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ACA-Dementia: Welcome to the desert of the academic real

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Contemporary campus life: Transformation, manic managerialism and academentia

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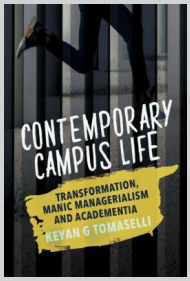

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Review Title:
ACA-Dementia: Welcome to the desert of the academic real

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Keyan Tomaselli presents a satirical narrative (griot or storytelling) as a court jester of his experiences as an academic at a contemporary university, where the freedom of academic discourse and education has been replaced by transformation through manic managerialism and academentia. Through academentia, academics have lost their purpose and become 'cash cows'. The narrative is further enhanced through the clever use (pronunciation and spelling) of homonyms such as economics vs. e-cow-nomics. Acting as a 'court jester', Tomaselli challenges all academics to reflect on their lives as academics at contemporary universities and urges them to become academics again.

You have been accepted to study at a 'world-class' university (whatever world class may mean?), or according to academic speak, you have been accepted to study at a university that is '4th, 20th or 100th in Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) rankings', an institution 'par excellence'. A proud moment indeed, you have worked hard to accomplish this feat. A prestigious moment in your life, followed by an even more prestigious moment, 'graduation', or even better, after years of suffering from the 'terror of the red pen', you end up with that prestigious qualification, a PhD. Now reality sets in. You are overqualified for employment in a 'nonacademic' environment (IOL 2022) and the last (perhaps the only) option left is pursuing a career in academia (which you accept), and then 'life' happens, or as Žižek (2002) states it, you find yourself in 'the desert of the real'. In this contemporary academic life, you will have to make peace with people of worth (PoW), where their underlings, 'controllers' with their spreadsheets, apply 'manic managerialism' and the concept of 'transformation' to 'measure' your performance (or to terrorise you – the terror of key performance areas) and expose you to the ailment of 'academentia'. This contemporary academic real is very well presented, 'tongue in cheek', by Professor Keyan G. Tomaselli[1] in his book '*Contemporary Campus Life: Transformation, Manic Managerialism and Academentia*', based on forty years of experience in this 'desert of the academic real'.

Tomaselli makes use of the '[*n*]arrative zone' (Rosenstand 2000:81) where the researcher (academic) will find the best empirical evidence ever, that evidence can be found in the living experience of the self (the researcher). We as researchers (academics) live our own story. It has its own beginning and its own end. Tomaselli uses his own 'narrative time' (or as he refers to himself, an 'academic traveller for 45 years)' and uses the concept of 'griot',[2] storytelling in the African context (the university as an institution on the African continent). This is the lived experience that Tomaselli, his students and subjects find themselves in. This storytelling is firmly based in satire,[3] and to use academic speak, the paradigm is ethnography, literally meaning 'writing about people' (Johnson & Christensen 2012:48). This satirical storytelling approach is further aligned with the 'griot' approach in that the storyteller acts as a 'court jester', who has the freedom to ridicule the kings and queens (PoW and controllers) and to not be taken seriously by the PoW but expresses the lived, everyday experiences of the audience. This satirical approach is further enhanced by the clever use of vocabulary and pronunciation (homonyms), for example, 'e-cow-nomics' vs. 'economics' (p. 7). The reviewer finds himself in the same environment in which this story of academic real at a contemporary university unfolds. A story of transformation, manic managerialism and PoW developing the ailment of 'academentia'.[4] The satirical approach and use of homonyms recall many experiences that align his own story with that which is

1.In the rest of this review, the term 'author' will refer to the author of the book under review, Prof. Keyan G. Tomaselli.

2.In the balance of the discussion, the term 'narrative' or 'story' will be used instead of the African storytelling term 'griot'.

3.Satire in this review is used as '… where topical issues are held up to scorn by means of ridicule' (The New Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus in One Volume).

4.Tomaselli describes the term 'academentia' as '… the state of manic managerialism that turns creative and intellectual labour into stressed factory workers who have lost their once entrenched institutional policymaking rights' (p. 8).

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presented by Tomaselli in this 'desert of the academic real' of contemporary campus life. Let us encounter our own 'lived experience' of transformation, manic managerialism and the ailment of academentia – but first, the fundamental concepts (as stated in the title) that underpin contemporary campus life, i.e. manic managerialism, transformation and PoW.

People of Worth and manic managerialism

What cannot happen in this review is to deconstruct the title of the publication and analyse and interpret the key concepts on their own and ignore relationships. Systems theory (and logical deductive argumentation) indicates that each element is influencing each other and is being influenced by the other. The concepts of PoW's (Manager), transformation and manic managerialism cannot be divorced as they have a symbiotic relationship that feeds on, and is being fed on by, each other. These PoWs and this manic managerialism can be laid at the feet of that great engineer and father of scientific management (which we refer to nowadays as Taylorism) Frederick Winslow Taylor, as quoted from his publication *The Principles of Scientific Management* (n.d. p. 39): 'You have seen this man here before, haven't you?' (Taylor doesn't name the man, but he name Schmidt the labourer.) 'No, I never saw him'. 'Well, if you are a high-priced man, you will do exactly as this man tells you tomorrow, from morning till night'.

> [*When he tells you to walk*], you pick it up and you walk. You do that right straight through the day. And what's more, no back talk. Now a high-priced man does just what he's told to do, and no back talk. (p. 39)

Taylor refers to this unnamed man as a 'manager', a group which has:

> […*T*]he burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws and formulae which is immensely helpful. (p. 32)

Not naming the man is important as it provides PoW and their managers (controllers) with a fallback position: 'management says'. The author quotes Martin's Law of Committees (p. 17) that '… a committee [management][5] as a group of people who, individually, can do nothing, but collectively can meet and decide that nothing can be done'. This is adequately attested by using powerful tools such as Excel spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations as implied by Taylor (p. 32). This is in reference to the quote from Taylor directly above – as these tools were not available at that time but the principle stay the same. This group of people (committees and management) is thus adequately controlled by 'that man' – a PoW. This brief introduction brings us the purpose of the review, sharing a living experience with the author as a fellow traveller in this 'desert of the academic real' – who ultimately suffers from 'academentia'.

5.Reviewer's insert.

A lived experience

Throughout this article, the concepts of manic managerialism, transformation and PoWs are interwoven into each chapter. In the opening chapters (Chapters 1–4, but not exclusively), the author positions the social construct in contemporary South African society and positions the story in the context of a societal phenomenon, the mega-university. What is happening in that esteemed place of higher learning is just a reflection of what is happening in the broader society: transformation, maniac managerialism and the ailment of dementia (which not only academics suffer from but also society as a whole). Tomaselli presents his experiences of contemporary campus life from a cultural studies perspective, and the reviewer aligns with the same experiences from a business management perspective, as we are all exposed to the same social forces (transformation and maniac managerialism) that inform culture and effects organisations, or as the author states, '…"forces" external to the university that are redefining academic life in unexpected ways' (p. 9). These unexpected ways also changed the reason of existence for universities.

The new 'raison d'etre' of the modern university is 'money' (Meja 1998). Universities are being managed as businesses (Furedi 2020), heavily relying on turnover – or as we call it, 'bums in seats'. This is done in a very creative way by explaining and linking 'e-cow-nomics' (pp. 19–24) with transformation to create an environment in which the PoWs are guiding (and measuring) the academics' performance (key performance areas [KPAs]) with the use of quantitative measures (Excel spreadsheets) such as throughput rate and pass rate (the target of which is given to deans, directors and academics by the PoWs), but it also uses qualitative subjective concepts such as transformation, decolonisation and entitlement to feed the 'e-cow-nomics' (p. 94). What do these concepts mean, apart from making an emotional appeal to the uninformed? The latter is illustrated by the following experience: an accounting student who attended a psychology class with his girlfriend asked the lecturer, 'Sir, when do you teach them that most important question?' Confused, the lecturer inquires, 'Which question, sir?' – with the prompt reply, 'And how do you feel about it?' If you don't feel well about 'it', the controller will score that specific KPA low, and that is not conducive to the PoWs, department, school or college's overall rating (bonuses and accolades), and this requires the academic to transform.

The question the author now poses is to '[*t*]ransform from what to what?' (p. 33). Again, this relationship is 'controlled' with 'spreadsheet-wielding controllers' who assist the PoWs in that universities are required to massify their undergraduate enrolments. This is in contrast with the 'grievously underprepared students'. When academics stand up against this with internationally accepted practices such as 'psychometric testing', we are categorised as antitransformation, and even as being racist, or as it was related to me, 'The dean is not happy'. Why? As it leads to

lower enrolment numbers that will impact the salaries and bonuses of the PoWs (and their controllers). But it doesn't only affect the academics; the deans are also being affected, as they are now forced to lead from the top down instead of the bottom up. The experience of the reviewer in this context was to invite the dean to one of these 'mass' or mega-classes with 800 enrolled students and to observe that only a hundred of these enrolled students attend lectures (with an obviously correlated pass rate of 42%). Readers need not even guess what the response was. But there is empathy with the deans, as they are being controlled by spreadsheet controllers (that man …), and instead of being involved in education, they are occupied with 'fighting fires' (that is, 80% of a manager's workload) (Mintzberg 2009) so as to 'ensure' transformation. Even the deans suffer from 'academentia', as they are under the impression that they set objectives and strategies for their faculties. Deans and directors – welcome to this contemporary 'academic desert of the real' – as your objectives are being given to you by the PoWs, and these 'spreadsheet wielding' controllers or managers have taken the human out of the academy, with the resultant ailment 'academentia' characterised not only by forgetfulness but also by stress, stress-related illnesses and early retirement. This is all a consequence of what Marx (n.d.:253) refers to as '[*t*]he labourer [*being*] divorced from the fruits of his labour'.

In Chapters 5–9, the author enters that holy grail of the academy, 'research and publications', and the dictum by which academics live, 'publish or perish'. But again, this is influenced by the PoWs, controllers and the cash cows of e-cow-nomics. It is not enough to publish your work (research) in any journal; it must be a Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)–endorsed publication. Of the work the reviewer published in DHET-endorsed journals, a 'thumb suck' reader estimate would be nine per publication, whereas an article published in a popular journal (not accredited by the DHET) would reach an audience of 1000 readers. But to no avail – no credits for that work. But research is not only limited to one's own research but also expanded to include the 'delivery' of PhD graduates who are not suitable for employment (IOL 2022), with a paradoxical report from Govender (2022) in the *Sunday Times* that PoWs are worried about the high dropout rate of PhD candidates. But to no avail: it is about feeding and controlling the cash cows (e-cow-nomics).

The author concludes (Chapters 10 and 11) this 'lived experience' with a summary of how organisational culture can kill the academic. Just doing your 'job' (research, preparing, lecturing, publishing and the endless stream of e-mails and forms to be completed – forget about the terror of the students) has become life threatening (p. 207). We as academics try to put the human back into the academy. By doing this you are labelled as a 'trouble-maker' or 'not a team player'. You become a leper. And then coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) happened! You are working online (which was a challenge in itself). You had some 'free' time (whatever that may be). You are out from under the eyes of the controllers. Spreadsheets had to be redesigned to cater for this new mutated environment, but human resilience will prevail; we need to put the human back (humans have souls) (p. 59) into the academy. To conclude the review, some final thoughts are discussed.

Final thoughts

As this review concludes, the latest QS rankings (June 2022) were released. The University of Johannesburg moved up one place to stand at second place in the category 501–600. The vice-chancellor (VC) congratulated all who contributed to this outstanding achievement. News media all over South Africa reported on it. What the VC did not say is that the new quantitative measure achievement becomes the new norm (you are working from home – you have some free time). The academics will suffer from '… dementia' and under pressure from the PoWs try and escape the 'Desert of the academic real' as reported by BusinessTech (2022) that 'Students have lost confidence in the quality of universities in South Africa: Survey' and the article published by IOL (2022) that '… PhD graduates are excluded from the recruitment space as they are seen as overqualified'. But contemporary campus life is not limited only to South Africa.

In an opinion piece published in *Russia Today*, Furedi (2020) states that:

> Unfortunately, the devaluation of a university degree cannot be stopped as long as universities continue to operate as businesses that treat students as customers. When higher education establishments have to keep their customers satisfied, grade inflation will continue. For what better way of ensuring that students are satisfied and happy then by offering them higher grades. (p. 1)

Welcome to (and enjoy) contemporary campus life – where academics suffer from (aca)dementia, an ailment enforced by transformation, manic managerialism and PoWs, where the PoWs reign supreme through transformation and manic managerialism to feed the cash cows of the e-cow-nomics.

This publication by Tomaselli is highly entertaining as a lived experience. Experience your own academic life in this satirical exposure of contemporary campus life and reflect on your own travels and experiences in this contemporary life on campus.

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