

Strange Encounters

Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality

Sara Ahmed



Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism

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Introduction

Stranger fetishism and post-coloniality

[...]

This book, while it takes as its point of entry a rather different set of encounters, is nevertheless an attempt to work through the familiarity of alien forms ('strangers'). Through strange encounters, the figure of the 'stranger' is produced, not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as 'a stranger'. In the gesture of recognising the one that we do not know, the one that is different from 'us', we flesh out the beyond, and give it a face and form. It is this 'fleshing out' of strangers in encounters with embodied others that I examine. The alien stranger is hence, not beyond human, but a *mechanism for allowing us to face that which we have already designated as the beyond*. So we imagine, here, now, that we are facing an alien stranger: it allows us to share a fantasy that, in the co-presence of strange and alien bodies, we will prevail.

Stranger fetishism

At the same time, this is *not* a book about strangers [...] Rather, it is a book that attempts to question the assumption that we can have an ontology of strangers, that it is possible to simply *be a stranger*, or *to face a stranger* in the street. To avoid such an ontology, we must refuse to take for granted the stranger's status as a figure. The stranger is clearly figured in a variety of discourses, including the crime prevention and personal safety discourse of 'stranger danger' (see Chapter 1). In such a discourse, which is clearly a field of knowledge that marks out what is safe as well as what is dangerous, the stranger is always a figure, stalking the streets: there are some-bodies who simply are strangers, and who pose danger in their very co-presence in a given street. The assumption that we can tell the difference between strangers and neighbours which is central to, for example, neighbourhood watch programmes, functions to conceal forms of social difference. By defining 'us' against any-body who is a stranger, what is concealed is that some-bodies are already recognised as stranger and more dangerous than other bodies (see also Chapter 2).

However, as I will argue throughout the book, the problems implicit in discourses such as 'stranger danger' — where it is assumed that being a stranger is a matter of inhabiting a certain body — are not resolved by simply welcoming 'the stranger'. Such a gesture still takes for granted the status of the stranger as a figure with both linguistic and bodily integrity. Hence, I examine how multiculturalism can function to assimilate 'the stranger' as a figure of the unassimilable (see Chapter 5). While 'stranger danger' discourse may work by expelling the stranger as the *origin of danger*, multicultural discourse may operate by welcoming the stranger as the *origin of difference*. I suggest that it is the processes of expelling or welcoming the one who is recognised as a stranger that produce the figure of the stranger in the first place. That figure is also taken for granted in ethnographic discourses which seek to transform the being of strangers into knowledge, and consumerist discourses which invite the consumer to become the stranger or inhabit the bodies of strangers by wearing certain products (see Chapter 6). The stranger does not have to be recognised as 'beyond' or outside the 'we' in order to be fixed within the contours of a given form: indeed, it is the very gesture of getting closer to 'strangers' that allows the figure to take its shape.

In this book, I also challenge the turn towards the stranger in some recent postmodern theory. The figure of the stranger has been taken to represent all that was excluded or delegitimated in modernity with its belief in order, sameness and totality (Bauman 1993, 1995). The figure of the stranger has become crucial: no longer seen as a threat to community, the stranger becomes a reminder of the differences we must celebrate. For example, Zygmunt Bauman calls for postmodern

strangerhood 'to be protected and lovingly preserved' (1997: 54). However, in *Strange Encounters* this idea that we should simply love the stranger as a basis for an ethics of alterity (see Chapter 7), or a non-universalist form of political activism (see Chapter 8), is questioned. While such theoretical moves may challenge the discourse of 'stranger danger' by refusing to recognise the stranger as dangerous, they also take for granted the stranger's status as a figure that contains or has meaning. It is this very granting of figurability that functions to conceal the histories of determination which were already concealed in the discourses of stranger danger. In other words, the turn to the stranger as a figure who should be welcomed does question the discourses of 'stranger danger', but only insofar as it keeps in place the fetishism upon which those discourses rely. Such a fetishism can be described as a fetishism of figures. Indeed, the Marxist model of commodity fetishism might help us to understand how a fetishism of figures might function.¹ The classical Marxist account of commodity fetishism considers the 'enigmatic' form of the commodity as a substitution; the social relations of labour become displaced onto the commodity form (Marx 1976: 164). While this is clearly a theory of objectification, it also allows us to consider the relationship between object fetishism and a fetishism of figures. When Marx makes his (problematic) analogy between primitive religion and commodification, he considers how the 'products of the brain', 'appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own' (1976: 164; emphasis added). The analogy suggests that the process of fetishisation involves, not only the displacement of social relations onto an object, but the transformation of fantasies into figures.² We could bring the two processes together and suggest that fetishism involves the displacement of social relations of labour through the transformation of objects into figures. What is at stake is the 'cutting off' of figures from the social and material relations which over-determine their existence, and the consequent perception that such figures have a 'life of their own'. Stranger fetishism is a fetishism of figures:³ it invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts 'the stranger' off from the histories of its determination. We need to consider, then, what are the social relationships (involving both fantasy and materiality) that are concealed in stranger fetishism, even if we no longer use the version of determination that is exercised in Marxist theory.

In the theoretical celebration of 'the stranger' as a figure that is paradigmatic of postmodernism, there is an investment in strangerhood as an ontological condition, and in the stranger, as *having a life of its own*. Michael Dillon suggests that, 'the stranger by *his or her very nature* is outwith the settled modes of questioning, and the received understandings of truth and identity' (1999: 121; emphasis added). Here, strangers are assumed to have a nature. Although that nature is no longer represented as dangerous, this argument still ontologises the stranger, turns the stranger into something that simply *is*. The investment in the figure of the stranger involves making claims about the stranger's being. As a result, Dillon defines the figure of 'the stranger' only as having effects, rather than as an effect in itself (= stranger fetishism).

What are the effects of ontologising the stranger? What forms of difference are concealed in that act of fetishisation? The problems of ontologising 'the stranger' as a way of being in the world are clear in Bülent Diken's *Strangers, Ambivalence and Social Theory* (1998). Diken takes up the figure of the stranger as the one who is excluded from forms of belonging and identity, particularly within the context of discourses of nationhood. He defines the stranger as the one who inhabits a space of ambivalence, in which one is not quite 'us' or 'them' (Diken 1998: 11). Diken then names who is included within the category of 'the stranger': 'I want to view immigrants, foreigners, refugees etc. all as "strangers"' (1998: 123). This extraordinary statement highlights the problems with granting the stranger the status of a figure which has a referent in the world: it functions to elide the substantive differences between ways of being displaced from 'home'. 'The stranger', when used in this way, works to conceal differences; it allows different forms of displacement to be gathered together in the singularity of a given name. Such an erasure of differences is implicated in any attempt to define the

stranger as the one who leaves home and moves to a different place (see Chapter 4). Within this model, all forms of movement, travel and displacement are assumed to lead to the same place: the place of the stranger.

Diken then suggests that everybody is a stranger: 'almost all people are in one way or another displaced, or become immigrants, because of globalisation, increasing mobility, urbanization, tourism etc.' (1998: 124). Here, strangeness is not simply ontologised, *but it is universalised as that which 'we' have in common*, in the presumed universality of homelessness. The effects of stranger fetishism are clear: the figure of the stranger assumes a life of its own only insofar as it is cut off from the histories of its determination, and hence only *insofar as it erases the very forms of difference that render impossible the formation of an inclusive community*.

Not surprisingly then, Diken concludes his book with the following statement, 'with the stranger, we find ourselves' (1998: 334). Diken is clearly borrowing from Julia Kristeva, who calls for us to follow the lead of psychoanalysis in a 'journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable. How could one tolerate the stranger if one did not know one was a stranger to oneself?' (1991: 182). The journey towards the stranger becomes a form of self-discovery, in which the stranger functions yet again to establish and define the T. This T translates swiftly into a 'we' (I am the stranger, we are all strangers). I would argue, in contrast, that we need to understand how identity is established through strange encounters without producing a universe of strangers. While identity itself may operate through the designation of others as strangers, rendering strangers internal rather than external to identity, to conclude simply that we are all strangers to ourselves is to avoid dealing with the political processes whereby some others are designated as *stranger than other others*.

This book will pose the question: how can we understand the relationship between identity and strangeness in lived embodiment without creating a new 'community of strangers'?

Encounters

I suggest that we can only avoid stranger fetishism — that is, avoid welcoming or expelling the stranger as a figure which has linguistic and bodily integrity — by examining the social relationships that are concealed by this very fetishism. That is, we need to consider how the stranger is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities, including communities of living (dwelling and travel), as well as epistemic communities.

I describe such processes in terms of encounters in order to show how they are determined, but not fully determined. The term encounter suggests a meeting, but a meeting which involves surprise and conflict. We can ask:

how does identity itself become instituted through encounters with others that surprise, that shift the boundaries of the familiar, of what we assume that we know? Identity itself is constituted in the 'more than one' of the encounter: the designation of an T or 'we' requires an encounter with others. These others cannot be simply relegated to the outside: given that the subject comes into existence as an entity only through encounters with others, then the subject's existence cannot be separated from the others who are encountered. As such, the encounter itself is ontologically prior to the question of ontology (the question of the being who encounters).

At one level, we can think about encounters as face-to-face meetings. Such face-to-face meetings can be thought of as 'eye-to-eye', involving a visual economy of recognition (see Chapter 1), and as 'skin-to-skin', involving an economy of touch (see Chapter 2). In face-to-face meetings, where

at least two subjects get close enough to see and touch each other, there is a necessary movement in time and space. The face to face requires that at least two subjects *approach* each other. The encounter, as a face to face, can only be thought of as a discrete event when the temporal and spatial function of this approach is negated. An emphasis on encounters involves a radical rethinking of what it might mean to face (up to) others (see Chapter 7). The face-to-face encounter is mediated precisely by that which allows the face to appear in the present. The face-to-face is hence not simply about two persons facing each other — the face to face cannot be thought of as a coupling. This encounter is mediated; it presupposes other faces, other encounters of facing, other bodies, other spaces, and other times. To talk about the importance of encounters to identity is to remind ourselves of the processes that are already at stake in the coming together of (at least) two subjects. Thinking of encounters as ‘face-to-face’ meetings also suggests that identity does not simply happen in the privatised realm of the subject's relation to itself. Rather, in daily meetings with others, subjects are perpetually reconstituted: the work of identity formation is never over, but can be understood as the sliding across of subjects in their meetings with others.

However, meetings do not have to involve the face-to-face encounter of at least two subjects. Meetings do not even presuppose the category of the human person. More generally, a meeting suggests *a coming together of at least two elements*. For example, we can think of reading as a meeting between reader and text. In this context, to talk of encounters as constitutive of identity (that which makes a given thing a thing) is to suggest that there is always more than one in the demarcation of ‘the one’: there is always a relationship to a reader, who is not inside or outside the text, in the determination of the text as such. To make the encounter prior to the form of the text (what the text would be within itself) is, not only to refuse to assume that the text or reader have an independent existence, but also to suggest that it is through being read that the text comes to life as text, that the text comes to be thinkable as having an existence in the first place. A thesis on the priority of encounters over identity suggests that it is only through meeting with an-other that the identity of a given person *comes to be inhabited as living*.

If encounters are meetings, then they also involve surprise. The more-than-one of such meetings that allow the ‘one’ to be faced and to face others, is not a meeting between already constituted subjects who know each other: rather, the encounter is premised on the absence of a knowledge that would allow one to control the encounter, or to predict its outcome. As a result, encounters constitute the space of the familial (by allowing the T or the ‘we’ to define itself in relation to others who are already faced), but in doing so, they shift the boundaries of what is familiar. Encounters involve both fixation, and the impossibility of fixation. So, for example, when we face others, we seek to recognise who they are, by reading the signs on their body, or by reading their body *as a sign*. As I will argue, such acts of reading constitute ‘the subject’ in relation to ‘the stranger’, who is recognised as ‘out of place’ in a given place. The surprising nature of encounters can be understood in relation to the structural possibility that *we may not be able to read the bodies of others*. However, each time we are faced by an other whom we cannot recognise, we seek to find other ways of achieving recognition, not only by re-reading the body of *this* other who is faced, but by telling the difference between this other, and other others. The encounters we might yet have with other others hence surprise the subject, but they also *reopen the prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference* (see Chapter 6).

Encounters are meetings, then, which are not simply in the present: each encounter reopens past encounters. Encounters involve, not only the surprise of being faced by an other who cannot be located in the present, they also involve conflict. The face-to-face meeting is not between two subjects who are equal and in harmony; the meeting is antagonistic. The coming together of others that allows the ‘one’ to exist takes place given that there is an asymmetry of power. The relationship between the

encounter and forms of social antagonism requires that we consider the relationship between the particular — this encounter — and the general. At one level, we can think of this relationship as determined by that which must already have taken place to allow the particular encounter to take place, that is, the social processes that are at stake in the coming together of (at least) two subjects. However, this would presuppose that the particular is an *outcome* of the general, and would assume that both are already determined at different times and places. I want to consider how the particular encounter both informs and is informed by the general: encounters between embodied subjects always hesitate between the domain of the particular — the face to face of this encounter — and the general — the framing of the encounter by broader relationships of power and antagonism. The particular encounter hence always carries *traces* of those broader relationships. Differences, as markers of power, are not determined in the ‘space’ of the particular *or* the general, but in the very determination of their historical relation (a determination that is never final or complete, as it involves strange encounters).

It will be my argument that differences can be understood through thinking about the role of everyday encounters in the forming of social space (see Chapter 1) as well as bodily space (see Chapter 2). Such differences are not then to be found *on the bodies of others* (see Chapter 7), but are determined through encounters between others: they are impossible to grasp in the present. We can return now to my argument about stranger fetishism. To say that stranger fetishism functions to conceal forms of difference is to suggest that the figure of the stranger only appears *by being cut off from such encounters between embodied others*. For example, if we were to describe the subaltern woman as the stranger then we would erase the particularity of her embodiment. This is not to say that difference can be found on her body: this difference can be encountered only in relationship to other encounters, that are determined elsewhere (that is, they are not simply in the present), such as those that are determined by the international and gendered division of labour. She can only become the stranger by a forgetting of how her embodiment carries traces of these labouring formations (see my reading of the short story, ‘Douloti the Bountiful’ in Chapter 7). The face to face of this encounter cannot, then, be detached or isolated from such broader relations of antagonism: to do so, would be to forget how the possibility or impossibility of some face-to-face encounters is already determined. It is here that my thesis on the priority of encounters over identity meets its limits: we must pose the question of historicity, which is forgotten by the very designation of ‘the encounter’ as such.

Post-coloniality

To the extent that historicity poses itself as a question, then it also reveals its own impossibility as an answer. That is, we cannot assume that history is something that can be simply missing from the abstraction of the encounter from the broader social relationships that make encounters possible: to do so would turn history into another fetish, into an object that could be absent or present. Rather, the question of history can only be posed partially: it is a question that allows us to think about how the relationship between particular encounters and more general processes requires an impure or *failed theory*. That is, although the relationship between the particular and the general may be determined, it is not fully determined, which means that we must give up the assumption that it can be translated into a meta-discourse (such as History). Such a meta-discourse would both explain and not explain the relation: for example, we could say that the relationship between the particular and general is History, but to name that relationship as History would be to describe both everything and nothing. Rather than saying that History determines the relationship between this and that, we can ask, ‘how is the relationship between this and that determined?’ as a historical question, a question that henceforth cannot be answered in a total or exhaustive manner. An historical approach to the relationship between particular encounters and more general processes requires that we give up any totalising thesis about what does and does not determine each encounter as such. Indeed, rethinking

the primacy of the encounter over ontology is also a means by which we can introduce historicity, as the very absence of any totality that governs the encounter.

It is here that I want to introduce post-coloniality as a *failed historicity*: a historicity that admits of its own failure in grasping that which has been, as the impossibility of grasping the present. Post-colonialism has already been accused of its failure as a history: for example, critics have argued that it is too totalising and universalising to grasp the multiplicity of colonial histories, and that it is bound up with an inadequate temporality in the very assumption of the 'post' (McClintock 1992; Ahmad 1992, 1995). One of the key arguments is that the term 'post-colonial' is problematic precisely because it makes colonialism the marker of historical difference. As Anne McClintock states, 'If the theory promises a decentering of history in hybridity, syncretism, multi-dimensional time and so forth, the *singularity* of the term effects a recentering of global history around the single rubric of European time' (1992: 86).

Aijaz Ahmad's critique of post-colonialism's emphasis on the centrality of colonialism as a marker of time involves a recentring on capitalist modernity as the primary engine in determining historical change. He implies that colonialism is almost incidental to this history insofar as modernisation took place whether or not particular nation-states were colonised by the Europeans (Ahmad 1995: 7). He argues that the primary determination of history is capitalist modernity which then, 'takes the colonial form in particular places and at particular times' (*ibid.*). To some extent, I seek to contest such a position by arguing that colonialism is structural rather than incidental to any understanding of the constitution of both modernity and postmodernity (if we can define the latter, very inadequately, as the relative globalisation of modernity). To make such an argument is not to say that we can only understand such historical transitions in terms of colonialism — I am not seeking to reverse the terms of Ahmad's version of Marxism, by making colonialism primary and capitalist modernity, secondary. What is crucial is that the colonial project was not *external* to the constitution of the modernity of European nations: rather, the identity of these nations became predicated on their relationship to the colonised others. This is one of the significant theoretical contributions made by those working on post-colonialism, and its implications are far reaching.

Others critics of post-colonialism have suggested that it (conservatively) assumes that colonialism has been overcome in the present (Shohat 1992: 104). I would agree with this critique, if post-colonialism was being used literally to refer to a time after colonialism. However, my understanding of post-coloniality is different. In some sense, the impossibility of postcolonialism describing the past or the present is my starting point. When post-colonialism is assumed to be referential — we are in a post-colonial time or place — then it does become deeply conservative: it assumes that 'we' have overcome the legacies of colonialism, and that this overcoming is what binds 'us' together. For me, post-colonialism is about rethinking *how* colonialism operated in different times in ways that permeate all aspects of social life, in the colonised and colonising nations. It is hence about the complexity of the relationship between the past and present, between the histories of European colonisation and contemporary forms of globalisation. That complexity cannot be reduced by either a notion that the present has broken from the past (a narrative that assumes that decolonisation meant the end of colonialism) or that the present is simply continuous with the past (a narrative that assumes colonialism is a trans-historical phenomenon that is not affected by local contexts or other forms of social change). To this extent, post-coloniality allows us to investigate how colonial encounters are both determining, and yet not fully determining, of social and material existence.

It is in this very precise sense that I understand post-colonialism as a failed historicity: it re-examines the centrality of colonialism to a past that henceforth cannot be understood as a totality, or as a shared history. It is the very argument that colonialism is central to the historical constitution of

modernity (an apparently simple argument, but one that must nevertheless be repeated) that also suggests history is not the continuous line of the emergence of a people, but a series of discontinuous encounters between nations, cultures, others and other others. History can no longer be understood as that which determines each encounter. Rather, historicity involves the history of such encounters that are unavailable in the form of a totality.

My analysis of strange encounters begins with the failed historicisation of post-coloniality. Indeed, post-colonialism as a body of knowledge, has come into existence through a prior theorisation of colonialism as an encounter between cultures, and cultural difference as a form of encounter (Hulme 1986; Greenblatt 1993; Baily and Morgan 1991). Colonialism as an encounter involves, not only the territorial domination of one culture by another, but also forms of discursive appropriation: other cultures become appropriated into the imaginary globality of the colonising nation. The encounters that characterise colonialism are not simply one-sided or monological: encounters involve at least two cultures who, in their meeting, transform the conditions of the encounter itself. In Mary Louise Pratt's work, the encounter becomes theorised in terms of the contact zone as, 'an attempt to involve the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures' (Pratt 1992: 7). Here, the encounter involves both a temporal and spatial dislocation that transforms both the colonising and colonised subjects: in other words, colonial encounters involve a necessarily unequal and asymmetrical dialogue between once distant cultures that transforms each one.

However, one problem with Pratt's model of the 'contact zone' is the use of a linear narrative that assumes a transition from distance to proximity. I want to suggest that colonial encounters involve a much more complex relationship between proximity and distance. Take, for example, Michel de Certeau's analysis of travel writing and colonial encounters (1986: 67). According to de Certeau, the travel account involves a search outward for the strange and works through the rhetorical device of distanciation (the 'appearance' of monsters and marvels, the documenting of cannibalism and polygamy). The homeward journey *almost* returns us to the beginning: the writing always returns home, but with a difference. The one who moves through space, or gets closer to the stranger, returns home as almost the savage, as contaminated by the inbetween of the narrative. In his reading, the relationship between travel and writing determines rather than is determined by a spatialising operation whereby the cultural fields of familiar and strange are precariously established.

Narratives which construct 'the strange culture' as their object (distance), are also contaminated by that very object (proximity). Colonial encounters do not just involve a transition from distance to proximity: they involve, at one and the same time, social and spatial relations of distance and proximity. Others become strangers (the ones who are distant), and 'other cultures' become 'strange cultures' (the ones who are distant), only through coming *too close to home*, that is, through the proximity of the encounter or 'facing' itself. There is hence an intimate relationship between colonial encounters, spatial dislocation and hybridity. Colonial encounters disrupt the identity of the 'two' cultures who meet through the very process of hybridisation — the meeting of the 'two' that transforms each 'one'. But just as the conditions of meeting are not equal, so too hybridisation involves differentiation (the two do not co-mingle to produce one). How others are constituted and transformed through such encounters is dependent upon relationships of force.

Indeed, another of the main critiques of post-colonial theory has been its failure to account for the structural conditions in which 'local encounters' with hybridity and difference take place. Ahmad (1995), Juan (1998) and Dirlik (1997) argue that post-colonial theory is complicit with global capitalism insofar as it emphasises play, hybridity and inbetweenness. Juan, for example, argues that 'post-coloniality can be interpreted as a refurbishing of the liberal individualist ethos geared to the "free

play” of the market’ (1998: 10), while Ahmad suggests that, ‘the underlying logic of this celebratory mode is that of the limitless freedom of a globalised marketplace’ (1995: 17). Dirlik bases the entire thesis of his book, *The Post-colonial Aura*, on the assumption that post-colonial theory is a *symptom* of global capitalism, given its emphasis on hybridity and inbetweenness at the expense of power, ideology and structure (1997: 65–66). To some extent, I share a suspicion of some of the post-colonial work that emphasises how hybridity involves the transgression and destabilisation of identity. In Chapter 3 and Chapter 6, I suggest that hybridisation can become a mechanism for the reconstitution of dominant identities precisely insofar as the hybrid subject — who becomes other through knowledge and consumption — remains defined against the ‘native subject’ who, paradoxically, is also represented as *being* the stranger. However, both Juan’s and Ahmad’s critiques involve making sweeping claims that underestimate the rigour of post-colonial critics such as Gayatri Spivak, whose work attends to the complexity of the institutional conditions of global capitalism (and who defines these conditions not simply in terms of class, but also in terms of race and gender). What post-colonialism can allow us to examine is *how* forms of hybridisation, and border crossings, are a means by which contemporary relationships of power are structured. In other words, the encounters in global capitalism may involve the restructuring of power relations *through* (rather than despite) the very forms of play, hybridity and movement discussed by some post-colonial critics.

In *Strange Encounters*, I examine the ways in which contemporary discourses of globalisation and multiculturalism involve the reproduction of the figure of the stranger, and the enforcement of boundaries, through the very emphasis on becoming, hybridity and inbetweenness. If we are to think of post-coloniality as that which is yet to come (we need to think the impossibility of the ‘post’ if we are to make the ‘post’ possible), then we need to pay attention to *how* and *where* colonialism persists after so-called decolonisation. That is, we need to pay attention to the *shifting conditions* in which encounters between others, and between other others, take place. From Chapter 4 onwards, I attend to the effects of globalisation, migration and multiculturalism on the relationship between communities and strangers. With the transnational movement of bodies, objects and capital, one could argue that the stranger is always in proximity; that the stranger has come closer to home. However, to say that the stranger is *now* close by would be to assume that the stranger was distant in the past. As my analysis of stranger fetishism suggests, the ‘stranger’ only becomes a figure through proximity: the stranger’s body cannot be reified as the distant body. It is our task to think through the different *modes* of proximity we may have to strangers in contemporary contexts without assuming that the stranger was distant in the past. We need to ask how contemporary modes of proximity *reopen prior histories of encounter*. In *Strange Encounters*, I analyse globalisation, migration and multiculturalism as particular modes of proximity, which produce the figure of ‘the stranger’ in different ways and which, in doing so, reopen such prior histories of encounter as the historical (that is, partial) determination of regimes of difference. An analysis of strange encounters allows us to address how the encounters that produce ‘the stranger’ as a figure that has linguistic and bodily integrity are determined. In other words, it is such encounters between embodied others, *as* the historical (that is, partial) determination of regimes of difference.

An analysis of strange encounters allows us to address how the encounters that produce ‘the stranger’ as a figure that has linguistic and bodily integrity are determined. In other words, it is such encounters between embodied others, *impossible to grasp in the present*, which are concealed by stranger fetishism. It is here that we can begin to pose the relationship between stranger fetishism and post-coloniality. In this book, post-coloniality is not stabilised as ‘the context’ in which strange encounters take place: rather, it is my interest in the *complexity* of the relationship between histories of colonialism and contemporary modes of encounter that is signalled by my use of the term ‘post-coloniality’. As a result, the encounters between embodied others that are concealed by stranger

fetishism can only be partly understood in terms of post-coloniality. My consideration of the relationship between stranger fetishism and post-coloniality *is also a thesis about how post-coloniality is impossible to grasp in the present.*

Encounters as method and structure

Strange encounters also provide the methodological framework for this book. While the chapters share a concern with stranger fetishism, they also represent fragments or moments of encounter in my own life world. The various readings I offer in the book come in part from my encounters within the academy, for example, my encounters with post-colonialism and with feminism. My concern with the ways in which stranger fetishism operates to conceal forms of difference has been shaped by my intellectual and political encounter with black and post-colonial feminisms, which have paid attention to how differences are always articulated in relationship to each other (hooks 1992; McClintock 1995). But there are other encounters at stake in my choice of different texts; these encounters were themselves shaped by my everyday dwelling (where I live) and travel (where I move). Hence, in the first chapter, I read texts that I first encountered in my local habitat — Lancaster, in the north of England. But, as someone who has travelled, and who has lived in Australia, and who has family connections with Pakistan as well as Britain, I also include readings of texts from other contexts including: political representations of multiculturalism in Australia; feminist ethnographies from Australia; and short stories by South Asian women in Britain and the subcontinent. These different texts reflect my multiple encounters in different local spaces of inhabitation.

One of my arguments is that the relationship between ‘the local’ and the ‘global’ is a site of differentiation (I would not talk of globalisation as such, but uneven processes whereby certain locales are constituted as ‘the global’). Partly my concern is with the implications of the way in which people, images and objects move across national borders, *as well as the way in which others fail to move.* Some of the texts I encounter, then, are texts that have already moved away from their local space of production and, at least in some cases, have already been elevated into ‘the global’: for example, images from Boots's *Global Collection* (see Chapter 6) and The Body Shop (see Chapter 8); American stories of racial discovery, both autobiographical and cinematic (see Chapter 6); and documents on women produced by the United Nations (see Chapter 8). In the case of the latter, it is through my encounters with the internet that I came to have access to the texts that I read as constituting (rather than describing) the global. In other words, my encounters with the very texts I read as encounters presuppose the movement and border crossings that I read *within the texts.*

In some ways, then, *Strange Encounters* is the story of my own encounters as a particular, located subject who both dwells and travels in certain places, and who has access to forms of ‘nomadic global citizenship’ (see Chapter 4) that enable some movements and disallow others. Where possible, I have attempted to write these encounters into my readings of the texts, as a way of avoiding textual fetishism (where one invests meaning in a text by cutting it off from the history of its production and consumption), and as a way of drawing attention to the differences between the texts that I read, at different times and places.

The emphasis on reading (texts) as a form of strange encounter allows us to understand how such encounters are always mediated and partial. Encounters involve the production of meaning as a form of sociality. That is, meanings are produced precisely in the intimacy of the ‘more than one’: as I suggested earlier in this introduction, by ‘coming together’ at a particular time and place, the reader and the text generate certain possibilities and foreclose others. Texts of course are not simply written or visual documents: as I argue in the final chapter, there is an intimate relationship between writing and acting, between forms of construction and ways of doing. As a result, the encounters that shape this work are not simply about how and where the stranger is produced as a figure (stranger fetishism),

but also *how that figure is put to work, and made to work*, in particular times and places. Indeed, it is precisely the differential relationships of labour that are concealed in stranger fetishism.

Ahmed, Sara, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 3-15