

“Van daai plek”: David Kramer, “Die ballade van Koos Sas”, and the Ground of Being

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Summary

This article examines the significance of the historical musical play “Die ballade van Koos Sas” (2007) in the oeuvre of South African singer-songwriter, David Kramer. Over the past three decades Kramer has increasingly turned his attention to the heterogeneous, multicultural origins of Afrikaans (as language and cultural matrix), as well as the far-reaching effects of the suppression of these origins during the emergence and apotheosis of white Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa. Kramer's work is both revisionist and recuperative in its reconstruction of a shared and heterogeneous folk tradition – a shared cultural ground – in which the specific character, or topology, of the land plays a constitutive role. The article examines and elucidates Kramer's critique, by means of the Sas legend, of the ideological structures and representational technologies that combine to effect the subjection – by, among other things, fixing identities and relations, and thereby abstracting them from the field of lived experience – not only of this recalcitrant, self-styled “last Bushman”, but also of the world he inhabits. I argue that by presenting his alternative version of the legend Kramer provides a critique of the taxonomies and ideological imperatives of cultural memory as history.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bespreek die historiese musikale drama “Die ballade van Koos Sas” (2007) as 'n belangrike werk in die oeuvre van die Suid-Afrikaanse sanger en liedjieskrywer David Kramer. In die loop van die afgelope drie dekades het Kramer sy aandag toenemend begin vestig op die heterogene, multikulturele oorsprong van Afrikaans (as taal en as kulturele raamwerk), asook die omvangryke gevolge van die onderdrukking hiervan gedurende die opkoms en hooggety van wit Afrikaner nasionalisme in Suid-Afrika. Insoverre Kramer se werk gemoeid is met 'n rekonstruksie van 'n gemene en heterogene volkstradisie – 'n gedeelde kulturele grondslag – waarin die bepaalde karakter of topologie van die land 'n vormende rol speel, kan dit as hersienend en herstellend gesien word. Hierdie artikel ondersoek en belig Kramer se kritiek, d.m.v. die Sas legende, van die ideologiese strukture en afbeeldingstechnologieë wat saamspan om die onderwerping van hierdie weerspannige en outonominerende “laaste Bushman” en sy wêreld te vermag, onder andere deur identiteite en verhoudings vas te lê en te abstraheer, en sodoende van die ervaringswêreld te vervreem. Ek voer aan dat Kramer se alternatiewe weergawe

van die legende kritiek lewer op die taksonomieë en ideologiese imperatiewe van kulturele geheue as geskiedenis.

In the mid-1970s David Kramer started his musical career on a predominantly English folk circuit, yet by the time he recorded his first album, “Bakgat!”, in 1980 he had become committed to working predominantly in Afrikaans, and to moving away from musical forms that seemed to him merely imported from England and America. The shift would eventually bring him success, but also criticism, insofar as he was considered to have sacrificed social criticism for popularity among, of all people, Afrikaners. Kramer’s response at the time was to question the assumed congruity between Afrikaans, white Afrikaners and the National Party of apartheid South Africa (see Collins 1983: n.p., Botha 1984: n.p., Campling 1984: n.p.). Related to this attempt to liberate the former from the purifying imperatives and historical coercion of the latter was an insistence on the importance of acknowledging “the strong coloured influence on Afrikaans culture” (Greyling 1983: n.p.).

Over the course of three decades Kramer has increasingly foregrounded the hybrid heritage of Afrikaans. This project also manifests itself in the extended version – first staged in 2007 – of the musical play “Die ballade van Koos Sas”, whose eponymous “bushman”¹ hero achieved notoriety in the early twentieth century first for being a slippery sheep thief and eventually for the murder of Daniel Stefanus – or “Boetatjie” – Botha, the proprietor of a shop on Hoek-van-die-Berg, a farm near Montagu. Kramer’s engagement with this material goes back to 1983, when he first recorded the ballad, “Die ballade van Koos Sas”, for his fourth album, “Hanepootpad”. The album identified his project in the arena of Afrikaans music as being both recuperative *and* culturally challenging; musically and narratively it involves a reconsideration of the ground of Afrikaans language and culture.

Kramer has repeatedly traced the origins of the ballad to an encounter, in the Montagu museum, with Sas’s skull (his name written on the forehead), an encounter which confronted him with questions of representation and power, particularly within the discourse of history. The song entailed Kramer’s first foray into the creative treatment of historical material, and for that reason alone marks a key moment in his career.

A one-act version of the play, literally developed out of the ballad by Kramer in collaboration with actors Jody Abrahams and Gaerin Hauptfleisch, was staged at the KKNK in 2001. It sported only three characters: Sas, Constable Tonie Swanepoel, who provided the official perspective on

1. Most scholars opt for the term “San” rather than the colonial term, “bushmen”, although the former has itself been subjected to criticism (see Hutchinson 2008: 315). In the 2001 version of Kramer’s play Sas specifically identifies both terms, as well as “kleurling”, as imposed names.

Sas, and Hendrik Skilpad, who presented a counter-perspective that focused on Sas's giving nature and his romantic involvement with Hendrik's sister, Lenie. Kramer himself appeared on stage as the balladeer, the narrator of the history. Significantly, the only other singing voice was that of Sas; as Francois Smith pointed out at the time, the play suggested Sas's reclamation of his own history (2001: 13). For the 2007 version Kramer added more songs, created parts for Lenie and Dominee Steenkamp – who was responsible for the exhumation of Sas's skull, and whose son took the photograph of the dead outlaw – and added the notorious raconteur Scottie Lennox in his capacity as grave robber.

The Sas legend, then, is tied in significant ways to the trajectory of Kramer's oeuvre, and has become emblematic for him of a need to represent cultural history. Thus it is also noteworthy that the 2001 version ran concurrently with Kramer's "Karoo Kitaar Blues", which showcased the music of a range of "coloured" folk musicians located by him in the rural Cape, Namaqualand and the Karoo. That project's rationale was, in part, the documentation of the fast-disappearing fund of "ou liedjies", Afrikaans folk songs that had developed from the cultural confrontation between Khoi, San, Dutch settlers, Malay slaves, etc. The show, also released as an album, left its impress on Kramer's subsequent albums, "Huistoe" and "Hemel & aarde". In adding music for the 2007 "Koos Sas", Kramer would rely on material from all three of these albums. The play, then, represents a point of convergence for many of the themes that have occupied the writer's thought and work over the past thirty years.

This article will trace some of the play's thematic concerns, particularly as they relate to the question of place, a question which informs Kramer's oeuvre as a whole. Kramer has consistently underscored the heterogeneous, multicultural local origins of Afrikaans (as language and cultural matrix), and pitted himself against the suppression of these origins within the discourse of white Afrikaner nationalism. His work reconstructs a shared and heterogeneous folk tradition in which the very topological features of the land play a constitutive role.

The idea of Afrikaner cultural hybridity has achieved wide currency in the post-apartheid context, as may be seen in Breytenbach's view of Afrikaners as a "bastervolk", and of miscegenation as a "[vital and positive process]" (Anker 2007: 343-344). Speaking more inclusively, Kramer once quipped to a journalist that "South Africans are nice bastards" (Moorcraft 1983: n.p.). But in the South Africa of 1917 that we encounter in "Koos Sas" such kinship goes largely unacknowledged. Constable Tonie Swanepoel is the only white character to be drawn with some sympathy, but we are never convinced by his suggestion that he and Sas are "bound in a strange sort of

friendship” (Kramer 2007: 1.1-2).² Still, it is thematically apt that the idea of such a friendship be raised; Swanepoel’s remark that he saw more of Sas than his own family similarly suggests the ground for a kind of kinship between them. Ultimately, of course, it is a failed kinship, one that never comes to fruition, and from which both characters in a sense recoil. It manifests itself only in the ongoing game of pursuit and capture they play out within the landscape of the Klein Karoo and Namaqualand, a game which simultaneously relates their identities and inscribes their particular positions vis-a-vis one another.

In making this point I am thinking of J.E. Malpas’s suggestion that

[o]ur identities are ... bound up with particular places or localities ... inasmuch as it is only in, and through our grasp of, the places in which we are situated that we can encounter objects, other persons or, indeed, ourselves Inasmuch as our subjectivity is inseparably tied to place, so our self-identity and self-conceptualisation (and our conceptualisation of others) is something that can only be worked out in relation to place and to our active engagement in place.

(Malpas 1999: 177-178)

This is firstly to underscore the fact that any place impinges upon the experience of those within it; in fact, it is “integral to the very structure of experience” (1999: 32). The “active engagement in place” of course also alters it, invests it with meaning, but it also presupposes the capacity for such engagement and implies the performance of identity within a landscape. Here forms of cultural praxis play a crucial role: Andy Bennett, for example, stresses that “[b]oth as a creative practice and as a form of consumption, music plays an important role in the narrativisation of place, that is, in the way in which people define their relationship to local, everyday surroundings” (2004: 2). It is a point that may be kept in mind in considering Kramer’s creative output, and additionally helps to explain why, within the abstract space of the stage, the landscapes through which the characters move are primarily brought to life by means of song.

Of course, Kramer’s interest in place has always been closely related to his own musical interests and development as a songwriter, and the “Karoo Kitaar Blues” project was specifically geared to the dissemination of songs and musical forms that he takes to emerge from a particular South African reality and region. Malpas argues that

cultural “memory” and identity [are] also tied to landscape and to the physical environment. Perhaps the most striking and best-known example of this is the way in which, for Aboriginal Australians, the landscape is marked out with narratives – or songs – by means of which the landscape itself is

2. References to the 2007 play indicate the act and page in the unpublished manuscript provided by David Kramer.

“sung” into being. The embedding of narrative in landscape is not, however, peculiar to Aboriginal culture.

(Malpas 1999: 187)

This resonates with the ways in which, locally, scholars have described the cultural life of the San, and it is hardly surprising that Kramer, a storyteller and someone deeply interested in the “coloured” roots of Afrikaans language and culture, should also engage this past, by having his protagonist declare himself the “last bushman of Montagu” (2.2).³

Scholars of the San peoples consistently refer to their close and vital bond to the landscape they inhabit, a bond not premised on an exclusionary system of property rights. John Parkington refers to “ideological systems” apparently “made to prevent the accumulation of either goods, space, power or any other form of privilege at any node along the network [of social relations]” (2007: 85). Relation to the land takes the form of narrative investments in the land itself; instead of “formal monuments” (p. 87), we get “stories, shared among equals, [which] both were, and told of, links to the land” (p. 89). Pippa Skotnes adds that these stories were “literally resident in” and “performed in the landscape” (2007: 58, 43). Kramer consciously draws on such accounts to provide an interpretive frame for the criminal intractability of this “last bushman” – the influence is evident in Sas’s criticism of private property in the play. Nonetheless, the play is less about regretting a lost culture than acknowledging Sas, Hendrik and Lenie as rightful owners of Afrikaans and participants in a hybrid culture. Such cultural meshing is evident when the dying Lenie finds herself praying to “the white man’s god” (1.16) even as her relationship with Sas increasingly reconnects her with a forgotten “bushman” past. These trends are not contradictory, as Lenie at length dies hearing two angels singing her “[bushman name]” (2.6). This testifies to the assimilation of Christianity by its new context, the very process whereby something foreign is appropriated by its new locale. Lenie’s vital if unsponsored spirituality invites contrast with Dominee Steenkamp’s irreligious comportment to the world, and should perhaps be linked to musical expression in the play itself, for certainly the bulk of the singing belongs to Sas, Hendrik and Lenie.

Kramer’s adaptation of a /xam image in the construction “sy bloed is soos ’n snaar” (1.4)⁴ clearly draws on its musical implications, and implies an ontological resonance with the place one inhabits. Thus Sas’s diminished ability to act after Lenie’s death is figured in the image of his “blood strings” gone slack (2.12), while, conversely, Hendrik Skilpad’s final triumph over Dominee Steenkamp and Scottie Lennox enables his recognition of his own “[blood [as] a string]” (2.9, 14), of his ability to

3. See also Tia DeNora’s study of “music’s social effects” (2000: ix).

4. See for instance, Dia!kwain’s “The Broken String” (Brown 1998: 69).

actively engage in the world he inhabits, and to inscribe it with his own song. As that song powerfully expresses, he now dances with his shadow in the dust (2.14). One is reminded of David Aldridge’s point that music can provide a “ground of being” (quoted in DeNora 2000: 71), and is tempted to suggest that the reverse also holds, that grounded being here expresses itself musically. For much of the play this is particularly true of Koos Sas, in relation to whom Skilpad first deploys the image of the blood as a string.

In stories about outlaws the question of where people are and whither they are heading is fundamental to narrative texture and dynamic, and locations themselves acquire a symbolic charge or a mythical dimension – vide the western. This is certainly the case with the country through which Sas moves, his “omgewing” (1.2), as the text has it – i.e., his environment, that which surrounds him: his *Umgebung*. The word simultaneously confirms the centrality of place to Sas’s identity and pertinently avoids the specification of a mappable coordinate. Hendrik simply says that Sas is “van daai plek [from that place]” (1.4), and elaborates by adding: “Daai plek daar doer waar die hemel en aarde ontmoet. Die plek waar die towenaars woon [That place way over yonder where heaven and earth meet. The place where the sorcerers live]”. In short, it is the indeterminate, liminal space that remains the realm of potentiality in the relation between the subject and his world. Malpas qualifies a point I quoted earlier: “In being worked out [in relation to place and to our active engagement in place] ... self-identity is not thereby tied to any simple location within some purely static space” (Malpas 1999: 178).

To oversimplify and reduce place, to render it static, is to petrify identity. It is this diffusion of stasis, this complication of being, that is effected by the invocation of the mythical dimensions of place (or, if we prefer, the narrative investments made therein). An ostensibly simple world becomes multifarious, uncanny, indeterminate. Sas, after his escape from jail, knows exactly where he is going – “[There I want to be]” (1.13) – but that place is only defined in relational terms: it is “[where the klipspringer jumps]”, “[where the wind can read your name in your tracks]”, “[under the melon-yellow moon]” and “[between the katbos and the aroma of the boegoebossie]”; and in terms of a set of actions: walking, being, going, dancing. Anticipated here is a fullness of relation that nonetheless defeats the fixing of coordinates. The prepositional constructions simultaneously specify position and render the locations imprecise, resistant to definitive circumscription. A key instance occurs when, after the murder of Boetatjie Botha, Sas suggests that Lenie and Hendrik escape with him to the place where his mother was born, “*duskant* [beyond] Droodaap” and “*naby* [near] Springbok” (1.20; my emphasis). We have an inkling of an entire world related to, yet forever just aside from, “officially” established coordinates. It is the same world we glimpse when early on in the play Sas distinguishes his “veldnaam” from his “dorpnaam” (1.2). In a sense Sas’s identity is more elusive than this still, for after all, his town name is changed during the

course of the play to Barend van Rooi, while his veld name, !Kagen gao (1.2), links him to the shape-shifting trickster god of the /xam, himself an inhabitant of an “ambiguous, unstable, often capricious world ... represented by the /xam storytellers as an edgy, uncertain place, yet a place nonetheless, where the existence of multiple identities was never doubted and where things could be what they appeared to be and something else entirely different” (Skotnes 2007: 46). In a sense what Kramer’s play suggests – and what the history of its composition dramatises – is that we should take up this perspective to our own settled sense of history itself.

The struggle of the characters who people Kramer’s work is the struggle of those who are, ontologically speaking, in the position of orphans – hence the recurring image of the road, and of destinations that lie far off. In the play it is Hendrik and Lenie, specifically, who represent this state of being, as people who have no claim to the present and only a tenuous link to the past. When they are first cut loose from the sphere of Botha’s farm they are entirely lost, adrift in an unknown land. Without denying the trauma involved in this experience, one is tempted to say that the play presents it as an important stage in the struggle for a new relation to place, and for Kramer it is certainly preferable to being narrowly and reductively tied to a plotted location. In the case of both these characters it leads to a kind of homecoming. After her death, Lenie can say that the wind has fetched her and shown her where to go (2.10), while Hendrik, in overcoming the challenge of keeping both Lenie’s and later Sas’s bones out of Lennox’s hands, and safely depositing them in the ground, regains a sense of identity that is essentially an attunement to place. Hendrik’s act directly opposes Lennox’s grave robbing, which divorces the body from the ground to which it is committed, subjects it to the abstraction of spatial reorganisation, which overlooks the insertion of the deceased into a particular context. Herein lies Kramer’s shock in discovering Sas’s skull in the Montagu museum – significantly, that moment has produced a story that also shows how Hendrik rediscovers his ground, not by delineating it, but by literally inscribing it with his relations.

Much of the play, then, involves attempts to elude the technologies and strategies for spatial domination. Lennox locates graves, Swanepoel sends photographs to “[strategic points]” (1.21) to facilitate the capture of Sas. These practices and procedures are means by which the world is simultaneously fixed and robbed of its history, and may be taken to represent the very praxis of colonisation itself. Swanepoel’s grid functions as a net, limiting the subject’s capacity for expressive action within his landscape, while Lennox systematically unmoors identity from its ground. In both cases the trend is that of a greater abstraction, in terms of which place becomes mere space.⁵

5. Malpas suggests that “the less a place is encompassed by our capacity to act

The general trend towards abstraction here is also fundamental to the representational technology for which Sas has a deeply rooted aversion: the camera. It is significant that both acts 1 and 2 should end with Sas being photographed: first by Scottie Lennox, after being arrested for murder; the second time by Willempie Steenkamp, shortly after being shot dead by Constable Jurie Dreyer (in the photograph the dead man is suspended between Dreyer and two subordinates). In both cases the photographer operates from predominantly economic considerations, although the photographs themselves have a role to play in the dominant discourses of law and of science. The complicity of exploitative and hegemonic practice is further underscored by the astonishing fact that the actual Sas photograph – as Dominee Steenkamp enthusiastically explains – was reprinted as a postcard to help fund an ACVV⁶ project to remove white children from the care of “coloured” foster parents to all-white orphanages, a project that simultaneously testifies to an interwoven history and aims to efface it by means of institutional segregative practice.

This project suggests a perspective that we may also align with the way in which the camera – and its operators – look at Sas. A useful way of characterising this perspective would be by way of Joseph Fell’s explication of Heidegger’s distinction between *Anschauung* – which we may translate as “looking at” – and *Umsicht*, or circumspection. As Fell explains, in speaking of *Anschauung*,

Heidegger attempts to show its derivative, abstractive, and isolating character. [*Anschauung*] lifts beings out of the context in which they are what they are, treating them as if their Being were an independent, nonrelative substantiality. The circumspection [or *Umsicht*] of ordinary practical experience, however, regards beings in their reference to their spatiotemporal environs. That is, circumspection sees by placing, situating, orienting. The place in which it finds beings revealed as what they are, as “true”, is Dasein’s own “clearing”, its time, and in its time its space and its world.

(Fell 1979: 36)

For us a link emerges between Heidegger’s *Umsicht* and the “omgewing” – or *Umgebung* – which Swanepoel assigns to Sas. To inhabit a place, to

or react, the more abstract must be our grasp of that place”, and adds that, “in general, the move to more encompassing places is also a move to greater abstractness. The same goes for the move downwards, to ever smaller ‘places’. There is a sense in which the move both upwards and downwards is a move that takes us away from *place* and towards an increasingly abstracted sense of *space*” (1999: 171).

6. Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging, the Afrikaans acronym for the Afrikaner Christian Women’s Association.

relate to it as an *Umgebung*, is to engage it circumspectively; by contrast, to “look at” it is to remain shut off from it and, similarly, to sever the object from its context and to resituate it in abstract space. This is the very procedure of Enlightenment science and, in terms of the play, the way in which the camera operates. It is also, we may note, the way the ACVV viewed the “problem” of white children in “coloured” homes, a view which resulted in the removal of children from a context into which they are integrated to the more abstract set of relations accommodated within the institution.

On both occasions when he is filmed Sas refers to the camera (or its operator) as “[my soul’s murderer]” (1.23; 2.13). This accusation would seem to proceed from the recognition that the camera fixes his identity by eliding time and space (there is a nice multivalency to the verb “fix,” which also accommodates notions of “correcting”, “arranging”, “punishing” and “improperly manipulating”). The camera removes the very ontological framework that place provides: Sas senses that the whole world is watching him (2.13). It is not only the more familiar issue of temporal fixity that is at stake here, but that of the dissolution of spatial difference, of boundaries (of acts and events tied to a place), which entails a loss of ground, the very field of lived experience. Not surprisingly, Sas’s last words ascribe this “soul murder” by photography to those “[who cut up the world and sell it to each other]” (2.13). Ultimately, it is the topological abstraction associated with private property – its disregard for traditional usage as well as the unity of place, its progressive eradication of “the commons” – that for Sas defines his killers. Malpas stresses “the close connection of subjectivity, and so of narrativity and memory, with embodied, *spatialised* activity” (1999: 180), and the system that defeats Sas impinges upon all of these. Hence the pathos of the moment when Sas is subjected to the camera for the first time: he is, in his own words, “[forever captured]”, and specifically expresses the hope that Lenie will remember him, i.e., will be the custodian of an alternative version of his identity and his story (although, of course, her very mortality implies that this version will not prevail).

This question of representation is already raised by the opening words of the play: “[They say]” (1.1). The formula itself is recurrent and, together with the overt problematisation of “naming”, suggests the play’s thematic preoccupation with the stories we tell of ourselves and others, and the unequal ways in which these stories are preserved or disseminated. It is even registered in the narrative mode of the script itself, in the tendency of characters to address the audience directly in order to relate events in addition to, or even instead of, enacting them.

Kramer’s own representation of the Koos Sas story, then, does not pretend in any straightforward sense to retrieve a suppressed truth. What it retrieves instead is the problem of history, by highlighting its implication in the interests of power (by means of characters like Steenkamp and Lennox). But

Kramer took a still bolder step – one that received some criticism in the Afrikaans press – in rewriting received history by having Hendrik Skilpad rather than Sas murder Botha. To render Sas innocent of the crime was a decisive and bold move, but it is noteworthy that this amendment is not evident in the original ballad. Kramer, then, revises his own former account, not on the basis of decisive new evidence, but rather, in acknowledgement of the fact that Sas was never formally charged with murder, and that his assimilation into official history occurred in terms of a limited range of discursive markers, among which one should include the photograph of the captured fugitive proudly displayed by representatives of “the law”. Kramer is drawing into question the official history more than he is claiming the objective legitimacy of his latest version. It is the very idea of “objectivity” that is subjected to critique in this play. In keeping with the eclipsed San cosmology that persists spectrally in the play’s diegesis, Kramer invokes a world in which meanings may shift, in which stability is itself fragile and fleeting. In such a world the artist, as a kind of trickster and purveyor of possibilities, has a role to play.

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