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THE AFTERLIFE OF VOËLVRY IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Kombuis, Koos (2009) **Short drive to freedom: A personal perspective on the Afrikaans rock rebellion.** Cape Town: Human & Rousseau. ISBN 978 0 7981 5098 0. Pages 256.

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In his recent memoir, playfully titled **Short drive to freedom**, Afrikaans-speaking musician and author, Koos Kombuis, contributes to the history of the "Afrikaner Alternative Movement" by offering "a personal perspective on the Afrikaans rock rebellion." Although Kombuis recounts events prior to and following the development of Voëlvry, which reached its highpoint in a 1989 nationwide tour, it is Voëlvry to which his narrative constantly returns. It was during this tour that Kombuis, together with manager, Dagga-Dirk Uys and musicians, Bernoldus Niemand (James Phillips), Johannes Kerkorrel (Ralph Rabie), Piet Pers (Gary Herselman), Hannepoort van Tonder (Jannie van Tonder), Karla Krimpalien (Tonia Selley) and Willem Moller played to packed audiences of mostly young white Afrikaners at university campuses and town halls, preaching against the insanity of apartheid. With sponsorship from the *Vrye Weekblad*, the then newly launched anti-establishment weekly newspaper, and from *Shifty Records*, an independent South African recording company, and armed with music, irony, alcohol, *dagga* (marijuana) and intense frustration at the suffocation of life under apartheid, the musicians became a scathing satire of the ideals, institutions, idiosyncrasies and monuments of Afrikaner Nationalism.

It has been a point of contention, pursued by several authors (e.g. Grundlingh, 2004; Du Preez, 2006; Hopkins, 2006), that certain key events in the Afrikaner Alternative Movement have been excluded from official history, the most frequent complaint being that Herman Giliomee (2003) inexplicably overlooked Voëlvry in his enormous book, **Die Afrikaners: Biography of a people**. Voëlvry has however occupied a rather prominent position in post-apartheid popular culture. One could cite here the public commemoration of Voëlvry at places such as the Oppikoppi music festival, to which Kombuis refers in some detail. Rather than excluded then, it has been included and portrayed as an overlooked and under-documented set of anti-apartheid protest events. The problem has not been one of exclusion, but of simplification, turning Voëlvry into an anti-apartheid emblem.

Kombuis takes his cue from this supposed exclusion, but he is more concerned with why he himself overlooked these events in his autobiography, **Seks & drugs & boeremusiek,** published nearly a decade earlier. As he puts it, "Of course, I've known

all along - at least subliminally - that I have been suppressing facts from a certain era. If that part of history is so important, if so many other writers have written about it and researched it, why was it almost completely excluded from my autobiography?" (Kombuis, 2009: 6). Kombuis frames **Short drive to freedom** as being primarily a therapeutic engagement, a book that he *had to write*, a trauma he had to face, his objective being to "take note of this history and to spend some time contemplating it, in order to properly integrate it into the present" (2009: 7). What I want to suggest is that there is in Kombuis' retrieval of certain suppressed elements of the past, a kind of mourning at work, a form of remembering which not only serves to integrate memories of Voëlvry into the present, but expand the set of meanings that have to this point been attached to this movement, and to free it from its anti-apartheid protest one dimensionality. While Voëlvry may have assisted many Afrikaners in disassociating from, and disidentifying with, apartheid, in **Short drive to freedom** Kombuis confronts the messiness and incompleteness of these processes. Let me illustrate this with a few examples.

Kombuis concludes his book, in an italicized passage, as follows: "*At last the Kombi has come to a standstill. There is a deathly silence except for the tinkling of tiny pieces of glass falling from the shattered place where the windscreen used to be. I look out through the shattered window. Outside the street is upside down. I crawl out through the gap, and the world rights itself*" (2009: 254). The allusion the windscreen provides is to his *ways of seeing the world* being shattered, and the trauma of that shattering. The reader though is at first not entirely sure of what it is that has been shattered, and one imagines, neither was Kombuis before embarking on the writing of the book. The therapy of the book then becomes focused on discerning what it is that has been lost - certainly something. We are assured of this when Kombuis says to his wife, after she has asked what Voëlvry meant to him, "It damaged me. It caused me a lot of harm. It just about ruined me" (2009: 250). The obvious shattering Kombuis addresses is the ideological distortion of his view of the world, into which colonialism and apartheid inducted him, a worldview "preordained through Calvinism, sponsored by Sanlam, and protected, with God's help, by the iron-fisted powers of the Police and the Defense Force" (2009: 35). This in a sense is what the Voëlvry tour strove to shatter, but according to Kombuis it also almost killed him in the process. I return to this below. At another level, it is his disillusionment with the struggle against apartheid and the ways in which he had responded to its call, that are shattered. He poignantly describes this loss of faith in his introductory passage, to which the car crash passage is also linked, when he notes that "*I felt my optimism and idealism evaporate. I realized that, while I had always imagined myself as a kind of freedom fighter, a Che Guevara, the most important part of my adult life had been spent doing one thing: rolling and lighting up dagga joints*" (Kombuis, 2009: 13). This is the second kind of loss and shattering he depicts. There is however quite another kind of loss he addresses that is seldom mentioned, particularly by those deeply invested in the political importance of Voëlvry: the loss of apartheid as an ideal, or at least, life lived according to apartheid as an ideal, a form of loss completely incompatible with the anti-apartheid struggle. This loss turns out to be the underside of the first kind - the shattering of apartheid. It is the discovery that one has participated in the death of something hated and that was life constraining in the worst kind of way, but the simultaneous awareness that one remains attached to it, even if unconsciously so. What Voëlvry has meant up to this point, was that it was an anti-apartheid movement, one that assisted in breaking down apartheid. But never before has the democratization of South Africa, for which Voëlvry helped

fight, been discussed as something analogous to a car accident. The changes instituted - the righting of an "upside down conscience," to use the words of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich (1975: 40) in the context of post-Hitler Germany - was for Kombuis a kind of trauma. To restate Kombuis' words, "*Outside the street is upside down. I crawl out through the gap, and the world rights itself*" (2009: 254).

Kombuis elaborates on this theme when he recalls how, before a gig during the Voëlvry tour in 1989, he walked through the streets of Potchefstroom: "During this stroll, I realized to my amazement that Potchefstroom is actually a *pretty* place. The old buildings and houses seemed to gleam in the slanting rays of the late sun. I felt as if I was witnessing the end of the colonial era. I wondered how long it would be before these churches and majestic buildings would become museum pieces of the past, relics of Nationalism. I could not understand why this made me sad" (2009: 138). What he brings across in this moment is his ambivalence over the death of an era, a death he was, along with others, willing. When he says, describing his walk through Potchefstroom, "I felt a profound sense of irretrievable loss, which I could not explain" (Kombuis, 2009:138), he experiences a sadness that is not understandable at the time. Indeed, one could not explain it: *one was not permitted to explain it*. The struggle against apartheid allowed very little ambivalence and it is only the withdrawal of investment into resistance politics, the end of resistance politics, that offers the occasion for the mourning of apartheid and investment in a new future. What Kombuis' book raises implicitly is how addressing the recalcitrance of apartheid requires the difficult consideration of the extent to which South Africans, despite protestations to the contrary - in fact, often at moments of vehement protestation, as psychoanalysis reminds us - remain attached to some aspect of apartheid, even if it is merely its familiarity. Here we see resonances with Jacob Dlamini's (2009) book, **Native nostalgia**.

To broaden the scope of the argument, the frequently cited opening line of the preamble to the South African constitution states, "We, the people of South Africa, recognize the injustices of our past." Here we find one instance, *the founding instance*, of how subjects of the post-apartheid nation are interpellated based on the recognition of colonialism and apartheid as injustices. One must recognize the injustices of the past to be an authentic subject of the nation. Voëlvry has functioned as an emblem for certain white South Africans, of being an authentic, anti-apartheid, post-apartheid South African. This emblematic post-apartheid afterlife of Voëlvry has offered a younger generation of Afrikaners a particular vantage point from which to acknowledge the injustices of apartheid, even if this is a somewhat limited vantage point that goes only so far in recognizing the victims of this injustice in reparative processes. It has opened up one more space for an Afrikaner anti-apartheid position within the South African imaginary. As such, it has provided a location of subject formation for Afrikaners compatible with the post-apartheid nation (Grundlingh, 2004) and it has offered Afrikaners one means amongst several, of authenticating themselves as South Africans. If we were to discern the conditions that have constrained the retrieval of these hidden aspects of Voëlvry, we might say that the perceived need for nation building, the call to unite a still fragmented nation, has provided those conditions. This is perhaps why certain elements of Voëlvry have been excluded: as an emblem, Voëlvry has not necessarily permitted a nuanced engagement with the complexity of South Africa's transition. And indeed, Kombuis does not simply retrieve his memories of Voëlvry and strategically rework them into the straightforward struggle narrative that

has usually structured the story of Voëlvry. And even when his retrieval of Voëlvry memories can be situated within an explicitly political context, there are too many contradictions for a straightforward nationalist agenda, where he is the *national subject par excellence*, a struggle hero, to come off smoothly. This argument only holds to a degree though, as Kombuis offers painful *personal* reasons he has not, up to this point, been able to face recounting those times, including feuds with friends who have since passed away. Then again, it is precisely his ambivalence about the end of apartheid as well as his portrayal of his entanglement with that which they were raging against, which give his story the weight of political sincerity and a kind of believable undecideability.

It does need to be pointed out that there is an overreliance in the book on memory alone and the book suffers from a lack of carefully researched historical detail, perhaps a labour that is beyond the therapeutic scope of his book. The chronology, by his own admission, is inaccurate, which does not seem to bother him. While weaknesses are being pointed out, it could also be said that the writing, although frank, is stylistically derivative and formulaic. Kombuis' book though, is redeemed by the way in which it employs a seemingly slavish form of expression - much like the music used by the Voëlvry musicians - to confront the past in novel ways. Despite its limitations, the book movingly portrays the afterlife of Voëlvry in post-apartheid South Africa. Indeed, the portrayal of loss is one of the book's strengths. How white South Africans are able to confront complicity with a history of racial oppression without lapsing into confessional mode, which exchanges privilege for another kind of moral, anti-racist capital - which can be traded on as a good reflexive subject of the post-apartheid nation - is no straightforward task (Hook, forthcoming). In simple language, Kombuis struggles with exactly this problem.

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