

# Review

Zimitri Erasmus (2017) *Race Otherwise: forging a new humanism for South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

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*Race Otherwise* is a contemporary exploration of race and identity in South Africa that attempts to provide us with a new form of humanism that may help us overcome or at least challenge and disrupt racialisation. This book is located in a local non-racialist tradition in which race is to be overcome or transcended through creative ways of reimagining ourselves and how we relate to one another. It locates the problem of race in the way we think about each other and ourselves. Given this attitudinal focus, the ultimate proposal of the book of how South Africa is to move forward is by engaging in what Erasmus views as a radical form of love.

## **Love thy Other**

What is this radical form of love Erasmus implores us to have? Erasmus says it is the love of ‘eros’ which she at one point says is a love that ‘valorises the Other for its Otherness and so reinforces, protects and nourishes its Otherness’ (137). It is a love realised through ‘*aimance*’, what she says is ‘a composite of friendship, imaginative co-creativity, care for the Other and transformative politics ushered in as a consequence of lived experiences of domination’ (141). This love is about coming to know each other in different ways, for us to come to ‘know otherwise’ (145). This locates the problem of the racialised world in our heads – or in our hearts.

At this point we may want to ask: what are some of the ways racialised groups in South Africa have been made into ‘the Other’? A core of the racist colonialist and apartheid white supremacist projects that have unfolded in South Africa are dispossession, subjugation, and the creation of economic, psychological, and intellectual dependency on and subordination to white

people. These are definitely not aspects of otherness which those who suffer being 'the Other' would want to reinforce, protect, or nourish. These aspects of being other are to be challenged and dismantled. How can this form of love do that for us? It does not seem like Erasmus took this into account.

The kind of love she implores us to have in the face of such dire racial inequality could be seen to be pacifying rather than emancipatory or radical. To focus on love as an attitude we should have towards one another whilst these conditions persist may be to resign ourselves to the unjust state of affairs in which we exist if this love does not lead us to act against injustice and inequality. As Manzini notes, 'Erasmus offers us a romantic notion of love as a way forward, one that does not consider the everyday realities of race in South Africa' (2019:219). The question we must ask is what good is this love 'if it will merely make people feel good about themselves yet it will not force the much needed change in our society?' (Manzini 2019:219). Love may be an important feature of the world we would like to have but it is not sufficient for racial justice.

### **Mystifying race**

*Race Otherwise* stimulates many questions about personal identity, race, and politics. In reading the sometimes auto-ethnographic and autobiographical narrative Erasmus gives, one cannot help but think about the ways in which history and politics shape the way we identify ourselves, including how and why we classify others the way we do. Erasmus challenges us to resist racial classificatory practices including racial identification as she herself has done as a practice of knowing ourselves and others 'otherwise'. She justifies her refusal to be identified as Coloured institutionally as such a resistance, arguing for 'cultivating indicators for historical exclusion that are premised on a way of coming to know that recognises *and* disrupts these effects without resorting to racial classification' (21).

Methodologically, there is more narrative than theory or argument in this work. It is not clear how the illustrative stories of people's lived experiences, even Erasmus's own lived experience, helps us make sense of what race is or the ways in which race functions. Instead of explaining what race is, Erasmus uses lived experience to complicate our common understandings of race. As important as such complications are for our understanding, their employment here serves only to obfuscate and mystify rather than explain the phenomena of race and racialisation. What lesson, for instance, are we supposed to draw about racialisation from Erasmus refusing to tick the racial category

‘Coloured’ on the HR form when she was being hired by Wits University in 2011? Her stance of resistance against racial classification is clear, but it is not clear what work this resistance is meant to do – what is the disruption it causes to white supremacy, for instance?

These questions haunt the entirety of the book with the reader left to figure out what the significance of the stories told are for the case Erasmus is building for her humanism. Take other stories Erasmus tells us about herself and Debra Meyer in respect to the relationship between Afrikaans, Afrikaner identity, race, and personal identity. Her stories show us that assumptions about a person’s language, their surname, and their personal identities may not always match up well with racial stereotypes about those things. Meyer’s well-spoken Afrikaans, for example, creates a disruption of these stereotypes for that reason (108–9). We are told of how the surname Erasmus is one with a complex history that is held by people of many different genetic and social heritages transgressing many stereotypes about surnames and population belonging (115–8). These features people may have that are associated with particular race groups are not accurate classifiers for racial belonging and can cast doubt on the legitimacy of racial classification itself.

The reader can surmise that these and other stories in the book tell of the arbitrariness of racial classification and the ambiguities in classificatory schemes. Autobiographical content about Erasmus’s encounters with people trying to classify her, often in contradicting ways, also serves this function. These histories give us a glimpse into the contradictions and inconsistencies of racial classifications and practices as they were and are experienced by ordinary people. Notably, the examples in the book are of persons who do not fit certain stereotypes of racial classifications. What you find in the book is extensive discussions of ‘individuals at the border’ of classification, ‘boundary cases’, and unusual situations which challenge the intuitions people have about racial classification.

But the fixation of this book on ‘boundary cases’ – and there sure are many boundary cases! – makes it seem mysterious how legislation such as the Population Registration Act of 1950 was implemented or how segregationist policies are effected if racial belonging is as ambiguous and arbitrary as described. How is it possible to subjugate generations of peoples through the systematic use of racial classifications if racial classification is so untenable? How did apartheid work if racial ambiguity is so pervasive and the undermining of racial classification is as common as the discussions of boundary cases in this book makes it seem? It is either that these stories show

us that our confusion about race is far deeper and more serious than many can admit or that the way in which the question of race is being approached here is itself confused. More questions about race and racialisation are raised than are answered by Erasmus.

Perhaps taking a different approach for social scientists may be more productive in answering questions about race and explaining the phenomena of our concern. We could say that race is a social construct which has often used the way in which people look to determine their racial belonging. The features that count about a way a person looks and what categories there are to sort these 'looks' into races depends on the social history in which those racial categorisations are created and employed. Classifications differ in number, in the features considered to be definitive or stereotypical, and on numerous other vectors dependent on the society one is being racialised in.

A common feature of racial classificatory practice is to associate particular physical traits with a particular racial label, and this racial label is usually culturally and geographically specific. This may be able to explain why Erasmus has been racialised in different ways in different parts of the world. Ambiguities and cross-classification become less mysterious under this kind of view independent of what one thinks race really is. In differently racialised societies, what race a person is said to belong to is determined by what people there generally label people with particular collections of features. Such classifiers can be at times confused or not comprehensive and may classify people in ways that differ from people from other places.

For instance, features in South Africa that would be read as stereotypically Coloured in the United States would be seen as Black, and even the connotations of the use of the terms Coloured and Black carry different meanings in those two countries. The reason for these differences, of course, emerge out of the specificity of the social, political, and historical roots of their use of those terms. The arbitrary boundaries of racial classification and the contingent choice of features that racial stereotypes are built around mean that there will be individuals who do not 'fit the look' or other criteria. There will be individuals who do not fit neatly in any category. This is what allows for passing and racial ambiguity in the first place. But for those who stereotypically fit 'the look' or match the socially determined criteria well enough, they are easily read as one race or another. This is what affords systematic racial discrimination against entire demographics of people without any direct knowledge of who they are, where they come from, or what their actual genealogy is. Making it seem as if race is always uncertain,

ambiguous, and amorphous – even if race is something completely made up – is misleading and unhelpful to social scientific efforts at explaining or intervening in the problem of race.

Stories of racial ambiguity and the experiences of those who are racially ambiguous in various ways are important in helping us build a comprehensive picture of racial practices and their effects. Nevertheless, the presentation of these stories about race in ways that mystify an evident past and the actual operation of classificatory practices in the present do not help us understand race. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to believe that taking on such views will make us less well-equipped to intervene in problems that pertain to race and racism or processes of racialisation because of this mystification of what races are and the mystification of what mechanisms racialisation may operate on.

### **No scientific authority**

A centrally contentious issue today as it has been historically is the relationship between race and biology especially in how inquiries and answers to questions about the nature of that relationship are leveraged for political ends. In recent times, biological heritage has been drawn upon to help draw the boundaries of racial groups, determine indigeneity, and motivate for the right to land through the use of racial and/or indigenous status which biology is purportedly meant to support. These debates often confound questions of biology, history, politics, and ethics by failing to make distinctions between the kinds of questions being asked and what the appropriate kinds of answers to such questions from each domain would be. Erasmus's chapter 5, 'The gene', is illustrative of this defect. Looking at one of the questions she deals with in the chapter may illustrate the point.

Erasmus finds issue with claims made by scientists about the authority of biology in confirming the aboriginal status of peoples in South Africa (see Erasmus 2019:496–7). This is a question intimately related to that of if we could ever confer 'First Nation' status to any indigenous group(s) in the country. She finds contention in the claim by two geneticists that 'biology when ... combined with oral histories, language, anthropological and other data, genetic studies [can] "confirm that the group of people often referred to collectively as the Khoi-San constitute the aboriginal inhabitants of southern Africa" (Soodyall and Jenkins 2007:89)' (141). By her account, Erasmus believes that this reinscribes 'colonial ideas of aboriginality and indigeneity and purport to provide biological evidence for Khoi-San people's belonging

to the land and their claims to live on it', pointing to the fact that it 'is partly on the basis of such findings that the Khoi-San can and have claimed First Nation status, and are fighting for admission to the House of Traditional Leaders' (141).

There are two senses in which this contention can be understood. The first is to say that biology can adjudicate on a person's social status as an aboriginal person. The second is that biology can determine whether one's ancestors originated from a particular place during a particular time. The first question is political, the second biological. The discussion by Erasmus slips between these two senses of indigeneity in her criticism and discusses the question of settlers, natives, and aboriginals in a way that confounds the political and the biological questions at hand. This is not a problem unique to her discussion but is also reflected in the public discourse about Khoisan identity and African identity more generally.

In the first sense, biology cannot adjudicate on this matter – it cannot determine social identities. Biology cannot decide what counts for us as aboriginal, who is native, who the settlers are, etc, as these are political and normative questions rather than biological ones. The very history of the terms 'settler', 'native', and 'aboriginal' in the South African political domain are indicative of the politically expedient understandings of who was to count as what when. It is correct that there isn't a clear and direct line for inferring 'First Nation' status from biology. What biology (or bioanthropology to be more specific) can show us is who the oldest population groups in an area are. Accounts of the region put the Khoisan groups in Southern Africa first, reaching the West Coast and the Cape a few thousand years ago. They were followed by the Bantu who had crossed the Limpopo River about 2 kya [thousand years ago] (Byrnes 1997:7–8, see Soodyall 2003:206). By 1600 (0.4 kya), the whole of South Africa was already settled by African groups (Byrnes 1997: 10). By the time Europeans arrived and settled in South Africa, the country was already settled contrary to the once popular and politically motivated 'empty land myth' (SAHO 2019).

To say that there is a First Nation, we must ask a First Nation of where? That is no longer a biological question but a political one. Are we claiming that there is a first Nation of the Cape or of the Limpopo? Is it even coherent to talk about a First Nation, especially of the whole of what is currently called South Africa? If we are talking about the whole of South Africa, when in the history of the region do we carve out a time in which to identify which populations are 'first' in the relevant sense? Do we choose the point in history

when the whole the country was settled by various interacting African groups (say, 1600 CE), before then when groups were more dispersed (say 400 CE), or after European colonial settlement (say, from somewhere after the mid-seventeenth century or with the coming of the 1820 settlers)? It is not that this is such a confusing question that there is no answer; it is that questions such as these are political and not biological in nature. When the notion of a 'First Nation' is spoken of, or when we speak of the indigenous peoples of South Africa, these are political questions decided by the discourses of history and politics. The story that natural scientists can tell us in this regard is a different kind of story even if it is informative in some ways to these discourses. Biology gives us a story about evolutionary history, not a story about socio-political history.

Erasmus's story of the Karretjiemense of the Great Karoo (112–4) may inadvertently demonstrate this point I am criticising her on: what genetics reveals is descriptive of the underlying biological relationships between groups (not necessarily telling of social relations). How we choose to interpret these biological relationships, and how we let these biological relationships influence our social conceptions and relationships, is up to us. Biology is not deterministic. There is no necessary connection between social identity and genetics so biology cannot be the final authority on questions of identity. Nevertheless, contra to Erasmus's allusions, biology is an authority in respect to our genetic ancestry. There is a direct causal connection between our genetic heritage and the place of origin of our ancestors. This means that biology is an authority about where and who we come from in the one sense but is not an authority in telling us who we are in respect to the identities and heritage we take on in the other sense.

Erasmus confounds these two issues, creating confusion about what the work of geneticists mean in either sense (even if geneticists can also be confused about these issues). Her failure to separate descriptive questions about human origins from normative questions about social history and what we want origins to mean (if they are to be relevant at all) misleads us about the relationship between race, genetics, and politics. The story told by genetics is a different kind of story to the narratives we create about ourselves, where we come from, and who or what we identify as. Genetic history tells us of our ancestral and evolutionary past whereas social history tells us about how we have constructed our relations and how we see our place in the world. Of course, these two stories about ourselves can inform one another although they are questions of different domains.

## **Race otherwise?**

*Race Otherwise* is an interesting book, rich in anecdote and the discussion of the complexities of navigating a racialised world. It challenges us to reimagine ourselves in an attempt to escape ‘race thinking’ and the evils it has brought. To this end it offers us a humanism based on love to transcend or to at least disrupt the racialised conceptions we have of ourselves and each other. But the challenge is not met by the book and the humanism it offers us lacks its promised emancipatory and radical potential. Through the book the challenge of imaging ourselves outside of race remains, as does what we could plausibly do about racial inequality.

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