South Africa, as many close observers of its inner workings know, is a place of contradiction. It has long been so. Given the country’s obvious racial history, the contradiction is at some levels perfectly comprehensible. But it is not without its puzzles. While the chasm between those with privilege and those without it has a racial character, belying this situation and giving it its less than legible obviousness are the continually confounding ways in which a number of factors work prior to, behind, alongside of and after ‘race’. They have the effect of calling us to pause each time we explain what the problem of South Africa is all about. How one makes sense of race is what drives Zimitri Erasmus’s Race Otherwise: Forging a New Humanism for South Africa. She writes with a searing commitment to being human. It is a text which continues in that distinctive South African tradition of engaged non-racial and anti-racist scholarship. Critical about that tradition is its refusal to take anything for granted – to never, in the first instance, work with social experiences at their surface level, and, in the second, to never apologise for the desire to understand life more deeply. It is about understanding the contradictions which surround race, but also how to live in relation to it. This approach produces, and I shall return to this below, what Erasmus describes as a ‘double politics’, the challenge of how to begin to work with the realness and unrealness of race.

Race Otherwise arrives at a time when we, as South Africans, find ourselves in this global hotspot of contradiction, adrift in all kinds of
ways. Characterising this aimlessness, most troublingly, is the onset of a political and moral waywardness in our relationships with one another. These relationships are, paradoxically, the very areas of sociality around which we have begun to project for ourselves, in the community of the world’s people, a kind of legitimacy, a right to speak, on issues of social difference and equality. Legitimated by the figures of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, South Africa presents itself to the world as a model of how to deal with the ugly global legacies of racism. Tolerance and dialogue have hallmarked this model.

In the past few years conditions in the country, and particularly the persistence of poverty and inequality, have placed this legitimacy in question. While it is true to say, and this is reflected in recent elections and voting patterns, that sizeable proportions of South Africans have a desire to work together across their social, cultural, religious, racial, class and gender differences, there is a sufficiently large and significant proportion of the population that is no longer prepared to accept the explanations of politicians for the unsatisfactory conditions in which they find themselves. Their anger has largely, as might be expected, taken racial form. There have been groupings and movements which have sought to engage and work with this dissatisfaction in different ways. Interesting analyses, to make the point clear, are beginning to emerge about social class and how the nature of South African society has changed since 1994 with the rapid explosion of what has come to be called the black middle class. This development has produced an empirical reconfiguration of the social structure of South Africa. It has objectively changed the dynamics of power in the country. But it is the workings of race, including the ways in which class has impacted on race, that correctly need careful explanation. They need to be carefully worked with because there is no gainsaying that race, and the deeply embedded habits and beliefs which surround race – the hidden conceits, the over-determining aesthetics of attitudes such as whiteness and all the unarticulated ways in which notions of superiority and inferiority condition our lives – continue to inflect social experience in South Africa. In this, sophistication and care of analysis are a priority. They are a priority because every situation in which difference manifests itself in the country has to be carefully assessed and
worked with. If truth be told, what is happening will not always be self-evident. Race will regularly be an issue. But it also, in some instances, may not. Invoking it, consequently, as the default explanatory variable is not always helpful. The explosion of vituperative talk in South Africa from all sides of the so-called racial spectrum has to be a matter of concern. Instead of providing direction, it often ignites, as Frantz Fanon (1980: 8) presciently said, ‘fervour’. He went on to say, ‘I do not trust fervour … Every time it has burst out somewhere, it has brought fire, famine, misery and … contempt for man.’ In the unedifying heat of this fervour, the country has been witness to and participated in reckless and insensitive talk. Contempt by some for others is the order of the day. Contempt constitutes the substance of much argument. Simply going by what is in the media, South Africa has been thrust back into a fraught racial stand-off. Its credentials as a modern model of how to manage its historical racial differences are under direct challenge.

*Race Otherwise* is, against the vituperation, an attempt to get to the heart of the South African puzzle of race. It is an attempt to do racial analysis differently in South Africa. It follows in a small line of new texts, including Gerhard Maré’s (2014) *Declassified: Moving Beyond the Dead End of Race in South Africa*, to take the question of race as a question to be understood and explained rather than as a self-explanatory framework of analysis. Several years in the making, *Race Otherwise* brings together the full amplitude of Erasmus’s thinking about how race works. It operates at both the visceral and the cerebral levels and tunes into registers both personal and social. It draws on sociology, history, psychoanalysis and genetics. It is not without indignation, and not, thereby, insensitive to emotion and particularly to the anger inside South Africa, but it seeks to move beyond the vituperative to a level of argumentation which is profoundly intellectual. It is an intellectuality, however, that is not afraid of questions of affect. *Eros* and love, Erasmus urges, are not separable from the hard work of thinking.

*Race Otherwise* makes several contributions to our understanding of race. One of the most critical is Erasmus’s recovery of Sylvia Wynter’s explanation of the ideological process involved in defining what it means to be human. She shows how a sequestration of the idea takes place
through its exclusive location in a biological and supposedly scientised explanation that places human beings in a hierarchy of worth and value. European men at the top of the evolutionary tree and Africans at its base – culture and nature, as Wynter explains, fused in an irrefutable logic. Erasmus uses this explanation carefully to show how problematic ideas of whiteness are and, significantly, all their derivative invocations such as blackness which arise simply in direct response to the totalising conceits of whiteness. Building on this, the book also makes a distinct contribution to discussions of mixed-ness and hybridity and the ways they come to be constituted through the authority and durability of ideas of whiteness.

One of the most powerful contributions that this work makes is in its approach to thinking about the ‘factoid’ of race – its realness and unrealness. This approach comes together in what Erasmus describes as a double politics. The idea, introduced at the beginning of the book, deserves a great deal more attention. At its heart is the simple syllogism that race matters in our lives but that it has to be undone. Her double politics is woven into the making of the text. At every step of her engagement she acknowledges its presence and significance. This is the first order of its politics. This politics requires an understanding of how it is instantiated into and produces real effects, including effects of kinship and solidarity. She uses many deeply personal illustrations in the text to show how affinity and connectedness, including her own sense of blackness, are given material and psychological effect as a result of this. This produces the politics of emplacement with which she and all of us have to struggle, all the time. She is urging that we should never deny this. But she urges, in a second politics, that we should never allow ourselves, ultimately, to be determined by race. Her appeal is to the practical and actual experience of creolisation through which human beings explore new possibilities for being beyond the imposed inscriptions on their bodies.

In the climate in which South Africa finds itself, Race Otherwise is a powerful new resource. It can be read at many levels. It can be read for the simple appeal it makes to our common humanity. Erasmus provides countless illustrations of the irreducible logic of what we as human beings have in common. I want to suggest, however, that the work be read, deliberately, at the more challenging level of what we understand by race.
I ask that each of us begin the reading by acknowledging to ourselves what our understandings of race are. I ask that we, each of us, think clearly about what our starting propositions are, to acknowledge how we think about belonging, connectedness, and most significantly, ‘my people’. Who ‘my people’ are, to be helpful, could range from biological to cultural understandings of race. I am asking that we take these into an engagement with Erasmus and that we deliberately test our understandings of these most basic feelings in our lives. If we do this, we honour her appeal to what she calls ‘humaning’. This ‘humaning’ is the capacity to think. We must not be afraid to do this.

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_Cape Town_
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