

De La Rey Rides (Yet) Again¹: Afrikaner Identity Politics and Nostalgia in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Gary Baines, Rhodes University

Paper presented to the IASPM Conference, Liverpool, July 2009

In 2006 a relatively unknown South African artist with the stage name Bok van Blerk released his debut album called “De la Rey”. The album included a music video of the title track that calls upon the legendary Boer War² general to save the *volk* (people) from the wantonly destructive strategies of the British imperial forces: the scorched earth policy and the subsequent internment of women and children in concentration camps. The British justified such extreme – some would say ‘genocidal’ – strategies so as to prevent non-combatants from supporting the irregular Boer soldiers. Although he did not believe that the war could be won on account of the overwhelming odds that the Boer forces faced, De la Rey still fought to the bitter end. Needless to say, he was on the losing side.



Figure 1: General ‘Koos’ de la Rey

¹ My title plays upon that of Tim du Plessis’s piece in the *Financial Mail* (2007).

² This is the contemporary British term for the war of 1899-1902. Boer which literally means ‘farmer’ was the name given to the white settlers who ruled the Orange Free State and South African Republics. Their preferred term for the conflict was the *Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (Second War of Freedom). More neutral terms such as the Anglo-Boer or South African War are used in the historical literature.

The legend the “Lion of the West Transvaal” owed much to the perception that General Jacobus Hercules (aka ‘Koos’) De la Rey implemented the Boer’s guerrilla tactics which prolonged the war after the British forces had occupied much of the Orange Free State and South African Republics. It also – somewhat inconsistently – credits him with the use of trenches in mobile warfare. Following the war, De la Rey aligned himself with the conciliatory Afrikaner leader and former Boer War General Louis Botha who became the Union of South Africa’s first Prime Minister. De la Rey broke with Botha over the latter’s support of the British at the outbreak of World War I and openly expressed his desire for the restoration of the Boer republic. He flirted with the leaders of the Afrikaner rebellion of 1914 and associated with the visionary ‘Siener’ van Rensburg who is said to have predicted his untimely death. De la Rey’s shooting in a police roadblock under suspicious circumstances fuelled rumours that he had been assassinated and spawned a martyr mythology. His status was reaffirmed by the unveiling of a twice life-size equestrian statue in his honour in front of the Lichtenburg town hall in 1965 (Figure 2). Cast in bronze, this reincarnation of De la Rey arguably represents the triumph of the Afrikaner republican ideal during the Verwoerdian era.



Figure 2: Statue of De la Rey, Lichtenburg

De la Rey’s third incarnation is in the form of van Blerk’s music video. It is available on YouTube with English subtitles at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAhHWpgPz9A>. Here are the lyrics:

Op 'n berg in die nag
lê ons in die donker en wag
in die modder en bloed lê ek koud,
streepsak en reën kleef teen my

en my huis en my plaas tot kole verbrand
sodat hulle ons kan vang,
maar daai vlamme en vuur brand nou diep,
diep binne my.

Koer:

De La Rey, De La Rey sal jy die Boere kom lei?
De La Rey, De La Rey
Generaal, generaal soos een man, sal ons om
jou val.
Generaal De La Rey.

Oor die Kakies wat lag,
'n handjie van ons teen 'n hele groot mag
en die kranse lê hier teen ons rug,
hulle dink dis verby.

Maar die hart van 'n Boer lê dieper en wyer,
hulle gaan dit nog sien.
Op 'n perd kom hy aan, die Leeu van die Wes
Transvaal.

De La Rey, De La Rey sal jy die Boere kom lei?
De La Rey, De La Rey
Generaal, generaal soos een man, sal ons om
jou val.
Generaal De La Rey.

Want my vrou en my kind lê in 'n kamp en
vergaan,
en die Kakies se murg loop oor 'n nasie wat
weer op sal staan.

De La Rey, De La Rey sal jy die Boere kom lei?
De La Rey, De La Rey
Generaal, generaal soos een man, sal ons om
jou val.
Generaal De La Rey.

On a mountain in the night
We lie in the dark and wait
I lie freezing in the mud and the blood
As rain clings to my pack

And my house and my farm were burnt to the
ground so they could capture us
But the flame and the fire that once burned
now burn
deep, deep within my heart.

Chorus:

De La Rey, De La Rey come lead the Boers
De La Rey, De La Rey
General, General we will fall around you as
one.
General De La Rey.

Against the khakis that laugh
A handful of us against a massive force
With our backs to the mountain cliffs
They think it's over for us

But the heart of a Boer is deeper and wider
than they can imagine
He appears on a horse, The Lion of West
Transvaal.

Chorus:

Because my wife and my child are in a camp
dying,
Although the khakis overrun, we will rise
again

Chorus:

There is little doubt that the Boers depicted in the video are longsuffering victims. They are fighting to preserve their independence, as well as their land from the clutches of an imperial power. But it is significant that De la Rey does not rescue the Boers from the enemy but, instead, commands such deep devotion amongst them that they are prepared to fight to the death; to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the *volk* (people). So is the song simply an instance of the descendants of the Boers – white Afrikaners – giving expression to their lingering bitterness and residual resentment at their treatment by the British more than a century ago? Do these perceived injustices still rankle with young Afrikaners such as Bok van Blerk in the 21st century? Does the song strike a different chord/register with current as opposed to previous generations of Afrikaners? Might it speak to issues that serve to alienate white Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa? Might the song be a metaphor for Afrikaner perceptions about the current dispensation of black majority rule in which the historical enemy has been replaced by a new enemy that has wrested control of the country from them? What message did Van Blerk and co-writers intend to convey? How should we read “De la Rey”? How has it been received? And what does van Blerk make of what others make of his song?

Before I venture to answer (some of) these questions, I should say something about the artist’s background. Bok van Blerk’s real name is Louis Pepler. He grew up in an Afrikaans-speaking household in Pretoria and was a teenager when South Africa’s transition from white minority rule to democracy occurred. His father took early retirement from the civil service when faced with the prospect of being retrenched as a result of affirmative action. Van Blerk reckons that this did not make his father resentful or bitter as it forced him to realize his dream of becoming a farmer (or *boer*). In interviews van Blerk has repeatedly denied that the song had political agenda and has insisted that it was simply about a historical figure. Commentators have made much of the fact that the choice of De la Rey as the subject of the song was not a considered one. They have pointed out that De la Rey was chosen ahead of any other Boer War general because it happened to rhyme with *lei* (lead). But it is probably not accidental that the songwriters invoked a figure from the untainted

pre-apartheid past, when the forebears of contemporary white Afrikaners were victims rather than the enforcers of an unjust political system.

Orthodox analyses suggest a profound dislocation in post-apartheid Afrikaner identifications (Davies 2007: 353). Van Blerk shares this view and reckons that white Afrikaners are undergoing something of an identity crisis and that they are sorely in need of leadership. He does not regard himself as that leader nor as an as an activist for Afrikaner rights in the mould of fellow musician and shameless self-promoter, Steve Hofmeyr. But he admits to admiring Hofmeyr for having the guts to be outspoken in his criticism of the ANC government for its failure to combat rampant crime and corruption. For Hofmeyr, whom the Mail & Guardian has referred to as “the ultimate Afrikaner issue activist” (Groenewald 2007), is prepared to fight for the rights of those whom he believes to have been disempowered and marginalised as a minority group in the “new” South Africa.

Like many young Afrikaners of his generation, van Blerk rejects having to shoulder the blame for the apartheid system that his forefathers institutionalised. (Yet, somewhat inconsistently, he is prepared to see his contemporaries as victims of the acts of the British Empire in a bygone era.) He claims that he is comfortable with the political transition and has embraced the “rainbow nation”. His endorsement of multiculturalism seems to be borne of political necessity inasmuch as it guarantees (in principle) the survival of white Afrikaners as a minority group. However, he believes that in practice Afrikaners have seen the erosion of their language and cultural rights; that current ANC language policies have resulted in the more extensive use of English as a medium of instruction in increasingly racially-mixed educational institutions at the expense of Afrikaans. He also claims that affirmative action is a form of reverse discrimination and that his generation have had enough of white guilt (cited in Russell 2007). This *gatvol* (“pissed off”) factor goes hand in hand with a wish to reassert pride in their Afrikanerness.

Van Blerk's musical heroes and influences are varied. They range from international acts such as Dire Straits, Bruce Springsteen and AC/DC, as well as local artists such as Valiant Swart and Koos Kombuis (De Vries 2007). Historically, Afrikaans music has been largely apolitical and the staple commercial fare was known as *liefdeliedjies* (love songs). With the emergence of the Voëlvry movement in the late 1980s, Afrikaans (rock) music developed a critical edge that condemned the repressive apartheid regime. This morphed into an Afrikaans alternative sound that includes the influence of blues rock and grunge on the local music scene. But to my mind, Van Blerk's repertoire owes as much to Laurika Rauch's nostalgic "Gee Groete aan Mannetjies Roux" that paid tribute to a Springbok rugby legend (as in the track "Habana" on the "De la Rey" album), as it does to Koos Kombuis's ironic "Blameer Dit op Apartheid" and other songs that insist that the Afrikaner is not to blame for the sins of their fathers. It is noteworthy that Kombuis initially took Van Blerk to task for tapping into Afrikaner reactionary sentiments – following a meeting between the two – retracted his condemnation of the younger man and gave him a ringing endorsement as the new Johannes Kerkorrel, the face of the Voëlvry movement (Bezuidenhout 2007: 4).

Van Blerk's invocation of the enigmatic/mythical figure of General De la Rey some twelve years after the country's political transition has obviously appealed to a large audience. The album has sold in excess of 200 000 copies (Grundlingh 2008: 178). This is an extraordinary volume of sales in a small racially and linguistically segmented music market.³ To put this in perspective in terms of economies of scale: sales of 25 000 earn a gold album in South Africa. The popularity of the song "De la Rey" is evident when and wherever it is played: whether in live performance in large stadium venues (such as the rugby ground Loftus Versveld in Pretoria) or whether as a recording in (say, Stellenbosch) pubs frequented by white Afrikaans-speaking students. Such audiences are obviously familiar with

³ White first language Afrikaans speakers in South Africa are estimated to number about 2,5 million. The figure has been in steady decline since 1994.

the song lyrics and have been known to clutch balled fists to their chests and sing the rousing chorus with great gusto. The song is often sung at occasions where symbols of the “old” South Africa are on display. Van Blerk, however, has publicly disassociated himself from the old South African flag and the singing of “Die Stem”, the anthem of the white minority regime (Du Plessis 2007: 65). The emotional response to “De la Rey” suggests that a raw nerve has been touched in the Afrikaner psyche; but one that is assertive rather than apologetic. This much is suggested by the appearance of slogans such as “Praat Afrikaans of hou jou bek!” (Speak Afrikaans or shut up) and “100% Boeremeisie” (100% Afrikaner girl) on tee-shirts. “De la Rey” seems to have become an anthem for a new generation of white Afrikaners seeking to reclaim an Afrikaner identity. Du Plessis (2007) speaks of the emergence of “a new Afrikaner” and others of the “De la Rey generation”.

The extraordinary reception of “De la Rey” appears, then, to suggest a resurgent ethno-nationalism. The song has certainly been appropriated or endorsed by a cross-section of Afrikaner political and cultural groups: from the right-wing Boeremag that advocates the creation of an autonomous Boerestaat (a “homeland” for white Afrikaners) to cultural forums such as the Federasie vir Afrikaanse Kultuur (FAK), lobbies like Afriforum and its sister organisation and labour movement Solidarity. Whilst Van Blerk distances himself from extremist groups such as the Boeremag, he is still prepared to perform the song for such organisations provided they pay him to do so. Indeed his response to the appropriation of his song by such groups has been somewhat ambivalent. This begs the question whether Van Blerk should be held responsible for the fact that his song has been used to promote particularist causes? And whether white Afrikaners – with the exception of the relatively small and unrepresentative Freedom Front – have withdrawn from parliamentary politics and have tended to rally around cultural and language issues? Has the white Afrikaner chosen to retreat into the laager or have they been deliberately excluded from the corridors of power? Whatever the case, there is no doubt that it is cultural brokers who have replaced the Nationalist Party, Broederbond and Afrikaner churches as mobilizers of Afrikaner public opinion (Du Plessis 2007: 65).

De la Rey's popularity has also occasioned a public outcry. Certain commentators regard it as a touchstone of white Afrikaner alienation from the "new" South Africa. They reckon that it tapped into a residual cultural chauvinism or resurgent Afrikaner nationalism that threatens the political stability of the country's fragile democracy. Such fears prompted critics to claim that the song's lyrics were potentially subversive and demand that it be banned or, at the very least, be prohibited from being performed or played in public spaces.⁴ In response the Department of Arts and Culture defended the composer's right to free speech and citizens' right to oppose the government provided that it did not violate the principles of the country's constitution. However, Minister Pallo Jordan added that the song was "in danger of being hijacked by a minority of right-wingers" and warned – somewhat ominously – that "those who incite treason, whatever methods they employ, might well find themselves in difficulties with the law" (South African Ministry of Arts & Culture 2007). The Democratic Alliance opposition party responded by saying that the song was not nearly as subversive as ANC president Jacob Zuma's signature song *Umshini wami* (Zulu for "my machine [gun]") presumably because it implied a return to the armed struggle (*The Star* 2007). The ensuing controversy involved not only van Blerk's defenders and detractors in heated exchanges in the media but journalists, political commentators and public intellectuals alike all weighed in with their views as to whether or not the song amounted to a call to arms by white Afrikaners and, as such, constituted a danger to the country's hard-won democracy and freedom, or whether it was merely harmless/unthreatening posturing by the new generation of this once politically powerful group.

Grundlingh (2008) does not regard the "De la Rey phenomenon" as politically motivated. He is of the opinion that young Afrikaners are astute enough to realise that there can be no going back to the apartheid past and that the transfer of power to the black majority is permanent. He believes that by far the majority have accepted this as a *fait accompli* and wish to move on. There is no doubt that

⁴ Two Afrikaans radio stations in Namibia removed the song from their playlists apparently because they did not wish to invite political controversy.

the new generation of post-nationalist Afrikaners have by and large welcomed the benefits of South Africa's return to the international community and the sporting, cultural and economic ties that it has allowed. Indeed, Afrikaners are a highly mobile group who have benefitted from the mixed blessings of globalisation in order to travel and sell their skills abroad. Many have migrated and joined expatriate communities in the UK, USA, Australia, Canada, and elsewhere. But those that have chosen to remain still command a vast material and cultural capital accrued during Nationalist Party rule. Indeed, prominent Afrikaner constituencies, including business and cultural elites are flourishing in contemporary South Africa. This is, in no small measure, due to their successful adaptation to structural shifts in the global political economy and the concomitant hegemony of neo-liberalism (Davies 2007: 354). It is somewhat ironic that van Blerk invoked the Afrikaner struggle for freedom at a time when most are materially better off than at any other time in their history.

If YouTube clips are anything to go by, South African expatriates identify with songs like "De La Rey" in moments of (drunken) homesickness. In order to understand the appeal of "De La Rey" both at home and abroad, I believe it is necessary to say something about how certain forms of memory work in Afrikaner society. Most commentators on the De la Rey "phenomenon" (correctly) in my view regard it as a manifestation of a crisis in identity politics in which the Afrikaner has sought to redefine him/herself in post-apartheid South Africa. But this argument does not go far enough towards explaining why it is that (young) white Afrikaners have embraced a song that lionizes a legendary/mythical historical figure. In order to grasp why De la Rey has been reincarnated we need to understand how nostalgia functions amongst Afrikaners.

Russell (2009: 142) reckons that the furore over the elegy to the legendary Boer War commander "reflected more an uncertainty over the future than a hankering for the past". This observation is suggestive precisely because of what it reveals about the nature of (Afrikaner) nostalgia. Nostalgia depends precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is

the very elusiveness of the past, its inaccessibility that accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power. This is not the past as actually experienced; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire. Thus, nostalgia is less about the past than about the present. And nostalgic distancing sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe from "the unexpected and the untoward, from accident or betrayal" - in other words, making it so very unlike the present. The aesthetics of nostalgia might, therefore, be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history blurs with dissatisfaction with the present (Hutcheon 1998).

Nostalgia, then, is a particular kind of memory; it is essentially an emotional response to changed circumstances. The extent to which such a response is shared by a community depends on whether personal memory intersects with that of the group (or collective). Where the personal and the group are linked by cultural affinities and shared experience, collective memory may coalesce. Nostalgia involves a sentimental yearning or hankering for half-forgotten past, involving distorted and often romanticised memories. While historians may be tempted to dismiss nostalgia as sentimental self-indulgent misrememberings, an examination of nostalgia is in fact a particularly valuable way of examining how communities imagine the past.

According to Van Zyl (2008: 136), the emergence of Afrikaner nostalgia coincides with the remoulding of South African society since the end of apartheid and advent of democracy in 1994. Similarly, Nauright (1998: 165) reckons that Afrikaners have employed nostalgia "to create a sense of cultural security during a loss of political, and possibly cultural power".

Much of the white Afrikaners sense of identity during the apartheid era was coupled to a system of racial domination, as well as a cultural supremacy that was articulated through the medium of the Afrikaans language. However, with the transfer of political power to the African majority

represented by the ANC, an already-redundant Afrikaner nationalism became obsolete in the new South Africa. In particular, it was politically incorrect to assert one's identity in terms of one's race – especially if one is a white South African. Both whiteness and Afrikanerness – discretely and conjoined – have had to be renegotiated in the new dispensation. Clearly, the premises for being a white Afrikaner had changed and previous notions of Afrikaner identity needed to be discarded and replaced with a more acceptable and relevant content. (Van Zyl 2008: 138). Van Blerk's "De la Rey" represents a type of performative nostalgia that finds widespread expression in contemporary Afrikaner society. Traces are found everywhere – from the letter columns in popular publications, to the writings of intellectuals and cultural icons, from newspaper articles, to literature and popular music. (Van Zyl 2008: 139). It feeds off a contradictory mood amongst (many) Afrikaners that combines a wish to disassociate themselves from a repressive past and yet, at the same time, express uncertainty about the future of the country. In this sense Afrikaner nostalgia is both backward- and forward-looking, as well as being both reflective and restorative.

The De la Rey saga which peaked in 2006-7 has not yet run its full course. Indeed, it has been opportunistically exploited by cultural entrepreneurs such as the playwright Deon Opperman whose "Ons vir Jou" musical dramatically re-enacts the story of De la Rey in epic and tragic terms. It was staged at that the Pretoria State Theatre in late 2008 and, after drawing full houses, its run was extended into 2009. This box office success suggests that De la Rey was turned into a commodity but, nonetheless, the perceived injustices to which the Boers – and by extension their descendants – have been subjected still resonates in some quarters. The lionisation – pun intended – of De la Rey strikes a chord with a new generation of Afrikaners that regards itself as being marginalised and disempowered in post-apartheid South Africa. At the same, it speaks of a growing assertiveness in the affirmation of a new Afrikaner identity.

References

- Bezuidenhout, Andries. 2007. 'From Voëlvry to De la Rey: Popular Music, Afrikaner Nationalism and Lost Irony'. Department of History Seminar, University of Stellenbosch, 5 September.
- Daniels, E.B. 1985. 'Nostalgia: Experiencing the Elusive' in Ihde, Don & Silverman, Hugh J., eds. *Descriptions*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Davies, Rebecca. 2007. 'Rebuilding the Future or Revisiting the Past? Post-Apartheid Afrikaner Politics'. *Review of African Political Economy*, 37(112): 353-370.
- De Vries, Fred. 2007. 'Bok van Blerk and De la Rey'. 24 March.
<http://freddevries.co.za/archive/2007/03/24/bok-van-blerk-and-de-la-rey.aspx>
- Du Plessis, Tim. 2007. 'De la Rey rides again'. *Financial Mail*. 9 February. 64-65.
- Groenewald, Yolande. 2007. 'The de la Rey uprising'. *Mail & Guardian*. 16 February.
- Grundlingh, Albert. 'Waarom 'n Spook as 'n Leier? Die "De la Rey"-fenomeen en die herskep van herinneringe, 2006-2007' in Grundlingh, Albert & Huigen, Siegfried, eds. 2008. *Van Volksmoeder tot Fokopolisiekar: kritiese opstelle oor Afrikaanse herinneringsplekke*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press: 177-187.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 1998. 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern'.
<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>
- Kombuis, Koos. 2006. 'Bok van Blerk en die bagasie van veertig jaar.' LitNet, 28 November.
http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=print_article&news_id=6473&cause_id=1270
(accessed 7 July 2009).
- Myburgh, James. 2007. 'De la Rey song potentially subversive – Ministry'. 6 February.
<http://www.moneyweb.co.za/mw/view/mw/en/page1655?oid=67089&sn=Detail> (accessed 3 July 2009).
- News 24. 2007. 'Bok's de la Rey hijacked'. 6 February.
http://www.news24.com/News24/South_Africa/News/0,,2-7-1442_2065220,00.html (accessed 7 July 2009).
- Russell, Alec. 2007. 'Boer roar'. *Financial Times*, Life & Arts Section. 21-22 July: 1-2.
- Russell, Alec. 2009. *After Mandela: The Battle for the Soul of South Africa*. London: Hutchinson.
- South African Ministry of Arts & Culture. 2007. 'Ministry of Arts and Culture on Bok Van Blerk's supposed Afrikaans "struggle song" De la Rey and its coded message to fermenting revolutionary sentiments'. 6 February. <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2007/07020710151002.htm>
(accessed 7 July 2009).
- The Star. 2007. 'De la Rey not as subversive as Umshini Wam', 8 February.
http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=vn20070208053536735C872647 (accessed on 3 June 2009).

Van Zyl, Danelle. 2008. "'O, Boereplaas Geboortegrond"! Afrikaner Nostalgia and the Romanticisation of the Platteland in Post-1994 South Africa'. *S.A. Tydskrif vir Kultuurgeskiedenis* 22(2): 126-148.