TROUBLING CONSTRUCTS

Durrheim, Kevin, Mtose, Xoliswa and Brown, Lyndsay (2011) **Race trouble: Race, identity and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa.** Pitermaritzburg: UKZN Press. ISBN 978-1-86914-199-8. Pages ix + 234.

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When I first started reading this book by Durrheim, Mtose and Brown the media was replete with reports on the manifestly racist utterances of the South African author Annelie Botes, and the columnist Kuli Roberts. More recently, an altercation between a white man and a black woman at a gym in Johannesburg reportedly resulted in a barrage of the vilest racist invective directed at the woman (Makhanya, 2012). This incident was also widely covered in the media.

Botes was reported to have argued that "the violence [experienced in South Africa] demonstrated blacks' anger because of their own incompetence" (Staff Reporter, 2010); while a complaint was lodged against Roberts with the South African Human Rights Commission for a **Sunday World** column in which she wrote that "[coloured] girls breed as if Allan Boesak sent them on a mission to increase the coloured race" (SAPA, 2011). The white gym member allegedly called another (black) member "a bloody kaffir [and] cockroach" (Makhanya, 2012: 4). The sheer meanness and brutality of all these utterances and the crude racism they embodied and appealed to did not fail to shock, coming as they did several years after the formal dismantlement of apartheid in South Africa.

On reflecting on these incidents I was reminded of a phrase employed by Alfred Lopez (2005: 2) in his **Postcolonial whiteness: A critical reader on race and empire***,* namely that "rumours" of the increasing sophistication of racism and whiteness and racism's imminent "demise have been greatly exaggerated". Racism appears to remain intractable and ostensibly quite resistant to the measures routinely developed and implemented to deal with it.

Given the apparent persistence of racism, from its crudest and most backward manifestations to its more obfuscated articulations as well as our apparent inability to understand and decisively deal with it in the South Africa context, the publication of Durrheim et al's **Race trouble: Race, identity and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa** was timely, particularly in view of the expressed objectives of the book, namely, "to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the persistence of race

trouble" (p. 57), and to "understand how race and racism are reproduced in the post-apartheid context" (p. 23).

Before I engage in any substantive manner with an evaluation of the book, it might be useful to provide a brief summary of the book for those who have not yet had the opportunity to read it.

Written in a relatively accessible register, **Race trouble: Race, identity and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa** consists of eight chapters. While the book coheres well and its constituent chapters fit together in a logical and fairly seamless manner, each of these chapters individually are sufficiently coherent, rich in content and "self-contained" to be read and studied as independent pieces in their own right.

After providing a cursory history of racism and opposition to the problem in South Africa from the 1930s to the present (largely introducing and contextualising the theoretical explorations that will ensue), the first chapter, *Apartheid, racism and change in South Africa,* introduces one of the central arguments and the gist of the book. In summary (and perhaps at the risk of over-simplification), this argument essentially holds that because racism, as a theoretical construct, "is no longer monolithic" (p. 23), and because the construct "today conceals as much as it reveals", it is "no longer useful in dealing with South Africa's legacy of [racial domination]" (p. 23). Consequently, a new concept to replace the now-less-than-useful (according to the authors) concept of racism is required. The authors therefore introduce the concept of *race trouble*, which they argue is much more appropriate for analysing and making sense of the social difficulties generated by processes of racialisation in contemporary South Africa.

The second chapter, *Experiences of race trouble,* according to the authors, aims to "convey a sense of the meaning, patterning and the breadth of experiences of race trouble" (p. 31). Much of the content of this chapter, and specifically the sections, *Troubling blackness* and *Troubling whiteness* appear to be based on aspects of the (evidently informative) doctoral research of Xoliswa Mtose, and Lyndsay Brown, respectively. One of the key arguments made in this chapter (and sustained throughout the book) is that in order to begin to understand racism, it is important to understand how the phenomenon (or *race trouble*, in the words of the authors) manifests in practice between racialised groups and the points of contact between individuals. A particularly valuable element of this chapter is the section on dilemmas of interpreting instances of racism, which results largely from the changing manifestations of racism, as well as the inevitable denial of racism when it does occur.

The third chapter in the book, namely, *Theories of racism won't do*, commences with an examination of a series of recent events (including a spate of complaints by white South Africans in 2007 about the ostensible increase in crime in South Africa and the Zapiro cartoon portraying President Jacob Zuma about to rape Lady Justice), which evoked ongoing debates about whether these events were racist or not. A cursory exploration of these debates serves as the backdrop for the focus of the chapter, namely an examination of the adequacy of various extant theories of racism. Unsurprisingly (given the arguments proffered earlier in the book), the authors conclude that these theories are simply not adequate in making sense of contemporary manifestations of racism.

Chapter 4, titled *Discourse*, provides a broad examination of some of the qualities of language and discourse and how these are deployed in the service of racism or *race trouble* to understand and deal with racism or *race trouble*. Appropriately re-emphasising a notion that was firmly established in the social sciences during the 1980s, Durrheim et al correctly argue that "the history and the use of the discourse are essential additional factors that must be taken into consideration in analysing race trouble" (p. 108). Two features of discourse that feature prominently in the chapter are *recitation* and *accountability*. Using a range of pertinent examples to which most readers will be able to relate, the authors employ these concepts to illustrate how in contemporary society racist discourses frequently adopt and build on articulations that had previously been formulated (*recitation* / re-citation); but also how the authors of these discourses are inevitably held accountable for their utterances (*accountability*).

The fifth chapter, *Practices,* sets out to examine the nexus between discourse, place and practices. Additionally, it examines two articulations of practice, namely talk and embodied routines and how they contribute to the instantiation of racist stereotypes. According to the authors, this chapter attempts to develop an understanding of "the conflicted contexts of race trouble as located and embodied contexts of discursive practices" (p. 116).

The sixth chapter, *Subjects,* endeavours to answer the question posed by Chabani Manganyi in his seminal 1973 text, *Being-black-in-the-world,* namely, "Is being-black-in-the-world different in fundamental respects to being-white-in-the-world"? (p. 138). In pursuit of an answer to the question, the authors undertake an illuminating examination of aspects of the work of Louis Althusser, Erving Goffman, Judith Butler and Michael Omi and Howard Winant. At the end of the chapter Durrheim et al conclude that owing to history, lived practices, the use of space and spatial arrangements, inter alia, being-black-in-the-world and being-white-in-the-world do differ in important ways. It is in Chapter 6 too that Durrheim et al. start engaging in a substantive manner with what they mean by the notion of *race trouble.* Here they inform us that while they use Omi and Winant's notion of racial formation as a point of departure, their notion of *race trouble* differs in at least two significant ways from the former. Firstly, according to them, the notion of *race trouble* allows for an analysis of social interactions that extend beyond racism, the purported focus of Omi and Winant's notion of racial formation. Secondly, while the concept of *race trouble* is concerned with racialised practices, racial formation is concerned first and foremost with representations. Despite these substantial differences, however, Durrheim et al. argue that the two concepts are similar in the sense that they both acknowledge the importance of racialised asymmetrical relations of power in analysing race related phenomena.

In the seventh chapter, *Repression,* Durrheim et al explore various theories of repression and apply the insights emanating from these theories in an effort to understand some of the features of contemporary expressions of racism. One of the interesting elements of this chapter is its examination of the embodied nature of racism-related repression, using domestic work as an exemplar of racism-related repression.

Chapter 8, *Race trouble versus racism*, reprises and consolidates the argument developed throughout the book for why the notion of *race trouble* is preferable to the concept of racism. Among several arguments proffered in support of the use of the notion of *race trouble* to study racialised patterns of interaction, Durrheim et al contend

that while the "language of racism misses all the complexity, contradiction and nuance" (p. 201) characterising complex or fraught race or racialised interaction patterns, the concept of *race trouble* does not. Instead, it provides opportunities for the study of "the forms of subjectivity that support racial privilege" (p. 201) in ways that racism cannot.

This brings me to my overall impressions of the book. In general, there are many aspects of the book that I find tremendously useful, some of which are listed below.

In the first instance, given the persistence and indeed apparent recalcitrance of racism, this book is a welcome addition to the extant repertoire of resources available to assist us in making sense of and dealing with issues of racism. The fact that the book endeavours to extend our thinking beyond the theories and explanations that are routinely trotted out to account for issues related to racism makes it a particularly welcome addition to the available literature. Secondly, I find the book useful because of its manifest commitment to burrowing below the surface of that which is frequently described in an overly simplistic and shorthand manner as racism. Thirdly, through their analyses of the increasingly nuanced and complex manifestations of racism, the authors provide us with several invaluable insights into the evolution and functioning of the phenomenon. Lastly, the analyses and insights offered by the book in relation to the micro-ecologies of race-related social interaction and the importance of examining the points of interpersonal and intergroup contact more closely certainly add depth to the way racism-related issues are often viewed and understood.

Despite the generally favourable impression that **Race trouble: Race, identity and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa** makes, the book does (as most books do) reflect a few lacunae, three of which I discuss briefly below.

Firstly, I am not convinced that all the readers of the book will find the argument proffered by the authors for the replacement of the concept of racism with the notion of *race trouble* particularly persuasive. In effect, the authors argue that because we now "live in a democracy with majority rule […] because it is unclear who is responsible for the persistence of racial segregation and inequality […] because the object of critique [racism] is no longer monolithic […] [because the] boundaries delineating us from them have become blurred" (p. 23), the theoretical concept of racism is no longer useful. Obviously, there is sufficient evidence to contradict this characterisation of contemporary South African society, including extensive evidence provided throughout the book itself. As this book amply illustrates, sharp social divisions based on race still prevail in South Africa (see also the unexceptional incidents described in the introduction of this review). Admittedly, the lines may be blurred within a small sector of South African society, but for the majority, the lines are as strong today as they were in the past. Then too, the idea that the notion of racism does not accommodate for the constantly shifting form of racial oppression does not quite hold. Certainly most of the extant theories of racism as an ideology to varying degrees account for the changes the phenomenon is forced to undergo. I am reminded here for example of the work of Essed (1991), Hall (1992, 1995) and Rattansi (1992), amongst many others.

Then too it is implied in the book that because it is always very difficult to accurately judge intentions in cases of purported racism, the notion of racism has become less than useful. It is certainly true that it is becoming increasingly difficult to judge intention in cases of racism. However, when we analyse racism is it not best to look at the

consequences of people and institutions' actions? As Essed (1991) argues, when attempting to understand and deal with instances of racism, it is perhaps most constructive to deal with these instances in terms of their consequences rather than intentions, simply because while it is generally difficult to accurately gauge people's intentions, the consequences of their actions are relatively easy to discern.

Furthermore, Durrheim et al argue that "the language of racism … wants to identify racists to judge them" (p. 201), whereas the language of *race trouble* does not. I am not sure that the intention of those scholars employing racism as a theoretical construct essentially is to judge rather than also to understand the phenomenon so as to change it. Nonetheless, if one assumes a critical stance then certainly racism in all its manifestations is to be judged, condemned and countered.

In this regard, I wonder whether rather than holding the promise of a more progressive alternative to the notion of racism, the concept of *race trouble* will not be used (despite the manner in which the term is actually conceptualised by the authors; see, for example, p. 163) to evacuate power dynamics and asymmetries from the analysis of systematically asymmetrical racialised relations, that is, racism.

Secondly, to my mind the book pays insufficient attention to how one is to deal with *race trouble* or, practically, what the antidote for *race trouble* is. Given the socially disruptive nature of what is constructed here as *race trouble*, one would have hoped for a more concerted engagement with this issue. To acquire new insights and knowledge, Martín-Baró (1994) argues, it is not enough to simply prioritise new perspectives, but it is also necessary to involve ourselves in a new praxis, an activity of transforming reality that will let us know not only about what it is but also about what it is not, and by which we may try to orient ourselves to what ought to be" (pp. 28-29). I am not convinced that the book pays enough attention to what needs to be done to go beyond the "what is" of *race trouble*.

Thirdly, as indicated earlier, in the main, I find the register in which the book is written accessible. Furthermore, most issues dealt with in the book are explained in a language suited to their complexity. Nonetheless, at certain points one cannot quite decide whether the book is written for the general public or for the academic community. For example, I find the explanation of what the Gini index is overly simplified. Sections of the book (for example, the beginning of Chapter 3) are also distractingly "chatty". While one would obviously not want to criticise any authors for writing in a register that is accessible to as wide an audience as possible, what I did experience as somewhat distracting as I read this book is the lack of consistency in the register employed.

Despite the last three points raised above, I find the book both interesting and useful and I have no doubt that it will prove to be an important resource for scholars in the field of racism, particularly in South Africa. Indeed, the book presents the reader with a rich array of insights into current research on, and constructions and manifestations of racism. Importantly, the book embodies and thereby encourages scholarship that endeavours to go beyond the tried, tested and obvious. Undoubtedly, the book will also evoke much debate, but that is why we write and that is what academia is about, is it not?

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