

## BOOK REVIEW

**Nadine Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles Against Subjection* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 185 pages.**

*Racial Imperatives* by the University of Wollongong's Nadine Ehlers is a thoughtful and provocative contribution to the literature of discipline, performativity, and agency as they relate to race. Drawing on Foucault's work from *Discipline and Punish*, *The History of Sexuality* series and his lectures collected as *Society Must Be Defended* as well as Judith Butler's gender studies work, Ehlers analyses the 1925 New York court case *Rhinelanders vs. Rhinelanders*. In the case, Leonard Rhinelanders claimed his wife had fraudulently duped him by passing as white and covering up her 'true' racial identity prior to their marriage. He sought a divorce on these grounds. The all male, all white jury found that Alice, his wife, had not lied and after parading semi-naked in the courtroom it was obvious to all present that she was indeed 'black.' She was thus acquitted of fraudulent activity. Ehlers' highlights this case as a way of discussing theoretical issues, and *Racial Imperatives* is less a work of cultural history than a philosophical investigation into passing, masculinity, femininity, responsibility, and negotiation within the frame of American race relations in the early twentieth century.

Divided into six chapters, the book has three sections of two chapters each. The three sections correspond to three claims. As Ehlers writes:

The first claim explored is that race operates as a disciplinary regime and that racial subjects are formed through racial discipline [...] The second claim [...] is that the mechanism through which this disciplinary formation is inaugurated and sustained is racial performativity, and that all racial subjects can be said to execute a kind of performative racial passing. Finally, while discipline and the performative imperatives of race might seem to delimit ways of being raced, I examine how subjects can and do struggle against subjection and practice new modes of racial becoming (3).

*Rhinelanders vs. Rhinelanders* then is a starting point for Ehlers rather than the focus. *Racial Imperatives* reads more as an excursus of Foucault and Butler than a specific close reading of one case and its significance. Given the remit of this journal I will focus on some aspects of Ehlers' use of Foucault, even as the majority of *Racial Imperatives* is indebted to his work.

Although Ehlers ably covers much of Foucault's later work, one phrase she quotes — "the soul is the prison of the body" — seemed worthy of attention. It is a famous and arresting phrase and is important not only because of what it suggests about the relationship of interiority to exteriority, of its content in other words, but also because of the form that it

takes, including specifically of the evocative use of the word “prison,” which reminds us of incarceration, confinement, detention, custody and “the inside” itself. Given its position in *Discipline and Punish*, it also reminds us, that we are inside rather than being quartered and hung in front of a baying public in the town square. It is a precise phrase so we must then be careful to read it as if it were theory *and* history—if we can make such a distinction. In reading it as both, I want to suggest, amongst other things, the simultaneous universality of the statement (theory) and its location in a specific time and place (history). Throughout *Racial Imperatives*, Ehlers is attuned to Foucault’s theory, but less so to his history. In other words, she seeks from Foucault a vocabulary that can be adapted and applied to a different historical situation than that from which it emerged. To readers of this journal, it will be no surprise to read of the use of Foucault to understand a different time or place than those he discussed in his own writings. It does, though, beg the question: what is an appropriate application of his theoretical insights given that he wrote historically? In reading *Racial Imperatives*, this is a recurring question. Ehlers’ use of Foucault is undoubtedly productive, in the sense that it contributes to discussions of discipline, race, performance, agency, and resistance. However, it is more an application of theory rather than the use of a history to speak back to theory. Foucault remains in tact; his work is not corrected, amended, or contested in any major way. This may be a result of reading in a way that could, say, place Sander Gilman’s historical discussion of blackness in the nineteenth century next to Frantz Fanon’s personal experience taken from the mid twentieth century rather than examining the change that occurred between these eras (35). Perhaps a closer reading of historical sources could have created tensions in the generalizations Foucault made in a way that is radically new. This is not to suggest that Ehlers’ extension of Foucault, and to a lesser extent Butler, is not productive. *Racial Imperatives* is indeed a compelling exploration about an intriguing and illuminating case, which was one of the top ten news items in New York for its year. My question though is to what extent are Foucault’s ideas and terminology elastic and applicable; what is lost and gained when we adapt and change theory and history, when we unyoke them from each other? That is a question readers of Ehlers’ book should ponder as it may influence their own work in more subtle ways than first considered.

Ehlers’ discussion of performativity, her second claim in other words, is a particularly strong part of *Racial Imperatives* and this is where theory and history are in productive dialogue with each other. The case articulates the thinking of Butler as much as Butler’s thinking, when read by Ehlers, articulates the case. For readers interested in passing and performativity chapter five will be particularly useful. However, can we assume that all relations, matrices, and manners of performance are equal? Is it the same type of performativity when a person whose discursive racial truth is ‘white’ wears blackface for a theatre play compared to a person whose discursive racial truth is ‘African American’ pretends to be white in everyday life? I am not suggesting Ehlers makes such a claim, but thinking through what constitutes performativity *in context* might create different generalisations. Relying on one case study in particular results in a very particular set of claims, and this is where greater dialogue between theory *and* history might be beneficial.

This section is followed by the final chapters, which discuss technologies of the self. It brings to mind scholarship on the microphysics of power. That is to say, there is an argument

for the political importance of gestures, comportments, embodied ways of being, which might not immediately strike one as political. Drawing on the work of people like Henry Louis Gates Jr., Ehlers argues that ‘resignification’ is regarded as an important tool that can challenge power structures. However, “critical practices of resignification are not guaranteed to successfully subvert the injurious norms through which hegemonic forms of identity are fashioned, but [...] this does not rule out the possibility that there are aims and ends that might be gauged or anticipated” (135). I wonder about the intent and applicability of this—what changes when definitions are expanded so that we do not focus on total institutions that produce hegemonic forms of identity—prison/prisoner, hospital/patient, military/soldier? What happens when we shift our focus from voting booths, street protests, political deaths to clothes worn, buses caught, pop music listened to? Arguably they are not irreconcilable discourses, but there is a political imperative and importance in recognizing that power, while being everywhere, is concentrated in specific locations, positions and people, and those specificities speak back to what power is in a general way. Ehlers argues that “for such a critique to *be* practical—in the sense that it ‘achieves’ anything in the concrete reality of one’s life—a genealogical investigation of identity must be coupled with an endeavor to craft a new *embodied* reality” (137). But can we imagine a reality that is not embodied? Ehlers is on firmer territory advocating the importance of pleasure in this, a pleasure that is disconnected and actively disconnects from the intensification of power relations, where the disassembly and reassembly of the self through practices enables power to be unfrozen. She is less explicit on what this is specifically, or on how pleasure is in and of itself. Perhaps an analysis of how Alice or Leonard lived after the trial in a way that sought agency and a productive, even revolutionary, negotiation of racial hierarchies, boundaries, hegemonies as they existed in 1920s America would have been beneficial to her theoretical claims.

Taken as a whole, *Racial Imperatives* is a clear and concise contribution. It adequately summarizes a wealth of Foucauldian scholarship on discipline and agency and puts his work in productive dialogue with Butler’s ideas of performance as they relate to American ideas of race in the early twentieth century. However, on occasion historical specificity is avoided on account of theoretical discussion. Though, readers in critical race studies, American history, legal studies, and those with an interest in Foucault, Butler, discipline, performance, and agency will be rewarded by a close reading of it.

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