affect it differently. 'Thus', he writes, 'ambition, competitiveness, anger, envy, aggression and fear, reduce intelligence, because they restrict the domain of openness for consensuality'. This, he says, is

evidenced in daily life in expressions, such as ‘he is blinded by anger or ambition’. ‘Only love’, Maturana writes, ‘expands intelligence, because love as the domain of those behaviours through which the other arises as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself, opens us to see and to enter in collaboration’. To live in love, Maturana argues, ‘in the biology of love, in the conservation of collaboration, in the acceptance of the other and in the acceptance of the conditions of existence as a source and not as an opposition, restriction or limitation, has been *the fundament for the evolutionary trend of conservation of the continuous expansion of intelligence in our lineage*’ (emphasis added).

There is, however, a twist in the scheme, a ghost in the human machine. Despite the fact ‘we humans’ are, as he puts it, ‘neotonic, sexual, tender and sensual animals . . . [who] become ill when deprived of love’, we are also languaging animals who can reflect and invent ‘rational systems’, typified by Maturana as ‘religious, political, philosophical and economic theories’ which, he says, may be ‘used to justify our doings in the negation of our emotions’. This, then, creates what he calls an ‘alienation’ from ‘our basic condition of loving animals’, and, he then strongly argues, ‘we humans have become alienated from our basic condition of loving animals, and we have begun to live through those theories the rational justification of the systematic and systemic negation of the other (love) through the defence of transcendental values, and rational or revealed universal truths’. This is a ‘blindness’ created by the ‘negation of love’; it leads to conditions of living guided by what Maturana typifies as ‘ambition, greediness and the desire for control’, and, he says, ‘we are not happy’. ‘Indeed we suffer,’ he declares, ‘because we become denied by the very same world and psychic existence that we are bringing about, as this is a world and psychic existence that denies the fundamentals of our existence as loving animals’.

Love, then, is the ‘grounding of our human existence’, and our species name, Maturana avers, should perhaps be *homo sapiens amans* rather than *homo sapiens aggressans*, the shadow-side of human development, the sphere of negation, rationalisation and denial. Having written tomes of scientific and abstruse discourse elsewhere, Maturana in this essay allows himself a visionary flourish: ‘[I]f we look at our individual human existence we can still see that what we search for in life is love, and all that we do in life, we do it to obtain love: we want to arise in our relations with others as legitimate beings that do not need to justify their existence with respect to them; we enjoy caring for others and we want to be cared for; we enjoy being caressed and we want to caress; we like to cooperate and do things with others for the pleasure of the company, and we like others to do things with us through the pleasure they have in doing so; we suffer under competition even though we have some sort of joy in the vanity of winning; we feel denied in relations of demand and exigencies, but we like to participate through invitation; we feel well in relations of trust and confidence; love is the first and more powerful medicine, and the doctor cures through love with the help of drugs and surgery only by creating the conditions for the body dynamics of self healing, not the reverse.’

For Maturana, love conceived in this way is what he calls ‘visionary’. He reiterates

that ‘we are not talking about love as a virtue or as something good from a moral, religious, or philosophical perspective’. No, he states, ‘[w]e are talking biology, we are talking about our animal constitution as the particular kind of primates that we are as members of an evolutionary trend centred [on] the conservation of the biology of love and the expansion of intelligence’. On the other hand, the emotions that entail the negation of the other, such as ambition, competitiveness, envy, or aggression, reduce intelligence. Whereas love need not to be learned, ‘because it is our biological fundament, ‘aggression needs to be cultivated or it fades away as we meet each other in the simplicity of our humanness’. Denial of love is ‘systematic’, and it comes about ‘through conversations that . . . use notions of efficiency, economy, progress, purity, obedience to god, or perfection, [pretending] to justify such negation’. This, says Maturana, is a ‘carefully cultivated feature of our patriarchal culture’.

I have paraphrased and quoted at length because I feel this essay, this theory of a ‘biology of love’, can serve to anchor the South African debate about the public sphere within a paradigm that speaks not from party-political imperatives or from the relativistic fallacy, a hangover from misunderstood postmodernism, that all arguments are self-interested textual constructions equally open to deconstruction. No, the paradigm I am suggesting speaks from a forceful, felt expression of democratic will based on an overwhelmingly obvious sense of human biological commonality. If anything is being denied in the growing sense of racial intolerance in South Africa’s public discourse, it is the commonality of our ‘biology of love’ which, I would argue, is as fitting a description of our ‘Paradise Lost’ (De Kock 2008), our Mandela revolution, as any I have yet encountered. If it is indeed being felt by many – as strongly evidenced at the ‘Paradoxes’ conference – that the public sphere is narrowing at the same time that the governing party’s own sense of its racially based possession of the national project is expanding (Chipkin 2008, Hamilton and Cowling 2008), then we face, once again, conditions of alienation and denial in our own relation to the public sphere. We must not accept this. We must not, again, think flight, think victim, think that the system is too big for us, as many of us did in the past. No, not again! We are the system. We are the living system. Let us live into our public, living systems, our public being, and make the body public. Let us embrace dissent, then, a kind of loving, insistent, caring dissent, *lojale verset*, in the famous words of Afrikaans poet N. P. van Wyk Louw, a loyal dissidence that follows the conversational path back into the fullness of our whole South African being. If anything, this is the new dissidence, forged in constitutionality, struck in the coinage of care and valued in the legitimacy of uncompromising human exchange.

Notes

1 On Friday 22 February 2008, the South African National Editors’ Forum (Sanef) issued a statement strongly deploring a decision by the Forum of Black Journalists (FBJ) to exclude journalists who were not members of FBJ from a meeting to be addressed on that day by ANC president Jacob Zuma. ‘The decision effectively means the exclusion of white journalists from

the meeting,' Sanef stated. Sanef added that 'the address by an important leader such as Zuma is of great public importance, particularly given his views on the media. It is in the interests of journalism and the public at large that this meeting should be open to all journalists wishing to report on it.' (Source: e-mail statement sent to Sunday Times e-mail users, 22 February 2008.) In the *Mail & Guardian* of 29 February to 6 March, 702 Talk Radio executive Yusuf Abramjee and 702 talk-show host Kieno Kammies report that they attended the meeting, objected to its racial exclusion of white journalists, and walked out in solidarity with their white colleagues (p. 8). 'After we walked out,' they write, 'we were referred to as "coconuts" – "black on the outside and white on the inside".' They cite several sources to confirm this.

2 Maturana sources are widely spread and often hard to obtain in physical form. The easiest way to access them is via the Internet, where important articles, both by Maturana and his various co-writers, and about him, have been collected. The best such source is <http://www.eno-lagaia.com/AT.html>, comprehensively maintained by Maturana teacher and scholar Dr Randall Whitaker. In instances in this article where I do not present page references, it is because I am quoting from documents sourced on the Internet, in which case page numbers do not exist. The URLs are cited in the first relevant reference in the text and again in the list of references.

3 Kenny: <http://www.oikos.org/vinclife.htm/> (accessed 13 February 2008).

4 Fell and Russel <http://www.pnc.com.au/~lfell/dance.html> (accessed 13 January 2008).

5 Maturana and Verden-Zoller 1996 and 2007, <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~jcull/articles/bol.htm/> (accessed 13 February 2008).

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