

An extremely problematic account

Steve Farrah, *Not Black, Not White: The Politics of Apartheid in South Africa*

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The sub-title of this book is misleading in that it does not deal with the politics of apartheid in any systematic way but is rather a memoir recounting the experiences of the author, which are contextualised within a description of the apartheid system. His classification as coloured under the Population Registration Act explains the “Not Black, Not White” in the naming of the book. Farrah, who was born in the mid 1920s and lived in Johannesburg for most of his life, entered the teaching profession as a young man. He taught at Alexandra Primary School from 1946 to 1956 and upon gaining his masters degree was transferred to Coronationville High School, where he eventually became principal in 1968. He was extensively involved in coloured teacher organisations, serving for more than a decade as general secretary of the Transvaal Association of Teachers and became vice-president of the South African Federation of Teachers’ Associations in the early 1970s. Farrah emigrated to the United States in 1979 where he became an American citizen in 1986. He has been living in Phoenix, Arizona and taught English at secondary school level until his retirement in 1997.

The book begins inauspiciously with the first two of its eighteen chapters devoted to a self-serving justification for his decision to emigrate, venting anger at the apartheid system, and providing a fitful and rather dated review of three and a half centuries of South African history. The historical overview is shot through with all sorts of inaccuracies and repeats many of the shibboleths of white supremacist South Africa. Thus, for example, the San are described as “stone-age relics” (p 6) who “gorged themselves after a kill, storing food in their oversized rumps and traveled (sic) for days without eating” (p 10). Regarding the origins of the coloured identity he repeats the old racist slur often served up as a joke: “The first colored child was born nine months after the Dutch landed in 1652” (p 7).

Over the next ten chapters the book becomes a great deal more interesting and informative because Farrah writes about his own life and the communities in which he lived and worked, interspersed with asides about the iniquities of apartheid. He provides a spasmodic narrative of his personal, educational, intellectual and political development that is unfortunately marred by undue conceit regarding his achievements. Farrah is particularly proud of the masters degree in English which he obtained from the University of South Africa in 1956, and endlessly congratulates himself for this accomplishment, at one point likening himself to a “conquering hero” (p 67). The book is at his most interesting when describing coloured working class life in places such as Vrededorp, where the author lived until 1963 when his family was forcibly evicted under the Group Areas Act; the small coloured section of Alexandra township, where he taught between 1946 and 1956; and the more prestigious Coronationville, where he lived from the mid 1960s while teaching at the local secondary school. The volume offers a number of vignettes of the daily struggles of ordinary people – their hardships as well as their responses, resistance to, and small victories over, apartheid. These pages are populated by an array of colourful characters ranging from cut-throat gangsters and feisty, female shebeen owners to backyard body-builders and hard-drinking teachers. The book includes quite a bit of discussion on the author’s first-hand experience of violence and gang culture of Johannesburg’s coloured neighbourhoods. He expands at some length on liquor having been “the opiate of the coloured people” (p 100). Farrah is open about his own indulgences in this regard and is quite proud of his ability to down copious amounts of beer. Nor does he shy away from discussing coloured racism toward Africans and the servility of many towards whites. It is a pity though, that the anecdotes tend to be rather clipped, leaving the reader with many unanswered questions. The value of the book as a whole lies in this middle section that provides useful insight into coloured working class life in Johannesburg, a theme neglected in studies of coloured identity and society which tend to focus almost exclusively on Cape Town and the Western Cape.

The last six chapters of the volume are almost entirely devoted to a description of the apartheid system. There is a return to angry denunciation of white racism and the author’s justification for emigrating. The description of apartheid policies and their impact on victims make for tedious reading. It has little new to offer anyone who has basic knowledge of the subject and is, in addition, desultory, repetitious and prone to error. Lest I be misunderstood, let me say that I have no objection to angry denunciations of apartheid, but for it to be done in such an inane and self-serving way is self-defeating.

The overall tone of the book, especially when discussing the political context and the day-to-day hardships and humiliations stemming from apartheid, is one of deep anger at the racist system that blighted the greater part of his life and eventually caused him to leave his homeland. Farrah makes it clear in his foreword that giving vent to his anger was a major motive for writing this book: “What I have attempted to put in these pages are bottled-up feelings that have been simmering in me for so long now” (p vi). He pulls few punches in expressing his animus toward racist whites, especially Afrikaners, declaring at one point that it would be “an understatement to say that we hated the Afrikaners” (p 123). The intensity of the resentment he still feels towards bigoted whites comes through clearly when he refers to the Afrikaner, presumably racist, female attendant at the airport counter who insisted on charging

him for his overweight baggage as a “snotty bitch” (p 194). It seems that the writing of this book was in part a cathartic exercise, a conscious attempt at releasing pent-up anger.²

It would also appear that the book, perhaps less consciously in this case, provided a means for Farrah to work through feelings of guilt over having taken what he refers to as the “chicken run” (p 187). Oft repeated denials — on one occasion very clearly stated: “I have not been plagued by feelings of guilt or cowardice because I have paid my dues” (p 187) — ring hollow. Also, Farrah’s frequent assertions of having risked career, incarceration, and perhaps even his life in opposing apartheid, and of having suffered serious victimisation for this stance, need to be taken with more than a pinch of salt. He supported the collaborationist Labour Party (p 130) that was sanctioned by the South African government because it was prepared to work within apartheid structures. The party was thus denounced within liberatory circles for working with the machinery of its own oppression and can hardly be described as drawing its support from “the younger, progressive and educated sector of the community” (p 131). If anything, the Labour Party and its opportunistic leadership were vilified within this constituency. The Transvaal Association of Teachers, which he served as an executive member for many years, was allowed to operate precisely because of its tepid opposition to apartheid schooling, whereas organisations such as the Teachers’ League of South Africa, which were outspoken in their opposition to Christian National Education, were suppressed.

There are times when the book descends into the ludicrous. Farrah’s sycophantic observation toward the end: “Since living in the United States, I have come to realise that it is simply the inherent kindness of Americans to help those less fortunate” (p 189) betrays both poor judgement and a desire to milk the book for whatever advantage it might offer. No less absurd is the claim on the back cover that Farrah in this book “gives voice” to the coloured youth.

While I have raised a number of criticisms of this book, I want to stress that it is not without some merit. It is at its most interesting and edifying when Farrah desists from overt pursuit of the ideological, self-laudatory and vindictory agendas behind its publication and writes candidly about his experiences and the communities in which he lived.

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2. Readers interested in coloured middle class harangues against white racism are referred to Roy du Pre’s *Separate but Unequal: The Coloured People of South Africa – A Political History* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1994) which is one long, even more fatuous, rant against apartheid. For an example of coloured working class denunciation of apartheid, at the height of the apartheid period and for which the main author, James Matthews, paid a heavy price, see J. Matthews and G. Thomas, *Cry Rage* (Spro-cas Publications, Johannesburg, 1972).