

# Not a race to humanism

## [BOOK REVIEW]

Erasmus, Zimitri (2017) **Race otherwise: Forging a new Humanism for South Africa.** Johannesburg: Wits University Press. ISBN 978-1-77614-058-9 pbk. Pages ix + 171

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In 2017, Zimitri Erasmus and Wits University Press quietly published **Race otherwise: Forging a new humanism for South Africa**. This book follows her 2001 edited book titled **Coloured by history, shaped by place: New perspectives on Coloured identities in Cape Town**. In the 16 years in between the two books, Erasmus has spent a considerable amount of time and thought developing her ideas and convictions on the fallibility of race. In today's talk, she has been a #racemustfall activist. She joins scholars such as Gerhard Maré (2014) who has pointed out that race thinking has become more entrenched in the post-apartheid political order and in everyday life. These scholars argue that the anti-apartheid impetus towards non-racialism has been sacrificed at the altar of redress legislation such as the Employment Equity Act No.55 of 1998 and its implications for re-inscribing race talk and race identification. In some ways then, race has crystalised and become a steady material reality in post-apartheid South Africa. In her latest publication, Erasmus expands on these arguments but presents readers with arguments and tools for thinking outside of race. In the tradition of Sylvia Wynter, her alternative and way out of the race conundrum is a new humanism.

The work is a testimony to committed scholarship. Readers may disagree with Zimitri Erasmus' arguments, but they cannot question the rigor of her work. In

fact, like her earlier book became a cornerstone of thinking about “coloured” subjectivities, this book will be a key reference for anyone writing and thinking about race in South Africa. It would be an error to conceive of Erasmus’ work as only concerned with marginal/mixed identities. She is concerned with how we become within Ingold’s concept of meshwork. In this regard, Ingold (1997) contends that we are enmeshed in webs of significance that comprise our lives. Personhood is social and political. She argues in forceful prose that none of our identities are straight lines. Her problematisation of race is not popular because it unsettles the well carved spaces that we have been forced into and that we now inhabit as places of our own. Of course the consequences of uncritically accepting these locations is that they create firm and impermeable boundaries that retain old hierarchies, hurts, and ways of being. Many of us who study race, work with the reality, affective and material effects of the concept in the past and the ongoing present. Erasmus asks us to continue this work but also to think differently. To think “otherwise”. She contends that our task is to think the future into being. Her subtle critique of race scholarship is that our engagement with the past and present is a mark of laziness if we do not attempt to engage with a different kind of future. This book is her thesis or roadmap for this kind of thinking. It is a product of many years of deep thought and a deep commitment for undoing the taken for granted.

Erasmus offers that “Race is neither *on* nor *in* the body, but lives in the words and meanings that surround it” (p xxiv). This eschews essentialist modes of thinking that codify race in the blood. Erasmus’ disappointment with post-apartheid lack of creativity and courage is palpable in this text. With cleverly constructed arguments, she demonstrates how “the look”, “the category”, and “the gene” have come to stand in for and affirm race thinking. But she does not just show us how things are. With an astounding amount of commitment, she painstakingly demolishes these taken for granted ways of thinking and being. Through her own family history, she illustrates the historically and geographically contingent nature of race. The examples provided in the text make the subject real and highlight the fact that it is human life and not dry categories that are the subject of examination.

Erasmus does not shy away from the thorny issues and minefields of race. She questions Xolela Mangcu by reviving I B Tabata’s central thesis of unity. She engages with what she suggests is Mangcu’s misreading of Tabata who wrote in a very specific context. In calling for humanism, she does not shy away from race and engages head on with the sociological scholarship on race. To human, she says, “is a lifelong process of life-in-the-making with others” (p xxii). For her, humanism is an active process and she uses verbs such as “to human” and “humaning” to illustrate this task. She argues that there is no one way for humaning and that this process is an ongoing cultural

practice that is historically and contextually specific. Erasmus is aware of the complex and controversial history of humanism and navigates this minefield with scholarly dexterity and finesse. Her message to the current student movement is that Black Consciousness and non-racialism are not direct inheritances from the past. They have to be fashioned for the present. She argues that race as it worked in the anti-colonial era does not have to be race now. She warns that race can too easily become a fetish. Or we can allow the past to cast a spell on us. In asking us to think otherwise, she cautions against an affective attachment to the past.

Her counter to the status quo is intellectual bravery and good old fashioned hope. This hope is borne on a commitment to the future and the problematisation of normative commitments to seeing and knowing race. She offers that to dissociate subjectivity from race requires economic and political justice. No shortcuts. As a scholar of race with a deep commitment to surfacing the injustices of racialisation, I am relieved that Erasmus' humanism is not a politics of forgiveness and happiness. It is only with economic and political justice that humanism can be a way out of the conundrum of race. Her thesis is not a race to humanism. Her humanism is informed by Sylvia Wynters' carefully crafted argumentation on the necessity of justice as a precursor for being human. With Toni Morrison and others, Erasmus posits that we should empty the racial signifier of its connotations and replace it with love. She offers us a vocabulary for and out of race thinking.

Forging a new humanism is not Zimitri going crazy. She is not succumbing to the caravan of love. She grounds her call to love in the work of Fanon and Audre Lorde among others. In South Africa, scholars have begun to look to the possibilities offered by positive affect such as love. For instance, in his review of Srečko Horvat's (2016), **The radicality of love**, Grahame Hayes (2017) makes a compelling argument for how love, hope and compassion can open generative paths to prefiguring a more just, fair and equal society. Following Chela Sandoval, Erasmus argues that "Love becomes a political apparatus, a set of practices and procedures for recuperating one's interior world from occupation ..." (p 139). For her, love breaks us open to community for loving the self and the other. It requires imagination and refuses to be trapped in history or the present. At a time in which many are frustrated with the pervasiveness of race discourses in South Africa, Erasmus does not end at the level of critique. She provides the genesis of a solution. At the best of times, hope can be an empty signifier for the oppressed. But courage is for the brave. And bravery is not in short supply among the working class and poor. If we accept that we require justice and courage, the book is timely for offering those of us who dare to hope a roadmap out of the conundrum of race.

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