Sara Ahmed. ***Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*** **(London: Routledge, 2000)**

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1 Routledge's *Transformations* series has produced a number of interesting volumes in recent years on post-colonial theory and feminism. Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters* is a welcome and stimulating contribution to this list. Whilst traditionally post-colonialism has concerned itself with the concept of 'The Other' in relationship to the ontological status of the subject, Ahmed focuses rather on the substantially more fluid concept of the 'stranger'. Through the prism of feminist and post-colonial discourses the book explores the tensions and contradictions implicit within the instrumentalisation of 'stangerness' in the production of embodiment and community.

2 The book opens with an examination of the phenomenon of what Ahmed terms 'stranger fetishism'. Initially through the metaphor of alien 'close encounters' (an image which does, perhaps, jar somewhat with the reader) she shows how communities construct 'the beyond' as a means of defining themselves. She argues that the alien

> is not simply the one whom we have failed to identify ('unidentified flying objects'), but is the one whom we have already identified in the event of being named as alien: the alien recuperates all that is beyond the human into the singularity of a given form. The alien hence becomes a fetish. (p. 2)

The book then goes on to deconstruct the notion of 'Stranger fetishism' in an attempt to highlight how many aspects of society are contingent on a process through which the stranger becomes an abstracted, universalised figure: "Stranger fetishism is a fetishism of figures: *it invests the figure of a stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts 'the stranger' off from the histories of its determination.*" (p. 5 Ahmed's emphasis)

3 In order to highlight this process of fetishisation Ahmed explores a number of social discourses which are underpinned by the need for an encounter with strangers, be it in terms of their exclusion or inclusion. In Part One she begins with an examination of the concept of the "stranger danger" within the language of British 'Neighbourhood Watch' schemes. Communities, she argues, rely on the recognition of strangers as strangers, and in so doing underline the fragility and sense of crisis implicit within themselves. Utilising Althusser's thesis of interpellation, she examines how the act of naming the stranger in order to expel him/her from the neighbourhood also implicates him/her within its structure. Through this process of implication, she then suggests, one can see that it is the fear of the stranger within

which is actually the necessary impulse for the construction of the neighbourhood in the first place:

> *It is the very potential of the community to fail which is required for the constitution of the community.* It is the enforcement of the boundaries between those who are already recognised as out of place (even other fellow residents) that allows those boundaries to be established. The 'ideal' community has to be worked towards and that labour requires failure as its moment of constitution.' (p. 26 Ahmed's emphasis)

This function of community construction is at the heart of the discourse of British Neighbourhood Watch schemes. Such schemes create an inextricable link between the recognition of the stranger and the construction of 'healthy' and 'pure' social spaces. What is particularly interesting about Ahmed's analysis is her examination of the deliberately empty nature of much of the language used in Home Office documents about the scheme. If we look at her close reading of the term 'suspicious', for example, she argues:

> The good citizen is not given any information about how to tell what or who is suspicious in the first place. It is my argument that the very failure to provide us with techniques for telling the difference is itself a technique of knowledge. It is the technique of *common sense* that is produced through Neighbourhood Watch discourse. Common sense not only defines what 'we' should take for granted (that is, what is normalised and already know as 'the given'), but it also involves the normalisation of ways of 'sensing' the difference between common and uncommon. That is, information is not given about how to tell the difference between normal and suspicious, because that difference is already 'sensed' through a prior history of making sense *as* the making of 'the common'. […] Neighbourhood watch is hence about *making* the common: it makes the community. (p. 29 Ahmed's emphasis)

4 The rest of Part One goes on to explore further the construction of the stranger as something which is recognisable, that is, something which, far from being simply outside, or other to the self, is contingent to the self. For example, through an exploration of the sensation of touch Ahmed suggests that the stranger is produced through a dialectic of *proximity* and distance. With regard to the question of 'embodiment', she suggests, "Strange bodies are precisely those bodies that are temporarily assimilated *as* the unknown within the encounter: they function as the border that defines both the space into which the familiar body […] cannot cross, and the space in which such a body constitutes itself as at home" (p. 54).

5 This first section ends with an examination of how some post-colonial theorists have actually compounded the position of the stranger as fetishised figure. In particular she explores the discipline of ethnography, showing how ethnography's need to translate the experience of the stranger into a form understandable by the Western academy can lead to the appropriation of the stranger. Here she shifts the point of examination from the traditional problem of who has the right to speak for the post-colonial subject to "how does the act of

speaking already know 'the stranger' as within or without a given community?", that is, how does post-colonialism itself actually construct, and, ultimately, marginalise strangerness. This she does through her case study of the 'Bell debate', which centred around the white Australian feminist Diane Bell who controversially cited Topsy Napurrula Nelson, an indigenous Australian women, as a co-author in an article about rape within the indigenous population.

6 Part Two, by far the strongest section of the book, takes up and develops further the notion of the appropriation and manipulation of the stranger within the context of global capitalism. Here she continues in her task of undermining all conceptions of an ontology of the stranger, preferring, rather, to look at the process through which ontology is produced. Particularly interesting is her analysis of the forces at work within migrant community formation, examining how strangerness itself can become a bond:

> The forming of a community through the shared experience of not being fully at home - of having inhabited another space - presupposes an absence of a shared terrain: the forming of communities makes apparent the lack of a common identity that would allow its form to take one form. But this lack becomes reinscribed as the pre-condition of an act of making. […] The process of estrangement is the condition for the emergence of a contested community, a community which 'makes a place' in the act of reaching out to the 'out-of-place-ness' of other migrant bodies. (p. 94 Ahmed's emphasis)

7 She then turns to the manipulation of the rhetoric of multiculturalism within Australia, exploring how the government appropriates difference in order to elide it, and in so doing reaffirm the power and values of the hegemony. In Australia, Ahmed argues, multiculturalism is reduced to the concept of accepting 'cultural diversity'. This, then allows the ruling elite to 'reinven[t] "the nation" over the bodies of strangers' (p. 95), since this form of multiculturalism actually

> *excludes any differences that challenge the supposedly universal values upon which that culture is predicated.* Or, to put it more strongly, the official discourse of multiculturalism implies that differences *can* be reconciled through the very legislative framework which has historically defined Western values as neutral and universal. (p. 110 Ahmed's emphasis)

8 The final chapter of Part Two gives an good analysis of the consumption of stranger culture within Western multicultural society. Drawing on bell hook's vivid examination of the exoticisation of difference, 'Eating the Other', she explores how ethnicity is turned into something which is to be consumed by the Western subject:

> Ethnicity becomes a spice or taste that can be consumed, that can be incorporated in the life world of the one who moves between (eating) places. Differences that can be consumed are the ones that are valued: difference is valued insofar as it can be

> incorporated into, not only the nation space, but also the individual body […]. By implication, *differences that cannot be assimilated into the nation or body through the process of consumption have no value* (p. 117-118 Ahmed's emphasis).

9 In Part Three of the book, Ahmed looks to move beyond the concept of stranger fetishism in order to gesture towards a new ethics of strangerness which attempts, among other things, to rehistoricise the process of stranger production. Taking as a starting point Levinas' call for the need to protect the 'otherness of the other' (p. 140), Ahmed places her examination of the process of encountering the stranger within a broader philosophical framework. Again, she insists that the key area of investigation is the mode of encounter, rather than the ontological status of the other encountered. In so doing she posits an ethic which engages dialectically with both the particular encounter with a particular stranger and the concept of universalism implicit within all such encounters.

10 Finally, Ahmed asks the question: how can her deconstruction of the concept of strangerness be applied to feminist discourses. Here she again calls for an awareness of the tendency for Western institutions (in this case the institution of 'International' feminism) to universalise their experience and speak for all people, and in this case specifically all women. Consequently, she suggests that feminism too falls into the trap of stranger fetishism. This she illustrates through an examination of attacks by Western feminists on 'the purdah' (the veil), which is conceived by many in the West as a sign of female oppression that can be given universal significance:

> However, universalism could also be read as a fantasy of proximity. For, at one level, reading the 'veiled woman' as an oppressed woman who is sexually controlled involves a fantasy that one can inhabit the place of the other, that one already knows what 'the other' means (and therefore needs). Or, to put it differently, the emphasis on the universal wrong of the 'purdah' (and the assumption of women's right as the right 'not to wear the veil'), involves the fantasy that one can 'get inside the skin of the other' (and speak for her). (p. 166)

Concurring with Spivak, Ahmed sees this as a highly contentious position. However, unlike Spivak, Ahmed does not conclude that the project of feminism is to explore 'who is speaking', but rather to explore how we encounter who is speaking. She sums up:

> What I am calling for, against either universalism or cultural relativism, is politics that is premised on closer encounters, on encounters with those who are other than 'the other' or 'the stranger' […]. Such a politics based on encounters between other others is one bound up with responsibility - with recognising that (labouring) relations between others are always constitutive of the possibility of either speaking or not speaking. […] It is the work that needs to be done to get closer to others in a way that does not appropriate their labour as 'my labour', or their talk as 'my talk, that makes possible a different form of collective politics. The 'we' of such a collective politics is what must be worked for, rather than being the foundation of our collective work (p. 180).

Difference should be seen as a productive dynamic, rather than that which must be overcome, or simply accepted.

11 The only real weakness to be found in the book is Ahmed's at times unnecessarily dense style, particularly in the theoretical sections (when focusing on her case studies Ahmed is far more lucid). Also, there is a propensity to give the reader some rather confusing and superfluous description (was it, for example, necessary to be told of the fact that the author danced in her home during the UN's conference on International feminism in 1995? (p. 164)). That said, *Strange Encounters* is a thoughtful and provocative intervention in the growing body of feminist post-colonial theory. What is particularly welcome is its call for cultural analysis to be rooted in the particular. In so doing, Ahmed provides a necessary corrective to much postmodern theory which would seem to elide the individual's relationship to material reality.