

Rikke Andreassen & Kathrine Vitus (eds.), *Affectivity and Race. Studies from Nordic Countries* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015)

The book's title announces that two concepts are of crucial importance in this publication: affectivity and race. The book's subtitle places its content geographically: in the Nordic countries; or better, in Scandinavia, since there are no studies comprised in the present book that deal with Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

The former concept refers to feelings, emotions and affects, which are, roughly speaking, the observable bodily aspects of feelings and emotions. These three terms are equivocal, since there are many different interpretations of them as well as of their mutual relationships, both within and outside the humanities (the contributors to the book work in cultural, media and migration studies). The book does not endorse any specific interpretation or set of interpretations. Each contributor is free to pick and choose as she wishes, so to speak. Still, one contemporary thinker is cited by all but one of the contributors, i.e. Sara Ahmed. References to her books range from a mere bibliographic entry to a maximum of three paragraphs, depending on each chapter. Nothing more or more exact is said anywhere about the key-terms at issue, their philosophical origins, or the natural sciences of feeling, emotion and affect. Only the author of the tenth chapter engages in some nitty-gritty conceptual clarification, concluding however that she "enjoy[s] the intentional imprecision of 'feeling'... even though [she] use[s] it interchangeably with 'emotion', at times." (p.190).

Without prior knowledge of the literature on the subject and, in particular, of the research conducted by Ahmed, the reader cannot learn much here about feelings, emotions or affects. Not even the editors' brave attempt to classify in the introduction the main conceptions of affect used by the book's contributors is of help. On the one hand, the editors erroneously suggest a widespread reliance on the conceptions of affect and emotion developed by Deleuze and Massumi, whose works appear however in just a fraction of the contributors' texts and bibliographies. On the other hand, Freud, Fanon and Lacan are at least as important for the proper understanding of several contributions. More and more background knowledge is required. In short, the present book is a scholarly exercise directed to other scholars, who possess already a set of shared interests and a common jargon. Outsiders are unlikely to be brought into the fold by this book.

The concept of race is not defined univocally either. Nonetheless, perhaps because of its more limited semantic scope, "race" comes across as fairly consistent throughout the book. Also, the concept of race is dealt with in a way that any inexperienced reader should be able to comprehend. For one, contemporary events and mainstream media sources are quoted in more than half of the contributions, which, as a result, read as highly topical and engaged with current affairs. For another, the older and troublesome eugenic roots of the concept

are recalled on a few occasions, its relation to cognates such as “ethnicity” and “culture” touched upon, and its persisting integration within sociological and legal settings outside the Nordic countries (e.g. UK, USA) commented upon. Two chapters in particular (i.e. 3 & 9) pivot around race’s taboo status in Swedish and Norwegian society, including academia. According to these chapters, both Nordic polities rejected long ago the racial doctrines that had been so prominent in the first half of the 20th century. At the same time, these polities made a persistent and largely successful effort to characterise themselves as anti-racist societies, where differences of, and even discrimination upon, ethnicity or culture are acknowledged, but not racial ones. Race, somehow, would seem to belong to a long-buried past that should remain buried.

Yet how can this concept remain buried, if immigrants’ experiences of racial stereotyping, harassment and marginalisation keep occurring in Scandinavian societies? (cf. especially chapters 1 & 8) How can it be kept buried, if the threat and shock caused by foreign and, above all, by indigenous terrorism, reveal the deep and pervasive strength of “whiteness” as the most obvious, almost instinctive criterion to perceive oneself as Norwegian, Danish, Swedish or Finn? (cf. especially chapters 2 & 7) The present book deserves attention for contributing to a growing yet still peripheral trend in Nordic scholarship, which wishes to explore, understand and apply conceptions of race that are suitable to, and possibly constructive within, the Nordic societies. Even if self-confining to a small academic circle by way of specialistic myopia, the present book gazes at important problems affecting Nordic societies at large, if not even all European nations.

The book comprises three parts and three corresponding thematic areas: (I) “How is race politicised through affects?”; (II) “How does race produce affects?”; (III) “How is race affectively experienced?” These areas are broad and vague enough not to reveal much about the actual content of the essays listed under each of them, though no contradiction can be determined clearly either. As a result, these three headings (i.e. I—III) do not provide much assistance as regards apprehending and appreciating the specific merits of the ten interesting contributions published in this book. Perhaps, a simpler geographical criterion would have been more straightforward and to-the-point:

- Chapter 1 (Kaarina Nikunen, “Politics and Irony as the Emerging Sensibility of the Anti-Immigrant Debate”) deals primarily with Finland.
- Chapters 3 (Tobias Habinette & Paula Mählck, “The Racial Grammar of Swedish Higher Education and Research Polciy: The Limits and Conditions of Researching Race in a Colour-Blind Context”) and 10 (Sara Ahlstedt, “Doing ‘Feelwork’: Reflections on Whiteness and Methodological Challenges in Research on Queer Partner Migration”) deal primarily with Sweden.

- Chapters 2 (Asta Smedegaard Nielsen, “If it had Been a Muslim: Affectivity and Race in Danish Journalists’ Reflections on Making News on Terror”), 4 (Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen & Dorthe Staunæs, “‘And then we do it in Norway’: Learning Leadership Through Affective Contact Zones”), 5 (Rikke Andreassen, “Nordic Colour-Blindness and Nella Larsen”), 6 (Marlene Spanger, “Disturbance and Celebration of Josephine Baker in Copenhagen 1928: Emotional Constructions of Whiteness”) and 8 (Kathrine Vitus, “The Affectivity of Racism: Enjoyment and Disgust in Young People’s Film”) deal primarily with Denmark.
- Chapters 7 (Stine H. Bang Svendsen, “Feeling at Loss: Affect, Whiteness and Masculinity in the Immediate Aftermath of Norway’s Terror”) and 9 (Henry Mainsah & Lin Pröitz, “Two Journeys into research on Difference in a Nordic Context: A Collaborative Auto-Ethnography”) deal primarily with Norway.

A thread shared by all the contributions, although in two different ways, is the socially dangerous yet psychologically reassuring search for simplicity (or simplification).

Firstly, racism, racial discrimination, or even mere racial pigeonholing of people are described and discussed in several chapters (cf. 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9), which show how the citizens of the highly educated, wealthy and progressive polities of the North are not so different from those of the South of Europe, where the ascent of xenophobic political parties began ten years earlier. They too may wish to divide the World into “us” and “them”, and racial criteria serve this end most aptly, even if they are poor descriptors of the past as well as of the present history and demographic composition of all these countries.

Secondly, three other contributions (cf. 5, 6, 10) explore a handful of individual cases that challenge the simple (or simplistic) picture of people’s racial identity. Racists, if not race and gender experts too at times, carve up the World into homogenous groups. There are white people. There are non-white people. There are dominant majorities. There are discriminated minorities. Yet societies are much more complex than this. Race does play a role; sometimes a life-and-death one (e.g. 19th-century US slavery). So does being part of a larger well-established group or a smaller one of newcomers. Social hierarchies and power distributions affect each and every one of us. Yet each and every one of us also remains a unique person.

On the one hand, each and every person is the fulcrum of a network of a gigantic plethora of group memberships and socio-cultural determinations, both actual and potential, that produce existentially significant diversity of condition by seemingly minor additions and subtractions (e.g. being male, white and conspicuously handsome *versus* being male, white and conspicuously ugly; being female, lesbian and atheist *versus* being female, lesbian and

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Catholic). On the other hand, each and every person, possibly since childhood, makes continuous choices *vis-à-vis* how to interpret, respond to and make use of the group memberships and socio-cultural determinations in which they find themselves immersed since birth. Neoliberalism, as criticised in the third chapter, goes too far in this sense, for it denies the social forces operating upon individuals, racial forces included. However, there is an emancipating modicum of truth in acknowledging individuals, their responsibilities and their chances for self-direction. Given the accounts provided in the present book, Nella Larsen (chapter 5) and Josephine Baker (chapter 6) are, in this perspective, a source of inspiration, for they show how deep-reaching racial social determinants do not imply complete heterogenous determination.

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