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Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles against Subjection by Nadine Ehlers

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Race theory is a discipline that has become increasingly useful in the social sciences in the past few decades. In *Racial Imperatives*, Nadine Ehlers, a scholar of women's and gender studies, provides a welcome view of the often forgotten question of how whiteness and blackness are formed and how individuals "pass" as one or the other. Her work is brimming with interdisciplinary content, including philosophy, critical theory, race and gender studies, and history. In contrast to earlier works that have taken only a historical approach or only a philosophical approach to race, Ehlers builds on a broad range of scholarship, including such well known titles as the historian Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Figure in Black* (1987), the philosopher George Yancy's *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (2008), performance studies specialist E. Patrick Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness* (2003), as well as a host of other works from scholars of slavery, post-Civil War racism, and African American studies. Ehlers also blends the work of French theorist Michel Foucault and the gender studies of Judith Butler to exhibit the "discipline" that exists in race and how through performativity, race is ultimately a game of passing.

Racial Imperatives is roughly divided into three parts that discuss race as a discipline, its performativity, and its ability to subjugate. By investigating many different historical contexts, this book provides a fresh interpretation of how race has been historically and legally characterized in the United States and beyond. She argues that race is both disciplinary and performative and that the idea of race cannot be conveyed through the skin but instead must be "seen to be a discursively generated set of meanings that attach to the skin – meanings that, through various technologies and techniques, come to regulate, discipline, and form subjects as raced" (p. 14). If this is true, she contends, then the supposed "obviousness" of racial subjectivity falls away, and this could possibly change the way people distinguish race. Thus, she explains that by working with "discursive constraints" (p. 14), race becomes something that is debatable regardless of skin color, and provides the possibility for an individuals' race to command and control different performances.

The two most illuminating chapters deal with the famed court case of *Rhineland v. Rhineland* in 1925. Here the author interrogates the performance of passing between Alice and Leonard Rhineland. It is here where the author drives home the idea that regardless of color, race is something under which everyone passes. Ehlers recounts the well known court case in which Alice Rhineland, who was classified as a mulatto in the census, tried to pass as white. When her husband Leonard found out, he claimed that Alice deceived him and went to court seeking an annulment. Ehlers highlights how Alice took on an ambiguous racial identity during the trial. Debates were always present about whether her family was white or black. In the trial, Leonard's lawyers brought forth Alice's body as evidence that she had duped her husband into thinking that she was white. Using her body as evidence shows the clear practice of racial norms. What is seen through the case, sometimes not so clearly, is that the court becomes a place where decisions are made on both the "internal racial truth" and what the court saw on Alice's skin. The court's decision that Alice was ultimately black highlights the performative workings of law with regards to race. Ehlers argues that it is not only Alice but also Leonard who was able to pass for something that the court decided that he or she was not. Here Leonard fails his performance of "white masculinity," even though his skin and body would say otherwise. Thus, Ehlers concludes, "[In] marking the strictures and disciplinary control that governs the formation and

maintenance of identity – it becomes clear that the subject never safely reaches a point where subject status is absolutely guaranteed” (p. 105). There is no point where the subject has arrived into that image, and thus can never fully occupy the image of identity. Therefore, the subject “can never be validated as having passed,” but is merely becoming (p. 105).

In the end, this is an eye opening study that deserves reading by scholars of many fields, especially those who study African American history. By taking a close look at how race is actually formed in public space, the media, courts, and the subjects’ own minds, we see that there is much to be discovered about how everyday racial identifications occur. This reviewer’s only real critique is that the jargon in this otherwise excellent book may make it less accessible for scholars from other disciplines.

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