



AUTHOR:
Aryan Kaganof¹

AFFILIATION:
¹Department of Psychology, Centre for Critical and Creative Thought, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Aryan Kaganof

EMAIL:
kaganof@mweb.co.za

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herri: A new model for online archiving and journal publishing

Significance:

herri has been described as an online archive, as a journal, as an e-magazine, and as a digital museum, and, while it happily accepts all of these definitions, it does not allow itself to be limited by any of these definitions. This Commentary is a brief introduction to a new model for online archiving and journal publishing that rejects a print lineage (book or magazine) for online publication but rather embraces a screen-based genealogy, foregrounding both cinematic and gaming approaches to digital design, user experience and navigation.

herri has been designed as a radical new pedagogic tool, an Afrocentric revolution in how new knowledge is generated, cultivated, analysed, propagated, archived, and taught in and out of universities.

Our first principle was gleaned from Buckminster Fuller: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”¹

What we understood from the slew of boring, badly designed web journals out there was that everybody was missing the point of the screen. Designers were trying to replicate onscreen a genealogy rooted in print — in books and magazines. In other words, they were negating the ontology of the screen, and therefore all these online journals were deeply dissatisfying because, in emulating something they were not, the participant was constantly left feeling in-between; the experience of reading these journals online gave nothing of the satisfaction of reading a physical publication, but also, and more egregiously, did not exploit the actual medium in which they are embedded.

herri therefore was designed explicitly with the history of cinema, and the history of video games, as well as the history of the print media in mind. As a synthesis of these three strands. A recognition that the screen is capable of so much more than a printed book page is, and must fulfill that capability if it is to secure the participation of a new generation of users who have grown up with movies and games as an intuitive part of their learning and cognitive process. Please note that I do not describe them as ‘readers’ because they are doing more than that when they engage with *herri*; they are active participants in an ongoing *jouissance* of the moment that enables *learning through the medium itself* and not only through the medium’s *content*.

The second principle was learned from Édouard Glissant. *herri* is not a thing (certainly not one thing) but a *relation* between the user and the interface. When we started designing *herri*, the students were still a force to be reckoned with and the word ‘decolonising’ was very much in the air. What we did not want to do with *herri* was create another thoroughly colonial collection of carceral disciplines marching in parallel sequence and thereby merely replicate an ongoing history of these incarcerated knowledge paths (‘the university’) but rather to radically investigate what ‘decolonisation’ might mean in this age of techno-hybridity.

The first thing we needed to decolonise from was time. Therefore, there are no publication dates in *herri*. We do have them stored, and if researchers really need them they could, theoretically, be given out, but the point is that *herri* is always now. *herri* is published the moment you encounter it. *herri* is not a ‘product’ with a sell-by date. It is not for sale. It gives you knowledge every time you log on. When you vibe with it, you and *herri* are now. The word ‘vibe’ is very important because *herri* is an African creation rooted in a Pan-African ethic and aesthetic that is best described as *simultaneous multidimensionality*. “‘Simultaneous multidimensionality’ names a condition prevalent in many African traditions of performance art in which music is coherent from different aural and kinesthetic perspectives at the same time.”²

A living archive

herri is the name used by the Dutch colonisers for the 17th-century Khoi freedom fighter Autshumao³, the first South African political prisoner, who famously escaped from incarceration on Robben Island. Twice. ‘*herri*’ – as opposed to ‘Herrie’ – is a decolonial orthography decision that was made because the curatorial team did not believe that the Dutch spelling of the sound *herri* was necessary, and, inspired by the way sms messages have influenced the orthography of contemporary Afrikaaps, decided to use *herri* as a flag signalling a de-linking from conventionally inherited colonial spelling.

herri is conceived of as a living archive that demonstrates the possibilities of (post) new media and integrated technologies where discrete categories like ‘art’, ‘music’, ‘film’, ‘text’ and ‘design’ all merge into sensorial and informational abundance. Initiated in 2019 as part of the Andrew W. Mellon funded Delinking Encounters project at Stellenbosch University, *herri* developed into an investigation about how the notion of decolonisation and decoloniality impacts on the archive, and in its 10 iterations to date, *herri* demonstrates how the archive is dispersed between artefacts, living people and their memories, and artistic imaginings of the past, present and future.

The intellectual challenge of *herri* was how to act as a mediating device, or bridge, between the memories of lived experience and the digital media currently available for recording and storing those memories. In my role as Curator/Editor I saw the challenge as one of changing traditional notions of institutional archiving which involve gated communities of difficult-to-access physical material in unwelcoming carceral environments (think colonial structures), into an unrepentantly liberated zone, a new model of open access memory sharing which makes the existing models obsolete.

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In setting out to do this, *herri* attempted to answer the question: What does decolonisation sound and look like in this age of techno-hybridity?

In presenting a sound-mine of narratives, mythologies, ideologies, statements, ambiguities and ideas inviting excavation, *herri* postulates that there is not just one answer to this question. By being deliberately trans- and post-disciplinary, incorporating all forms of digital media, and by working with writers, musicians, filmmakers, composers and designers at the cutting edge of their fields of expertise, *herri* contributes to new knowledge, forging a South-led digital humanities voice that does not emulate what is already known. Writing in *Business Day*, Chris Thurman commented that:

*herri is not just a publication or a platform but an ever-expanding archive. It offers a journey down, through horizontal layers of history, but it is very much present and future-oriented, a portal between diverse settings and geographies and languages.*⁴

An intersectional structure

Structurally, *herri* consists of differentiated sections that are digitally and conceptually linked in a variety of ways with other content in each edition. Intersectionality is an important feature of the 'herriverse'. The sections have been created to allow entry into the site from different portals, not necessarily only the single front cover entrance.

The **Editorial** section forwards positions, formulating viewpoints and positing analyses much in the way conventional editorials are expected to do, with the exception that these *herri* editorials are not limited to textual contributions but have also appeared as films and, as in this powerful example by Khadija Tracey Heeger, as performed poetry.

Each issue of *herri* has a **Theme**, which invites writers to explore in-depth the work of an individual artist or genre. This kind of deep focus writing and analysis is difficult to sustain in the market-driven, product-related contemporary media environment of late capital where academic writing itself has become an entirely fungible commodity, administered by monolithic corporate behemoths.

The Theme section has to date featured 'Mantombi Matotiyana' (#1), 'Code Switching: From The Eoan Group to Country Conquerors' (#2), 'Night Music' (#3), 'Africa Synthesized' (#4), 'Social Impact' (#5), 'Graham Newcater' (#6), 'Johnny Mbizo Dyani' (#7), 'Al in Africa' (#8), 'Lefifi Tladi' (#9), and the current issue, 'African Psychology' (#10). These themes have developed organically from archival material I have been recording and collecting since the 1980s, working closely with Guest Editors Vulane Mthembu (Al in Africa) and Professor Kopano Ratele (African Psychology).

The release of *Songs of Greeting, Healing and Heritage* became the focal point for a multi-perspectival reflection on the artist/composer Mantombi Matotiyana, the heritage represented by her music, and the music itself in the 'Mantombi Matotiyana' theme (issue #1). Matotiyana (who was 85 at the time), created her very first CD recording of her own compositions and *herri* initiated a series of commissioned responses to the recorded work by writers, poets, composers, producers, DJs and theorists, including Njabulo Ndebele, Antjie Krog, Malaika wa Azania and Mbe Mbhele. These 15 responses were published in the Theme section of the first issue. The point of these commissions — a practice sustained over the course of all 10 iterations of *herri* — was to explore the archive as a creatively generative motor, a source of unending creative possibility, both academically and in terms of artistic practice.

"How do we begin to think and speak ('do research') about a practice such as music that 'lives inside people' without approaching it through a colonial lens," asks Neo Muyanga in his editorial⁵ in issue #1 which offers various perspectives on this question. Congolese rapper, artist and filmmaker Baloji's multi-faceted short film *Zombies* is a critique of techno-dependence, and an essay by Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling considers the relationship between recordings and the real, among others. *herri* itself is not exempt from this question, and the whole *herri* project could be regarded as a meditation on its own role as medium.

For issue #2, another CD release, *Streng Verbode*, this time of Greyton's ghoema-reggae band the Country Conquerors, twinned with a long-term

archival project on the Eoan Opera Group, presented the opportunity to interrogate the notion of code switching through the juxtaposition of opera and reggae, past and present. Writing in *The Conversation*, Stephanie Vos explained, "Reading about the Country Conquerors and the Eoan Group side by side becomes an exercise in code-switching."⁶

The design of *herri* reflects this content, through its fluidity and non-linear, non-hierarchical presentation of material. *herri* strives always to avoid the pitfalls of university-bound humanities projects where "Institutions have the megalomania of the computer whose whole vision of the world is its own program"⁷.

Issue 3's Theme, 'Night Music', too, has a CD and book as its central pivot. Already in this third edition, *herri* sent a clear signal that South African music was not either 'Western' or 'African', 'elite' or 'popular'. The sequence of topics and approaches embedded in the wider sectional diversity of *herri* enabled a syncretic-hybridic effect that proposed a South African music culture released from its apartheid ghettos of categorisation.

The theme of issue #4, 'Africa Synthesized', transplanted the notion of a physical conference (that did not take place because of COVID) to the domain of a design-intensive and media-rich platform that expanded the kinds of material and presentation that would have resulted from conventionally published academic exchanges.

The theme of *herri* #5, 'Social Impact', was prompted by a funding award from the Social Impact Division of Stellenbosch University. It enabled the university to turn a critical lens on its notion of social impact, which could easily become an alibi that allows the broader academic (and managerial) project of the university to avoid the responsibility for thinking through and implementing the imperatives of transformation and decolonisation.

The special issue of *herri* with its focus on Social Impact flowed organically out of its concern with music as a 'weather vane' to understand and analyse social conditions. The referent here was Giorgio Agamben who, in his 'What is Philosophy?', states:

*Philosophy is today possible only as a reformation of music. In fact, this arche-event that constitutes humans as speaking beings – cannot be said within language: it can only be evoked and reminiscenced musically. In music something comes to expression that cannot be said in language.*⁸

The South African 12-tone composer Graham Newcater celebrated his 80th birthday in 2021, and *herri* marked the occasion by publishing archival scores and recordings of his music in its 'Graham Newcater' theme issue #6. The thematic focus on Johnny Mbizo Dyani (issue #7) illustrated the manner in which archival depth or diachronic layering, is digitally presented as synchronous curation. Dyani's theme was built on an interview conducted by the Curator/Editor more than three decades ago. In a sense then, the Dyani theme shows how digital curation accrues depth, not only from research or mobilised networks, but through sustained individual and team engagement with important people, bodies of work or ideas.

The '**Galleri**' section of *herri* foregrounds sonic, visual, photographic and film work as autonomous art works, rather than as (inter)textual contributions to discursive engagements. '**Borborygmus**' (stomach rumbling, peristaltic or abdominal sounds) serves as a digital soap box for hard to swallow material that might resist polite, academic or entrained forms of reception and engagement. The 'Borborygmus' section of *herri* forms part of a larger ethos of respecting the importance of encouraging transgression, bringing to the surface submerged or repressed material or forms of expression, and insisting that discourse and creative engagement with abrasive and potentially offensive ideas be invited, as far as possible, into the academic space. As Edward Said put it: "Least of all should an intellectual be there to make his or her audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant"⁹.

Whereas 'Galleri' privileges a full spectrum of artistic creativity, it is in '**Frictions**' that newly commissioned work of edgy text – both poetry and

fiction – is showcased. Issue #1, for example, features the University of Johannesburg's Literature Prize Winner Lesego Rampolokeng, whose writing is translated into an indigenous South African language (isiXhosa) for the first time.

'**Claque**' is a review section where books, CDs and DVDs are analysed by practising experts in their fields, whilst '**Off the record**' is where *herri* invites writers to uncover what has hitherto been deliberately hidden or inappropriately conveyed. This is the most classically 'archival' section of the *herri* architecture.

'**Hotlynx**' is designer Andrea Rolfes' creation of an evolving artwork out of the hotlynx; it is an abstract motion machine on the surface – click on the hotlynx and you get immersed in an information tunnel... it is a fun curation into wildly different avenues of exploration for *herri* readers. '**The Back Page**' is a section devoted to philosophical counter-narratives, reflections and possibilities – a *contra* summing up of the issue. '**The Selektah**' is a section that invites DJs to contribute a mix and an essay.

Language

One of the most significant aspects of *herri* is that it is potentially a multilingual publication. By not segregating the languages onto separate pages, apartheid style, but rather criss-crossing and alternating the different language paragraphs with each other, *herri*'s pages give a sense of the linguistic code switching which South Africans do every day in their communications with each other. It is in this polylinguistic approach that *herri* creates new knowledge; not merely endlessly talking *about* decolonisation in English, but actually doing it, mediacentrically.

A navigation button allows readers to engage a text in two or more languages simultaneously. So, for example, in the Mantombi Matotiyana themed issue (#1) the Sazi Dlamini article is given in isiZulu, English and the Mpondomise language, which is uMam' Mantombi's mother tongue.

The pages were designed so that the articles that were available in more than one language would have these languages integrated. Instead of a full-page article in English followed by a full-page article in isiXhosa or seSotho, a paragraph-by-paragraph 'flip flopping' between languages was designed. The relational aspect of the *herri* page design, particularly (but not exclusively) with regard to language, is strongly influenced by Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*¹⁰ and is a concrete example of how decolonial theory has been incorporated into the 'nuts and bolts' of *herri*'s web design at every level.

Here are some of the pages that feature the language button:
<https://herri.org.za/2/zimasa-mpemnyama> (isiXhosa and English)
<https://herri.org.za/3/nduduzo-makhathini> (English and isiZulu)

PhD

A major development facilitated through and by the digital infrastructure and attendant conceptual possibilities of *herri*, was the publication, in issue #5, of a PhD thesis by a student at Stellenbosch University. To the curatorial team's knowledge, this is the first time that a University anywhere has allowed a student to present a PhD in a completely digital format. Contemporary artist Nicola Deane received her PhD in Visual Arts in 2020. It is entitled 'Decentering the Archive: Visual Fabrications of Sonic Memories'. Deane's research was a visually based exploration of the sound archives of the DOMUS. Deane has reflected on the expanded scope afforded her by *herri* as follows:

*The various features of herri allowed me to create visual reference pop-ups and links throughout the text, to embed my own film works, as well as YouTube videos, to interrupt the text with audio files or image carousels, with the aim of integrating theory with practice and making the reading experience more interactive and multimodal.*¹¹

In *herri* #9, another Stellenbosch University published her PhD digitally. Inge Engelbrecht's *Die Koortjie Undercommons* was written in a bold

decolonial hybrid of Afrikaans, Afrikaaps and English and accepted by the University in that format.

Institutional context

herri is currently being used by Matthew Pateman in his media lectures at Edge Hill University, UK, where he is Professor of Popular Aesthetics and Head of Department. In email correspondence on 10 September 2021, Pateman writes:

I just completed the external review/evaluation of herri 2–4. It struck me as I was writing that one aspect which is profoundly important is the fact that the curatorial as opposed to editorial nature of herri means that the wide variety of ways of entering into a page, exiting a page and therefore having interesting and (while not at all random, nevertheless) un-motivated collisions, juxtapositions and abrasions. In my report I described how I think that creates a new kind of research method: one that is structural or even meta- insofar as it exists in the reader's navigation of the curated space and the possible contingent connections, as much as in the objects being curated.

In other words, an epistemic construction that is obliquely but absolutely determined by ontologically unpredictable exchanges.

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Declarations

I am the founding Curator/Editor of *herri*. I have no AI or LLM use to declare.

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