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*Xamissa* by Henk Rossouw (review)

Christian Bancroft

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# Review

**Henk Rossouw.** *Xamissa*. Fordham University Press.


REVIEWED BY CHRISTIAN BANCROFT

Henk Rossouw's debut poetry collection, *Xamissa*, published by Fordham University Press in 2018 as a part of their Poets Out Loud Series, represents a letter of complicated intimacy and affection to Rossouw's birth city, Cape Town, South Africa.

The title of the book stems from the word "Camissa," which Dutch colonists believed was the Khoer term for "place of sweet waters." The Dutch arrived in Cape Town in 1652 on behalf of the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), or the Dutch East India Company, which was founded because of a government-directed merger of six small Dutch companies (*voorcompagnieën*). Rossouw stylizes the VOC as , the company's logo, which functions as a haunting visual vestige of colonialism throughout the book.

"Camissa," however, was a "linguistic error." Rossouw informs us in the introduction that "Colonists likely mistook the Khoer words for water, freshwater, to mean an actual place." Rossouw reassures us that Cape Town's "legendary springs and streams exist," and has himself waded and swam in them. The X in "Xamissa," according to Rossouw, "stands for . . . the intersecting languages of Cape Town past and present," and originates from the double album *Dream State* by jazz composer Kyle Shepherd, on which one of the tracks is named "Xamissa."

Following the "Proloog," which details the above information, Rossouw includes a copy of his South African birth certificate. Before the collection begins, we are witnesses to Rossouw's most bureaucratic form of identification, one that exposes his date of birth, gender, and race. It's a vulnerable gesture and might, under other circumstances, be read as sentimental, but Rossouw makes clear that his origins are intertwined in the socio-political histories of Cape Town.

*Xamissa* is divided into six more sections after the "Proloog," and this structure Rossouw has established befits the book. The beginning of the book introduces us to the author in the most exposed fashion and with each subsequent section, the poems become increasingly more entwined in archival research, concluding with the book's most profound statement on Cape Town's history and its future, "Helena | Lena | .

 This isn't to say that *Xamissa* becomes less personal as the book continues; on the contrary, even in the final section, Rossouw

threads his own subjectivity into the narrative in such a way that he interrogates Cape Town's colonial past, its democratic present, and its future in conjunction with what it means to be an Afrikaner born in 1977, just before the election of Pieter Willem "P.W." Botha—an opponent of black majority rule and international communism—as Prime Minister.

As a result of these socio-political dimensions in *Xamissa*, the book doesn't serve so much as a counterpoint to the personal dimensions of Rossouw's life as they serve as a complement to these aspects of the book. For example, in the section "The Dream of the Road," Rossouw presents us with an intimate scene involving his father riding a "1300 c.c. six-cylinder" Kawasaki bike that Rossouw washed on Sundays and on which he rode pillion. Rossouw's father was a part of the "Kingdom Riders," a motorcycle gang rooted in the Christian faith. Rossouw and his father rode with Oom, or Uncle, Ibby, a "Coloured" who was forced to live segregated in a separate, residential development because of the Group Areas Act. Ibby's girlfriend, Jesse, from the rival motorcycle club Black Widows, would "dialect / [Henk's] father's name," turning "Eugene into Denie," which "sounds like genie," and Rossouw supplements this memory by asserting "In Afrikaans, anything / can happen." The moment is at once tender, nostalgic, and haunting, not in the least because we find out earlier in the poem that "Jesse died young" from a motorcycle accident. At the end of the poem, Rossouw describes a recurring scene from his childhood when he wrestled his father at home on the carpet. If he won, Rossouw would be hoisted up, reminding the poet of Jesse "in heaven, an upended bucket with a palace on top / ablaze like Caltex the refinery, my night light."

"Doppler Shift" likewise contains these bittersweet moments, as in the final poem of that section about "two street kids" Rossouw knew, Ashraf and Stix, who were "flâneurs of small change and half-eaten KFC," during a time when "kids peroxide their afros / orange—the shade of sodium-vapor lamps." In the poem, Rossouw tells us how he

gave Stix and Ashraf a driving lesson  
in the cable car parking lot above  
the city hoping to keep them okay  
next time they hi-jinxed another  
late-model Mercedes.

Just as we immerse ourselves in this memory, Rossouw yanks us out of it with the brusque truth that "Stix was run over. No-one knows where / Ashraf is." These episodes by a lesser-skilled poet would be overwrought with sentimentalism, but part of Rossouw's skill lies in his ability to move quickly from one topic to the next, implementing poignant, chiseled language along the way.

The penultimate section of *Xamissa*, "The Water Archives," features an early twentieth century black-and-white photograph of Roggebaai Canal with Table Mountain in the background. The poems in this section move in and out of a

narrative about the former slave, Louis van Mauritius, who, while working as a tailor, led a slave rebellion on October 27, 1808 in Cape Colony. Rossouw's dexterity at weaving narratives about his own life and family in and out of the historical narratives from the archives is done without compromising his respect for the history of Cape Town and its people.

"Helena | Lena | <^~^>," the longest section of the book, includes the Lontara script for Helena van de Caab in its title, and the script appears throughout this part of the book. The poems here relay the story of Lena, an enslaved woman at the VOC slave lodge who ends up joining other escaped slaves at a settlement just outside Cape Town on Table Mountain. Rossouw addresses Lena with the formal Dutch pronoun, "U," which is similar to *vous* in French. Like other moments in *Xamissa*, Rossouw continuously reflects on his own subject position in relation to these archival narratives. Just as information about Helena's life is fragmented, the language that Rossouw uses throughout the book is also fragmented with its typography, its fits and starts, its erasures, and its silences. Rossouw's poems meditate on the ways in which identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through the fractional nature of the archives. Perhaps most importantly, Rossouw questions what his role as an archivist is. "Each sentence I utter to U another lash?" he asks Helena just below a 1737 document of Helena's trial record after she was recaptured by the VOC in 1730. In the book, Rossouw recognizes the imperfect and incomplete qualities of archival work: "I see what I want to see," he admits, "An ashen narrative." Ultimately, Rossouw tells us that this history "should not be forgotten." Like *Xamissa's* many abrupt syntactical breaks indicate, Cape Town's promising future is still on the horizon. Instead of focusing on the end, Rossouw advises us to "begin / and begin again."