

## REVIEWS

### Books and other publications

#### Book Review

**Caitlin Janzen, Donna Jeffrey and Kristin Smith Eds.**  
***Unravelling Encounters. Ethics, Knowledge and***  
***Resistance under Neoliberalism. Waterloo Canada, Wilfred***  
**Laurier Press, ISBN 978-1-77112-125-5, 2015, 292 pages.**

Sarah Ahmed's (2000) work on encounters is the source of inspiration for many of the chapters in this book which owes its origin to a workshop held at the University of Victoria, BC, Canada in 2012. These chapters provide nuanced views on encounters between different people in different contexts in Canada and beyond (including foreign contexts, such as Seoul, for Canadian migrant teachers). They reveal the nature of the encounters from a postcolonial perspective, many exploring the ethical bases of these encounters in the context of the all pervasiveness of the market and therefore neoliberalism. In the words of the editors, in their introductory chapter, this volume draws on "Ahmed's conceptualization of the encounter as a productive entry into an analysis of ethics in the classroom, in social activism and in the helping professions." (p.3)

This book brings together different groups of people from different areas of specialisation, including social work, literary studies, anthropology, sociology and international development. They provide understandings of different facets of neoliberalism, as it impinges on work in different sectors, and the encounters across difference that it conditions. For instance, who does it include in and exclude from the notion of citizenship it carries forward?

Echoing some of the sentiments expressed in various chapters, I would argue that this raises the perennial critical pedagogical question: who encounters whom and from which position [of privilege or subalterneity]? It also raises issues regarding how one connects with other people in this encounter. Furthermore it sheds light on the tendency to sanitize the history of violence that has characterised earlier encounters between different people, especially violence with regard to ethnic cleansing, colonial settlement and dispossession, sexual repression and other forms of oppression. These issues are raised in the book which also indicates how these histories of colonialism, genocide and slavery are overlooked within contemporary discourses around citizenship and human rights. They are said to embody a white-centric, settler-colonial view of the world and marginalise those who do not fit this paradigm.

There are chapters which posit that seemingly progressive reactions and advances regarding previous states of oppression (e.g. Nazi-fascist domination in Europe) speak a language of emancipation and liberal democracy which remains exclusive of a variety of others who were (e.g. ruthlessly violent Western, including Nazi-fascist, colonialism in Africa and elsewhere) or are still racially otherised. Even nostalgia for and mourning of social welfare gains of the past are often characterised by these forms of eclipsing and historical amnesia. What are the tensions involved in working in different settings (e.g. bathhouses with their sexual encounters, among others, and the racialised AIDS discourse to which they often give rise)? Great contradictions characterise the encounters with people in this and similar contexts, positioned as 'other' on sexual and ethnic/racial grounds.

These questions and issues emerge as one reads through the various chapters, the introductory and individual contributions by the three editors and those written by the other eight authors involved. All authors are ensconced in Canadian academic institutions from both the 'Anglophone' and 'Francophone' contexts, a very problematic labelling of contexts given that they represent the earliest settler-colonial split in Canadian society. It still makes its mark today, obscuring the huge range of ethnic/racial differences which have characterised the country thus far.

This division has certainly obscured the presence of indigenous (First Nations) populations of Canada and the nature of encounters between them and colonising white settler others. There have been pacts and breaches throughout Canadian history. This history is marred by violence of a physical and symbolic nature but is frequently, as elsewhere, sanitized in a variety of displays, not least those we often encounter in museums, provincial or otherwise. This has resonance for countries beyond the scope of this book; Australia and New Zealand immediately come to mind. The issue of writing history and national narratives calls into question the nature of knowledge that is exalted in Western institutions and continues to be advanced in the contemporary Neoliberal scenario which limits Western understanding of the complexity of human encounters tackled in this volume.

The book calls throughout for the still urgent need to move beyond ethnocentric knowledge to learn from other knowledges that have been marginalised by colonialism and the market. We read, in the Afterword, that they are marginalised by the “‘economy of credibility’ that turns repeatedly and exclusively to the same European-derived canon of ideas and authorities.” (p. 274)

The call is for those limited to a Eurocentric body of knowledge to begin to ‘shut up and listen’ to those whose minds and bodies are inscribed with centuries of colonial violence and who have their own valid knowledge to offer, often painful but also potentially more emancipatory than the ‘official’ white settler one. This subaltern knowledge is often born of one’s connecting with the ‘web of life’ that sees people *rooted in* rather than being separate from and superior to nature. This knowledge and view of life is at odds with the Neoliberal vision of all things on earth being objects of consumption to be exploited in accordance with the rule of the market.

A process of unlearning and learning is key to the development of healthy encounters through which one can aspire to collectively resist and transform colonial legacies, while, at the same time, valorising social and bio-difference. Some of these legacies are embedded in or transcend neoliberalism that is not simply a type of economic policy but also very much an ideology for producing a particular kind of

subjectivity (Sotiris, 2004, p. 319) which, as indicated by authors in this book, is characterised by self-interest, self-censorship, competition and being governed at a distance (governmentality). Governmentality and 'colonial logics' can easily constitute a strong feature of the University-community encounters, given specific treatment in one of the book's chapters.

The volume touches on all of the above issues and more. In my view, there should be a follow up to this initiative which can take the form of a genuinely international forum around the subject. *Postcolonial Directions in Education* can provide a suitable platform for this.

**Peter Mayo**

*University of Malta*

## **References**

- Ahmed, S (2000) *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Sotiris, P (2014), 'The New 'Age of Insurrections' and the Challenges for the Left (Thoughts on the aftermath of the Turkish revolt) in U. B. Gezgin, K. Inal & D. Hill (eds.), *The Gezi Revolt: People's Revolutionary Resistance against Neoliberal Capitalism in Turkey*, Institute for Education Policy Studies, Brighton.