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Unravelling Encounters: Ethics, Knowledge, and Resistance Under Neoliberalism

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In a social work landscape rife with managerial discourses and notions of cultural competency, this collection is a welcome contribution. An outgrowth of a workshop at the University of Victoria in which participants partook in conversations about the possibilities of ethical practice within a neoliberal socio-political climate, *Unravelling Encounters: Ethics, Knowledge, and Resistance Under Neoliberalism* offers a fresh, powerful, and reflexive examination of how notions of self and other are formed and transformed.

Comprised of 12 chapters, this edited collection takes up various aspects of Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* in order to explore how to be in ethical relationships with others and to illustrate how encounters between and about people are historically and contemporarily situated in power relations. Careful attention is given to the processes and effects of the actual practices contained in these encounters, illustrating the "power of neoliberal governmentality" (p. 13), as Janzen, Jeffery, and Smith write in their Introduction to the collection.

By engaging with Ahmed's notion of encountering the "stranger," the chapters in this book shift the focus from individualistic ideas about identity and difference so common in social work discourse, to instead explore the modes and effects of engagements with the figure of the stranger. As Anne O'Connell states in her chapter on apology legislation, "Ahmed is concerned that we do not fix and fixate on the stranger, the other, and instead move our attention away from the particularity of the other to the particularity of the modes of encountering others (p. 202).

The modes and sites of encounters explored in this book include classrooms, tourism, teaching ESL, bathhouses, media, and government documents, among others. The diversity of the sites examined is one of the many strengths of this book, as it allows the reader to traverse the analytical threads of the book's central themes and understand how racialized and neoliberal imaginings of self and Other occur in similar ways through diverse modes. A central theme, for example, is how "the journey towards the stranger becomes a form of self-discovery, in which the stranger functions yet again to establish and define the "I" (Ahmed

2000, p. 6 as quoted in Dean, p. 178). The “I” being imagined in many of these chapters relies upon notions of whiteness as caring, innocent, and moral. Kristen Smith, for example, illustrates how white activist social workers’ mourning and nostalgia for a Canadian social welfare state in times gone by relies upon an imagined past which erases historical racism and colonialism. In so doing, white social workers are able to construct themselves as ethical, innocent, and caring within the context of neoliberal changes. Bains’ chapter on the experiences of Canadians teaching ESL in Korea exposes a similar process by which the imagination of self as “superior” and “civilizing” forecloses the possibility of considering themselves migrant workers. Similarly, Mahrouse details how participation in ecotourism supports a type of fantasy allowing white women travellers to reconstitute themselves as innocent and moral. Reconstituting white subjectivities in these ways freezes notions of the stranger-other into a subordinate position as illustrated by Schicks’ analysis of white settler emotional resistance and backlash to Indigenous Peoples. Not only can encounters call dominant subjectivities into being, they are simultaneously able to disappear subordinate subjectivities, as Greensmith argues in his chapter on the neoliberal erasure of indigeneity from bathhouses.

As a whole, this collection offers a significant contribution to the field of social work. By drawing upon Ahmed’s concepts of “stranger fetishism” and “affective economies” the contributors to this volume resist dominant discourses about difference, cultural competency, and diversity and illustrate how “encounters do not simply begin in the present or in conditions delinked from social, economic, and political contexts” (p. 3). The authors detail both face-to-face encounters and encounters structured by public and state discourses, such as in the chapters by Dean, O’Connell, and Janzen. As such, the sites and modes of encountering explored in this book have direct relevance to social work practice, teaching, and research, making it a must read for graduate-level students and academics.

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