Close encounters: Creating embodied spaces of resistance to marginalization and disempowering representation of difference in organization

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Abstract
In this paper I approach questions of representation from a viewpoint that adopts postcolonial feminism as a starting point for theorizing new orientations for the study of corporeal ethics and difference in organizations. Specifically, I draw on the works of Sara Ahmed and Gayatri Spivak to open up a notion of a close encounter to reflect how we could encounter others in a generous way as a basis for ethical engagement with difference in organizations. Embracing an understanding of self–other relations as embodied practices that materialize in concrete worlds but transcend times, places, and spaces, close encounters provide an alternative epistemological position to imagine ethical subjectivities in organizations through which withdrawal from the essentialist representations that guide our understanding of difference is possible and resistance to the dominant gendered and racialized identities can take place. This perspective offers important implications for rethinking the basis of feminist alliances, participative epistemologies and difference in postcoloniality.

KEYWORDS
close encounter, corporeal ethics, difference, representation, resistance

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INTRODUCTION

In doing research, we most often write about others, either from a distance or by getting close to them. We write through practices of representation, but what is on the line in those practices and how, along the general discourse of difference, do they reflect to work and organizations? In postcolonial literature, questions of representation have long been examined under the rubric of the production of otherness (see, e.g., Bhabha, 1994; Fabian, 1983; Fanon, 1967/2008; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Suleri, 1992). Feminist contributions to postcolonial literature have, for example, addressed the questions of the way the “West” colonizes and writes out gender, especially its colored, racial, and class dimensions (see, e.g., Mohanty, 1991, 2003), focusing ethico-political attention on knowing differently and fighting intellectual, or epistemic, colonialism, and the way in which subaltern/Third World women become appropriated in the West’s discursive and material practices (Minh-Ha, 1989; Spivak, 1981, 1988).

Albeit marginal, postcolonial feminist critiques of representation in organization studies are long-standing (e.g., Calás, 1992; Chio, 1996; Henry & Pringle, 1996; Mir et al., 1999; Özkan-Pan, 2012) and the need to write, think, and organize differently has been established. Despite the pervasiveness of many group stereotypes, and the harmful appropriative effects they cause on their bearers and their world views and knowledge, there have been few attempts to explicitly frame questions of representation as ethical issues and link them to discussions of ethics in organizations. Rare exceptions to this are the works of Rhodes and Westwood (2007), Rhodes (2009), Westwood (2015), and Özkan-Pan (2019a), which all point to crucial questions of responsibility and ethics of difference in organizations (Rhodes and Wray-Bliss, 2013). Foregrounding one potential form of relational ethics, in this paper, I concentrate on reflecting the responsibilities, politics, and ethics of representation that embodied postcolonial feminist viewpoints bring out for management and organization scholars interested in the long-contested dilemmas of approaching and “writing the Other” (Rhodes & Westwood, 2007).

I frame questions of representation through embodied ethics and bring up and explore an understudied crossroad of postcolonial feminism and corporeal ethics in organizations (Pullen & Rhodes, 2010, 2014, 2015a). As the disruptive element of corporeal ethics demonstrates the possibilities of the ethico-politics of resistance to social inequalities that are reproduced in organizations (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014, p. 788), this text focuses on thinking how the gendered and racialized colonial identities produced by dominant representations can be resisted through it. I propose that the current readings of corporeal ethics in organizations grounded in embodied, lived experience (Diprose, 2002) seem to be unable to stand for the gendered postcolonial body. In the discussions of ethics, embodiment, and organization (e.g., Dale & Latham, 2015; Kenny & Fotaki, 2015; Knights, 2015; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015; Tyler, 2019), the specific, politicized nature of the gendered postcolonial body and experience have not been analyzed, which has left the subaltern and othered identities in the shadows (Spivak, 1990; Liu, 2017), as the authors in the call for papers for this special issue point out (Georgiadou et al., 2019). Currently, the site of an embodied encounter with an-other and the following moment of interembodiment is rather exclusively understood as inclusive, thus rendering the possible differentiative, hierarchical, and silencing nature of the encounter invisible and difficult—if not impossible—to be addressed.

To change this and further the existing theoretical perspectives and work on embodied ethics and difference in organizations, I introduce a concept of a close encounter derived from Sara Ahmed’s economies of touch (2000), deeply rooted in her theorization of strange encounters and Gayatri Spivak’s thoughts on the ethical singularity of the Other (1996, 1999), also known as a secret encounter. In a close encounter, I imagine a different kind of being with the Other in which—acknowledging the limitations, particularity, responsibility, and accountability of the encounter—it becomes possible to engage with others in postcoloniality in a way that gives and is generous (Diprose, 1996, 2002; Ahmed, 2000). Close encounters illustrate difference and ethics as emerging through material relations between bodies that unfold in different times, places, and spaces. Thus, this paper provides an alternative epistemological position to imagine ethical subjectivities through which withdrawal from the essentialist representations that guide our understanding of difference in organizations is possible and resistance to the dominant identity categorizations can take place, making learning from others possible.
As negotiations of ethics and subjectivities in organizations take place in relation to difference, expanding our understanding of the concept of difference and its formation through close encounters redirects diversity scholarship toward relevant considerations from embodied ethics. Özkazanc-Pan (2019a) has presented questions and concerns around ethics, (in)equality, and representation as vital to future research on difference and inclusion in the context of management and organization studies. It is not in the scope of this paper to open up the well-established critique of the concepts of multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion (see, e.g., Ahonen et al., 2014; Dobusch, 2014; Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013; Kaasila-Pakanen, 2015; Liu, 2017; Nkomo, 2014; Swan, 2010; Zanoni et al., 2010), but it is important to pay attention to the ways in which the subject of diversity can be formed and with what consequences (Ahonen & Tienari, 2015; Özkazanc-Pan & Calás, 2015). Ahonen and Tienari (2015, p. 281) bring forward how production of diversity knowledge includes the danger of turning difference into categorizable diversity through colonial forms of knowledge, for which finding a way to understand formation of subjectivities and difference outside the social psychological conceptualizations of self and even beyond the relational understandings that still tie the subject in the context of time and space (Calás et al., 2013, p. 712) has guided the construction of this text.

The ideas presented in this paper sharpen the point about how a seemingly individual action, such as writing, is embedded in an epistemic community in which we need to carry the collective responsibility of our knowledge claims. Collective responsibility also paves the way to collective and affective solidarity in epistemic communities. Vachhani and Pullen (2019, p. 20) have written about ethics, politics, and feminist organizing, about the affective solidarity and practices of feminist infrapolitics that enable us to understand exclusion and become sensitive to it. Thus, the goal of this text is not to prompt a reading of corporeal ethics that creates a one-size-fits-all version of it but to evoke an understanding of ethics that is based on the “engagements of women across the racial, ethnic and class distinctions that would divide us” (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019, p. 19) and support a vision of noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders (Mohanty, 2003, p. 224). Close encounters explicate that these engagements and solidarity are not necessarily easily built, comfortable, or harmonious but also include accepting many uncomfortable emotions and conflicts. In the introductory sentences of this paper, I deliberately use the word “reflections” to signal that the goal of this paper is not a comprehensive and regulated analysis of “an ethical encounter” or an assertion of the impossibility of it but to form a critical and productive organizational space in which to ask questions and one question in particular: how can we write the Other differently? Historically and conceptually, postcolonial thinking and postcoloniality emerged from movements and events of anticolonial liberation that brought together anticolonial thought and figures from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to challenge modern imperialism and pursue multiracial and multilingual solidarities (Gandhi, 2019, pp. 180–181). Hence, keeping in mind the political struggles from which postcolonial theories arise and how the colonial and gendered operations of power affect bodies and formation of subjectivities in organizations, I am writing this text to learn to theorize from difference, to examine the politics of difference and diversity in organizations, and to support ethics that “emerge infrapolitically between affective bodies and that make available the circumstances for the preconditions of politics” (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019, p. 19).

This cannot be done without also understanding writing as an embodied and affective practice (e.g., Gilmore et al., 2019; Höpfl, 2000; Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018; Metcalfe, 2003; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008, 2015b; Sinclair & Ladkin, 2018; Vachhani, 2015) and as an inquiry (Helin, 2019) that can be used and seen as a performative and political act (Pullen, 2018; Savigny, 2017). This text is written through the body of a Northern European woman: an academic, a mother, and a passionate writer who rarely finds her words as assertive as demanded by the proper “scientific” practice. Speaking from a position of a white scholar who is part of the One-Third World—which Mohanty (2003, p. 227) refers to through Esteva and Prakash’s (1998) taxonomy of the One-Third World/Two-Thirds World—brings certain limitations and complexities to my readings of postcolonial literature, feminist theory, and organizations. It is clear that from the social position that this paper is written, there is knowledge I cannot reach. This paragraph is not to be read as a sign of “good practice” or a self-reflexive confession that could transcend my whiteness and possible ignorance (Alcoff, 1991; Swan, 2017) but as providing accountability for my theoretical
positionality and complicity in that which I criticize (Spivak, 1988, 1990). In alignment with Westwood’s (2015) critique on intensified reflexivity as an insufficient answer to mediate our encounters with others, I have aimed to acknowledge the complexities and limitations of my position within the text and by reimagining reflexivity as a corporeal, aesthetic, and political act that searches for an alternative ethical position (Fotaki et al., 2014, p. 1252) from which to approach difference in organization.

In the following sections, I sketch a picture of what a close encounter thought through embodied postcolonial feminist ethics could look like and what kind of possibilities it could offer for resisting oppressive representations and fostering social justice and equality in organizations. The lines of my reflection unfold as follows: I begin by positioning this work in postcoloniality and among the existing postcolonial feminist organization research and the work on embodied ethics in organizations, which explicitly takes part in conversations on difference through highlighting the materiality of the body. In the second part, I open up the conceptual prerequisites of close encounters by connecting the work of Ahmed and Spivak and illustrate how self–other relations can be understood differently through close encounters as a location to which the relationship of ethics and difference returns. In the final part, I consider what these ideas mean for approaching and writing the Other differently, not only in reference to questions of corporeal ethics in organizations but also to organizational discourses on diversity, inclusion, and belonging.

2 | POSTCOLONIALITY, CORPOREAL GENEROSITY, AND DIFFERENCE

As “the struggle over representation is always also a struggle over knowledge” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 189), postcolonial feminist frameworks redirect management and organization scholars toward politicization of theory and challenging those epistemological assumptions that uphold hegemonic regimes of representation and particular object/subject relations in our field of study. This in mind, postcolonial feminist organization analyses have focused on various kinds of discursive and material encounters as experiences of relationality in a globalized world, for example: Ong (1987) has analyzed the encounter of Malay factory women with global industrial production; Calás and Smircich (2003) have brought forward the close relationship between feminine-in-management discourse and globalization (Calás and Smircich, 1993) and through a particular critique of modernity, development, and globalization, sought to create space for organization scholars to escape the institutional forms of representation that confine our thought; also Chio (2005) has specifically investigated the questions of voice, representation, and otherness through the phenomenon of knowledge transfers between and within multinational workplaces and local actors in Malaysia. Postcolonial feminist lenses have also been used to address questions of contemporary subject formation (Leonard, 2010; Calás et al., 2013), the simultaneity of race, gender, and class in organizations (Holvino, 2010), and to critique and reframe the discourses of organization development (Holvino, 1996), business ethics (Calás & Smircich, 1997), diversity (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006; Özkan-Pan & Calás, 2015; Özkan-Pan, 2019a), and corporate social responsibility (Özkazanc-Pan, 2019b) among others.

In general, this stream of research examines the complexities and intersections of labor, gender, race, ethnicity, and class in different organizational contexts, processes, and knowledge production. As Calás and Smircich (2011) bring out, under globalization, a move toward transnational feminisms has guided feminist authors to contemplate the above-mentioned interconnections in the contemporary contexts of shifting boundaries and networks based on mobility across time and space. These dynamics not only form the context of this study as postcoloniality but moreover, emphasize the complexity of the relationship between the past and present, and between the histories of colonization and contemporary forms of globalization (Ahmed, 2000). Thus, postcoloniality, as used here, goes beyond the condition in which we encounter others by involving an assumption of a deconstructive position in it, which allows engagement with the struggles and solidarity of the transnational political subjectivity as the Global South (Mahler, 2017).
As shown by previous research, the question of how we conceptualize and understand difference is inherently ethical—through static categorizations of difference and identities, we are at the risk of reproducing the inequalities we seek to address (Ahonen & Tienari, 2015; Westwood, 2015; Özkazanc-Pan, 2019a). Using the analytical framework of superdiversity, Özkazanc-Pan (2019a) positions the particularity of experiences associated with encounters between and among people as crucial to analysis that seeks to understand differences and belonging. Her framework rearticulates organizations as emergent out of these encounters and thus positions organizations and organizing as appropriate sites to understand fluid subject formations that take shape through the encounters (Özkazanc-Pan, 2019a, p. 485). From the perspective of seeing organization, work and research as embodied practices, as emergent out of encounters between bodies upon which different social, political and even technological forces play, the question of corporeal generosity and respect for the lived and experienced difference raised by Pullen and Rhodes (2014) becomes central. Consequently, approaching corporeal generosity and generous encounters through lenses that recognize the well-established postcolonial feminist critique of the forms of representation that restrict voices and visibilities in organization, and the more recent mobile conceptualizations of subjectivity formation, offers us interesting viewpoints on what embodied ethics in postcoloniality might look like.

Keeping in mind the long-standing criticism of the disembodied masculine organizational subject and realities (e.g., Bendl, 2008; Fotaki et al., 2014; Gherardi & Poggio, 2001; Höpfl, 2000; Knights & Kerfoot, 2004; Phillips et al., 2014), corporeal ethics in organizations bring out how ethics cannot play out as guided and controlled practices of organizations—as organizational ethics—but through sensing, knowing, and vulnerable bodies in relation with each other (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014). Giving ethical primacy to the concrete and embodied other in self–other relations, Pullen and Rhodes (2014, p. 786) have advocated ethics that originate from an embodied, affective relationship with other people—ethics that could seize the lived, sensed, and felt experience of interpersonal ethical engagement that Roberts (2001) identifies as left aside by organizational ethics. This perspective not only recognizes power relations as constitutive of organizations, but it highlights that it is power relations mapped through the body that constitute organizations, for which the starting point of resistance against the aforementioned gendered and racialized subjectivities must also begin from the bodies through which ethics emerge. Following Rosalyn Diprose, generosity toward the Other in corporeal ethics can be understood as something that constitutes the self as open to others (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014, p. 787). Diprose (2002, p. 5) has described generosity as a being given to others without deliberation, “a being given that constitutes the self as affective and being affected, that constitutes social relations and that which is given in relation.” Therefore, the generosity that this paper refers to speaks of openness that happens at the level of prereflective corporeality and is not a quality of an individual in the encounter per se.

The notion of intercorporeal generosity (Diprose, 2002) and its inclusivity resonates with many of the recent studies on embodied ethics in organizations. In the study of management and organization, the embodied ethics of the body have been considered from diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives, bringing out various feminist concerns and sensibilities relating to gender, bodies, and identities in organizations. These studies have given voice to the ethico-political demands of embodied self–other relations and their connection to creating transformational change in the way that difference is understood and approached in organizations: For example, Kenny and Fotaki (2015) have addressed the ethics of difference through the feminist ethics of Ettinger in order to develop a theory of inter-corporeal organizational ethics that emphasizes the compassionate relationality of subjects through the idea of matrixial borderspace and offers a theory of subjectivity that goes beyond the assumptions of oppositionality and domination. Building on and critiquing Levinasian ethics of impossibility and recognition, Thanem and Wallenberg (2015) have proposed an embodied ethics of organizational life through Spinoza’s affective ethics as inseparable from ontology and politics. They offer a theory of the good, joyful, and powerful life, not only to analyze, enact, and enhance the affective relations embodied within organizations but also to put limits on the domination, exploitation, and exclusion that take place there. Based on fieldwork in a nonprofit organization that provides support for people with disabilities, Dale and Latham (2015) have shown concern for the ethical implications of the entanglement of embodiment and nonhuman materialities, drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty and also Levinas.
A quite different context of a French investment bank has set the scene for Péretz et al. (2015) to study collective ethics as an esprit de corps, in which the visceral nature of ethics is seen social as much as individual. Adding to these views, Knights (2015) has drawn attention to the ways in which masculine binary thinking restricts the possibilities for embodied ethical engagement in organizations and theorized a nondualistic approach to ethics in organization that aims to both disavow the dominant discourses of masculinity and dissolve the discriminatory ground that enables binary thinking and the hierarchies it sustains. These diverse studies have offered perceptive contributions and brought up various gendered differences of embodiment to the discussions of ethics in organizations with an open desire to dismiss the dualistic and discriminatory grounds of organizations and work toward equality.

Although current approaches to embodied ethics in organizations have drawn from multiple sources, the absence of postcolonial and postcolonial feminist perspectives leaves the materiality of the gendered postcolonial subject unexplored in the theory and practice of ethics of difference. According to Rhodes and Wray-Bliss (2013, p. 43), examination of ethical difference relates to togetherness, which is seen in the way that the site of inter-embodiment is assumed as inclusive in its openness to difference in the contemporary understandings of corporeal ethics and intercorporeal generosity in organizations. From a postcolonial perspective, this assumption and glossing over of the “painstaking labour” (Spivak, 1996, p. 269) that is needed to establish responsibility and accountability through being attentive to injustices of the past are problematic and they might not lead us closer to more equal or “ethical” self–other relations. But what kind of generosity, openness to others, could? Swan (2017) has discussed generous encounters in relation to critical diversity research and collective white ignorance when arguing for listening as a form of progressive white praxis. I continue the discussion on generous encounters from this opening in order to voice the challenges the theory of corporeal generosity and intersubjectivity as a site of inclusion presents for postcolonial bodies in organization.

3 | THEORIZING A CLOSE ENCOUNTER

A central line of this text focuses on the concept of a close encounter as a way of approaching and writing the Other differently. To do that, here I begin to write through the work and thoughts of a critical race theorist, Ahmed (1997, 2000), and a literary theorist, Spivak (1981, 1985, 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1999, 2004)—two prominent postcolonial feminist scholars interested in the materiality of colonial discourse and its gendered subject. In her exploration of the politics and ethics of difference, otherness, and strangeness in specific, Ahmed (2000) has analyzed the production of stranger fetishism and how the absence and presence of “alien” in the stranger pushes us to recognize the limits of representation as that which exceeds “our” knowledge. Combined in critical materialist attention, Ahmed’s work resonates well with the ethico-political goals of Spivak’s (1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1990, 1999) writings on bringing out the (im)possibilities of an ethical encounter with the subaltern. As both of these writers focus on the processes through which bodies marked by race and gender come to matter, I draw on them to frame a close encounter as an epistemological space from which the politics and ethics of representation can be analyzed in an organizational sphere, and from which possibilities for generous encounters can arise.

3.1 | Space in-between (silence and violent representation)

Practices of representation often erase differences. Ahmed (2000, p. 6) suggests that stranger fetishism and the representations it propagates can only be prevented by examining the social relations they hide. Namely, by considering how the stranger, or the Other, is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion that not only threaten but form the boundaries of bodies and both living and epistemic communities. Instead of concealing or overcoming epistemic difference with overly emphasized reflexivity in our writings of others, both Spivak (1988)
and Ahmed (2000) suggests we recognize and focus on the difference. Ahmed speaks of the importance of acknowledging the more general postcolonial feminist emphasis on the power differences between women, and of the distance and proximity between the one that writes and the one that is written of, whereas Spivak (1988, 1985) specifically calls upon academics to recognize their epistemic privilege and institutional location, from which and to which, their writing is based. How then to write, as a white Western feminist, without the colonial intention of knowing the Other, speaking for her, and avoiding representing anyone as a subject or object of knowledge (Mohanty, 1991)?

Remaining completely silent cannot be the answer (Ahmed, 2000, pp. 166–167; Spivak, 1987b, pp. 253–254, 1988, p. 80, 1990, p. 62) as it would still predicate the possibility of knowledge on identity and refuse the inevitable encounter, derived from our complicity in the international division of labor, with those who are not part of the One-Third World, and confirm the Other’s status as already recognized and known. Ahmed (2000) proposes that we need to develop a stronger sense of what it means to be “in-it,” in the encounter as a site of differentiation and hierarchization that already takes place in the organization, spatialization, and gendering of labor and thus mediates that which is already said and what is possible to say about others. Also, Spivak (1988) notes that although the answer to the questions of subaltern representation by Western academics cannot be silence; instead of what we can say, the notion of what we cannot say becomes important. If the international division of labor already situates so-called Western and non-Western people in relations and encounters of difference and hierarchization, to take this into account in our research practice and particular encounters with others requires us to return to the site of the differentiation and to the site wherein representations become lived experience—to the body.

3.2 | Relating through touch

Even though Ahmed (2000) emphasizes our encounters as embodied, what she brings out is that encounters of strangeness or otherness do not simply take place in the present nor just in face-to-face encounters. For Ahmed (2000, p. 8), the nonpresence of a face-to-face encounter does not lose the lived “more than one” in which a subject comes into existence as an entity—whether in a face-to-face encounter or a different type of encounter: “it is only through meeting with an-other that the identity of a given person comes to be inhabited as living.” (emphasis in the original). As encounters with others are often meetings based on absence of knowledge (of the Other), they are unpredictable and thus involve both fixation and the impossibility of fixation—they are determined, but not fully determined (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8). She explains further: in constituting the subject in relation to the “stranger,” when we meet others, we seek to recognize who they are by reading the signs on their body or by reading their body as a sign—however, we may not be able to do that and by telling the difference between this other and other others, we try to find a way of achieving recognition. Hence the encounters we may have with other others “reopen the prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8). In postcoloniality, the particular (the encounter) thus always carries the traces of the general (the broader relationships of power and asymmetry) but is never fully determined by them.

Starting to think of the dilemmas of encountering difference using Ahmed’s bodily encounters indicates that marking out the boundary lines between bodies involves practices and techniques of differentiation. For Ahmed the body as such is still insufficient as a boundary line of difference. It is the skin—as a border that feels—that functions as a mechanism for social differentiation and that enables us to think how the materialization of bodies involves an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies—as skin registers how bodies are touched by others (Ahmed, 2000, p. 45). What she comes to suggest is an understanding of embodiment as lived experience, which moves beyond the privatized realm of “my body,” an understanding of embodiment that could thus be theorized in terms of inter-embodiment through which the lived experience of embodiment is always the social experience of dwelling with other bodies (Ahmed, 2000, p. 47). Ahmed notes, however, that she wants to make a difference to the general theory of interembodiment in which “my body” is transformed into “our body” and sociality becomes the fleshy
form of many bodily forms: she wants to consider the sociality of such inter-embodiment as the impossibility of any such “our”—interembodiment as a site of differentiation rather than inclusion (Ahmed, 2000, p. 48).

The challenge that the postcolonial body produces for corporeal generosity in organizations arises from this. In the encounters, or in the system of intercorporeality as interbodily movements, bodies are touched by some bodies differently from other bodies (Ahmed, 2000, p. 48). According to Ahmed, this requires that in postcoloniality, corporeal generosity would be complemented by an approach that does not simply see “my body” being with the “other body” as a site of inclusion (Diprose, 1996, 2002) but as a site of differentiation that, by necessity, includes a nonequal relation of asymmetry between “my body” and the “other body,” and thus also takes into account the prior histories of encounters and the nonpresent moment of the encounter. Being with the Other thus gains a different kind of significance if it is supplemented by an understanding of the economies of touch that mediate the relation between particular bodies and the “body” of the social (Ahmed, 2000, p. 49). This is a relation that Ahmed explains as imbalanced: even if both of them require the touch of the other to come into being, the particular body is touched by the social in a much stronger sense as the social body actually marks the effect of being with some others over other others, which again continuously reforms and deforms both bodily and social space (Ahmed, 2000, p. 49).

3.3 | Bodies in relation (in effect)

That being said, to analyze difference and the related social dilemmas as bodily matters does not mean that the differences can be read on the surface of the body, the skin, but as Ahmed (2000) reminds, it is rather about accounting for the very effect of the surface and for how bodies come to take certain shapes over others and in relation to others. What is important to remember is that difference is not found in or on the body (see Suleri, 1992, on feminism skin deep), it is established as a relation between bodies. As said, the role of the corporeal, the body, becomes emphasized as it is where representations and their effects come to be lived; it is where their harmful and oppressive nature shows itself as informing and cocreating notions of reality. As Prasad (2014) has shown through his example of the latent prejudices among all of us, it is only human to be affected and influenced by institutionalized discourses of representation in social action. In her essay and Amnesty Lecture Righting Wrongs, Spivak (2004, p. 524) speaks of human rights and “altered normality” as an objective of the educational system that operated behind colonialism. Also, Prasad (2014, p. 528) brings out the force of representations in creating altered normalities that govern bodies while perceptively mirroring how representation intrudes experience, if is not constructed by it as Spivak (1988) suggests.

3.4 | Representation(s) in complicity

If we understand representations as material, as carrying a power to create altered normalities and intrude our daily life and social relations, a deeper look into the concept of representation can shed light onto the potential for transformational change in itself through the way it is understood. For Spivak (1988,1990), representations function in a double form: as Vertretung, meaning “stepping into someone’s place,” to tread in someone else’s shoes (Spivak, 1990, p. 108). This is when representation can be seen as political representation. And as Darstellung, meaning “placing there,” representing through proxy and portrait (1990, p. 108). As presented by Landry and Maclean (1996, p. 6), the danger lies in collapsing these two meanings in writing and research, mistaking the aesthetic sense of representation for actually being in the other’s shoes and “assuming that always imagined and negotiated constituencies based on unstable identifications have literal referents: ‘the workers’, ‘the women’, ‘the world.’” The key is to remember “that in the act of representing politically, you actually represent yourself and your constituency in the portrait sense, as well,” and this complicity should be kept in mind—the “essence” that
Vertretung represents is a representation of the other kind, Darstellung (Spivak, 1990, pp. 108–109). This can be read as pointing to a kind of deconstructive awareness to acknowledge that these kind of master words are actually catachreses and that there are no “true” examples that could stand for the ideals that representations are capable of producing (Spivak, 1990, p. 104). In practice, it also points to the dangers of benevolent and familiar speaking for the Other and not only to the theoretical but material implications of these actions for the gendered subject.

3.5  |  Unlearning bodies in (productive) complicity

Reading Spivak and the deconstructive awareness she brings out shows the possibilities for both the ethical and nonethical in organization. As investigators, we become entangled in the webs of the imperial practices and universal categories of Anglo-American academic knowledge, even if our goal would be to break free from them (Spivak, 1985, p. 272). In encounters of difference, we are thus obligated to take our complicity and responsibility into account, both in knowledge/power relations and in the unequal material conditions that we may perpetuate and create through the practices of research for those at the opposite side of the international division of labor (Spivak, 1988, p. 80). For Spivak, the relationship between global capitalism (as exploitation in economics) and nation-state alliances (as domination in geopolitics) is so macrological that it cannot account for the micrological texture of power (1988, p. 74). To touch those micrologies and triviality of power in an ethical encounter with another, a researcher would thus need to leave aside the earlier described interest in what can be said and focus on bringing into light subject formations (aka representations) that often operate in the interests that fix the macrologies. Thereby, Spivak guides our attention to representing how the Other has become (and still is) represented and the social consequences of this. She urges us to think what knowledge and the practices of knowing do. The silencing nature of representations is obvious, but as Ahmed (2000, p. 57) points out, if we consider the production of “the stranger” through relationships of knowledge, we can draw attention to the actual conditions of knowing and labor, which in the end allow the very possibility of speaking or listening.

Spivak’s writings emphasize the paradoxical nature of encountering difference—when a Western academic encounters difference, she or he inevitably becomes complicit in constituting the Other, regardless of the research agenda. Yet, this does not mean that this complicity has to be unproductive or oppressive. Spivak’s writings put emphasis on recognizing the limits of Western knowledge, acknowledging our theoretical and institutional positivity, and unlearning our privilege (Spivak, 1981, 1988), learning to learn from others in order “to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be corrected by our superior theory and enlightened compassion” (Spivak, 1981, p. 156). The point that Spivak strongly makes is that in order to learn enough about Third World women (“the Other”) and to develop a different readership (let alone writership) is to appreciate the immense heterogeneity of the field and that “the First World feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged as a woman” (Spivak, 1981, pp. 156–157). One must learn how to listen to that other constituency, to speak to others in a manner in which one is understood and taken seriously, and most importantly, in a way that enables others to answer back (Spivak, 1990, p. 42). Unlearning one’s privileges and learning to learn from others is thus an ethical project. Genuinely unlearning is about imagining the Other ethical subject and the affirmative ethical possibilities (Spivak, 1993) in which this paper has faith.

3.6  |  A singular body

The double gesture proposed by deconstructive awareness suggests that a researcher in the neocolonial context needs to begin from the historical critique of their position and recognize that the margin, as the boundary line of difference, is also the impossible boundary of marking off the wholly other or quite other (tout autre)—“the named marginal is as much a concealment as a disclosure of the margin, and where s/he discloses, s/he is
singular” (Spivak, 1999, p. 173). Spivak (1999, p. 384) has used the term ethical singularity to describe the premises from which responsibility, answerability, and accountability arise in encounters in which we engage profoundly with a person and when responses and answers flow from both sides. She explains: in those encounters we want to conceal nothing, "yet on both sides there is always a sense that something has not got across," which is the secret that one desperately wants to reveal in the relationship of singularity, responsibility, and accountability (Spivak, 1999, p. 384). The singularity of the subaltern body, acknowledging its impossibility in disclosure, creates the space for the alternative ethical position to imagine the Other ethical subject (as un-translatable). It is ethical singularity that thus creates a sense of the limits of what can be got across and a sense of that which cannot be grasped in the present moment but is mediated by the encounter (Ahmed, 2000, p. 148). Understanding encounters as singular thus makes it possible to engage with that which does not come across and cannot be grasped. As this type of encounter can be attentive to both sides and mind-changing on both sides (Spivak, 1999, p. 383), it has the potential to be an encounter that gives and is generous (Ahmed, 2000; Diprose, 1996, 2002).

3.7 In close engagement

Ahmed (2000, p. 166) notes, that the universalism of “speaking for” the Other is often based on the delusion of absolute proximity or distance, for which she has warned her readers of the dangers of taking proximity or distance as basis for ethics. Yet a concern with the responsibilities, politics, and ethics of representation calls for close engagement: getting “close enough to others to be touched by that which cannot be simply got across” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 157). Ahmed clarifies: in such an encounter one does not stay in place or stay safely at a distance but, through getting closer, the impossibility of pure proximity can be put to work and one can actually begin to think what it means to be “in-it.” For her, the assumption of distance involves a refusal to recognize the relationships of proximity between differently located women in the world, and as said: “Western feminists are already in relationships with ‘third world women’ given our implication in an international division of labour—we do not withdraw from that implication by refusing the privilege of speech.” (emphasis in the original) (Ahmed, 2000, p. 167). To make an encounter attentive and responsible for both sides thus requires a willingness to work within the dialectics of proximity and distance.

Through the work of Ahmed and Spivak, I have so far explored how an embodied feminist postcolonial position illustrates the responsibilities, politics, and ethics of representation in organization through defining the prerequisites of close encounters. A close encounter with an-other creates a space for voices that refuse to keep silent or engage in projects of violent representation and speaking for others. A close encounter aims to capture the ethical moment between bodies in relation through difference, through acknowledging both the proximity and novelty of the encounter at hand and also the distance brought along by the broader social processes that unfold, affect, and bind the encounter to different times, places, and spaces. Difference and generosity are thus located to the encounter, as created in it and by it. In a close encounter, the continuous play of the two forms of representation is recognized and our complicity is entangled in it—in the way we practice research through representing and writing others. A close encounter brings us just close enough to realize the limits of our knowledge and the possibilities it offers for learning differently from others. Learning through affect, the body, and through sensing the untranslatable moment of the encounter, the escaping ethical singularity of the Other, which gives the encounter its potential to be productive and generous. A close encounter is thus accepted as a location to which the relationship of ethics and difference returns. In order to think more closely what this means, below I discuss the signification and suggestions that arise from this theorization for organization scholars interested in the questions of difference, generous encounters and creating possibilities for different kind of knowledge production and praxis.
In the previous sections, I have theorized from difference and from the exclusion (or more precisely, the absence of presence) of the gendered postcolonial subject in corporeal ethics, in productive complicity. I have strived to keep within the frames of knowledge that my position can offer for examination of an ethico-political space of a close encounter from which the shifting play of the two forms of representation can be read. But what is the potential of close encounters for transforming our thinking of self–other relations in organizations and academic practice? And more precisely, how can close encounters and the presented reflections materialize in politics that could change the way difference is seen and understood in organizations? Ahmed’s and Spivak’s work suggest that close encounters not only function as moments of differentiation based in history, presence, and opening futures but that these moments can lead us closer to the “ethical” in writing and everyday organizational practices.

The concept of a close encounter shares Diprose’s (1994, p. 38) idea of ethics as the examination and practice of that which constitutes our embodied place in the world. Thus, drawing from broader feminist ethics, ethical engagement with others in close encounters recognizes experience as deriving from diverse and nonsubstitutable forms of embodiment and recognizes lived experience as a condition under which people may understand how histories of oppression constrict the contexts in which encounters take place, and relationships and responsibilities toward others emerge (Borgerson, 2007). In continuation with this, the concept of close encounter brings up three interrelated considerations for the theory of corporeal ethics and difference in organizations. All of these, stem from the problematization of the prevailing understandings of proximity and distance, and time and space in self–other relations in organizations. First, the concept complicates the notion of interembodiment as solely inclusive and thus guides attention to the productive discomfort that is needed to create generous and responsible encounters, which enable forming affective feminist alliances through differently situated bodies in postcoloniality. Second, it brings out how generous encounters may also need “strategic silence” to decenter privileged epistemologies and third, it suggests understanding difference as a dynamic relation, which at the end highlights the need of institutional transformation through the productive discomfort. Next, I will discuss these three possibilities and their implications in more detail.

4.1 Community building through productive discomfort

As presented, a postcolonial feminist reading of close encounters complicates ideas of the site of interembodiment as inclusive and also brings it up as a site of differentiation and hierarchization (Ahmed, 2000). Thus, organization scholars should take into account that the moment of interembodiment not only holds potential for connecting and understanding but also for discontinuity and separation. From a postcolonial perspective, our shared being or being with the Other cannot be seen as straightforwardly inclusive and comfortable but also as complicated and conflicted, and yet potentially productive in enacting more equitable practices in organizations. This productivity can only arise from the “painstaking labour” of accepting the uneasiness of the emotions that might be evoked in opening up the meaning and violence of past encounters in order to create different, more responsible futures. For corporeal ethics in organizations, this can help in understanding how the prereflective felt response of the body in the openness and hospitality toward others (Diprose, 2002) can also be negative, felt as discomfort on the skin, and how this discomfort or pain might be a necessary, if not critical, starting point for building alliances and transnational feminist solidarity. Although Ahmed’s (1997, 2000) conceptualization of economies of touch implies that encounters do not dissolve boundaries between the self and other, being touched by others brings one closer to each other enabling dialogue and learning from others, which reflects how differently situated and constituted bodies can thus act as a basis for community building and feminist organization across borders (see also Özkazanc-Pan, 2019c on collective feminism).
4.2  Listening made possible by strategic silence

Close encounters problematize current understandings of proximity and distance, both material and discursive, in self-other relations and in doing research. In postcoloniality, one needs to simultaneously acknowledge the closeness of the Other (many times, in their absence) and the distance that keeps one apart, that “something which does not get across.” This implies that organization scholars need to acknowledge that through the spatiotemporal element of the encounter and past encounters, we are already in embodied relations with others and share a complex presence in this world. This presence effects how we encounter others in different organizational spaces and doing research. In her discussion of generous encounters, Swan (2017, p. 555 relying on Ahmed) has pointed out how in encounters of Others there is a lot that remains unspoken or unvoiced, for which “we will need a different kind of listening to hear what is not ‘present as voice.’” To hear the silences and for this kind of listening to be possible, we may also need “strategic silence,” or, as Mir et al. (1999, p. 290) has expressed it, strategic “silence as said,” that would allow for participative epistemologies to take place. The strategic silence that close encounters point to highlights the need for continuous vigilance in regard to responsibility in the practices of representation and writing the Other. It also requires a careful consideration of how strategic silence can only be deployed from a privileged position, and although it might be sometimes necessary, it does not overcome or neutralize privilege (Alcoff, 1991, p. 25). Therefore, in close encounters the ethical singularity of the Other calls academics to acknowledge the performativity of knowledge and writing as a practice of representation, and to carefully analyze our roles as investigating subjects that provide knowledge of organizations, social relations, and subjectivities within its frames.

4.3  Understanding difference as a dynamic relation

In the hope of new forms of sociality, close encounters redefine our conceptualization of time, place, and space within them. Therefore, Ahmed’s and Spivak’s insights into close encounters can also be read in connection to other theorizations that have rethought time and space as highly relational. For example, Massey (2001, p. 269) has called for “thinking in terms of space-time” and Castells (2009, pp. 33–34) has argued that in a network society, “power relationships are embedded in the social construction of space and time, while being conditioned by the time–space formations that characterize society.” Massey (2001) and Castells (2009) both argue that the concepts of time and space should be thought of in terms of social relations. In doing that, close encounters bring up how our understanding of time, place, and space is profoundly bound to the creation of, and resistance to, gendered and racialized self-other relations in organizations and how the space created in close encounters can be thought to be “by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation” (Massey, 2001, p. 265). In relation to advancing the theory of corporeal ethics in organizations, close encounters help to understand what intercorporeality and “being with” the other could mean in postcoloniality, and bring a new perspective to thinking about temporality, spatiality, and embodiment in encounters with others, which has important implications also for theorizing diversity and difference in organizations.

In close encounters, difference is understood as emerging from material relations between bodies in encounters that unfold in various times and spaces. This suggests that “the ethical” can be embraced and touched in a close encounter, working within the structures of the encounter and responses that come from both sides, working in acknowledgment of the limitations and impossibilities of that encounter and with a will to forcefully continue to work within those limitations and impossibilities to escape dualisms. This requires a collective effort from organization scholars and practitioners to affectively engage with others as “without the mind-changing one-on-one responsible contact, nothing will stick” (Spivak, 1999, p. 383). As seen, this paper connects to a larger effort to write materiality into questions of organizational diversity and difference, as Ashcraft (2018) has suggested, for organization scholars to feel the relations of power through the body, feel the relations of difference in our bodies.
Feeling difference in our bodies, as generated and constantly renegotiated in encounters with others, enables us to resist production of otherness and problematic closures that fix difference to the bodies of others in creation of diverse organizations. Thus, close encounters help to develop and understand the presented critique of the controversial, if not oppressive, nature of the concepts of diversity and inclusion, and the urgent need for constructing organizations where people can actually belong to and have agentic possibilities (Ahmed, 2012; Özkazanc-Pan, 2019a). Close encounters ask for consideration of the relations of power within the practices and understandings of diversity and inclusion, and also of how we engage in the work of diversity and inclusion as affective and embodied relations in organizational life. In close encounters, the inclusion of others through assimilation into the sameness of self or stereotypes is no longer possible as, in ethical singularity, the Other remains inaccessible. Thus, this analysis suggests an understanding of difference as a dynamic relation instead of seeing it as an ontological character of an encountered person. Özkazanc-Pan (2019a) has shown that mobile conceptualizations of difference require diversity scholarship to redirect its focus from the concepts of diversity and inclusion to the notion of belonging, which can only happen through cultivating research and practices that are willing to challenge the gendered and colonial structures of contemporary organizations. In other words, this text and theorization of difference through close encounters highlights the need of institutional transformation through disrupting whiteness (Liu, 2017; Swan, 2017) and taking up racism and inequality, instead of just comfortably focusing on bringing about diversity and inclusion (Ahmed, 2009). Creating conditions of possibility for belonging can only happen through productive discomfort. This in mind, the ethical engagement with the Other that the concept of close encounters reaches for, approaches difference with a certain mindset that recognizes not only the particularity of the embodied other in relation to “the I” in the encounter but also in relation to the forms of authorization and labor hidden by representational logic for Spivak and by stranger fetishism for Ahmed. In close encounters, “the ethical” is therefore located in reconstructing knowledge through embodied relations and relationships that transcend times, places, and spaces.

These three observations open up the broader contribution of close encounters that calls attention to the prevailing postcolonial feminist concerns of decentering the center, knowing differently, and creating spaces for other voices, which are most often lost through our practices of knowing and living (Narayan & Harding, 2000; Spivak, 1988). Following Diprose (1994, p. 132), close encounters situate us as knowledge producers in the midst of a network of those discursive and material practices that, by being constitutive of our relative places in the world, ground injustice. Encountering others in close encounters emphasizes the continuous production of multiplicities of self, other, difference and organization. Through this—as transformative nodes of different ethical subject positions and reciprocal knowledge on the lines of the international division of labor—close encounters form epistemological spaces from which specific resistance to marginalization and the stagnant disempowering representations of others in organizations can be established. The circulation and production of knowledge through past and current encounters underlines the uneven and contested processes of exchange and flows in the global economy and reminds us of the way in which some bodies and knowledge (namely, of the Global South) have been both appropriated and diminished as illegitimate, and how this effects how people inhabit organizations and experience belonging or not belonging there. Advocating strategic silence to hear the silences and make space for voices of the Two-Thirds World and the theorization of organization and ethics through these voices undoubtedly points to how socially excluded others have always been part of knowledge production, albeit made invisible. Thereby, it would be tempting to talk only about the politics of presence and absence, but moreover, close encounters draw our attention to the politics of proximity and distance through which Others are produced (Ahmed, 2000).

Both Ahmed and Spivak argue for a possibility to know differently through recognizing the limits of our knowledge. In a generous encounter in postcoloniality, one would thus be willing to drop the desire to know in the sense we have been trained and accustomed to know in the scientific tradition of management and organization studies and instead pay attention to the various factors of social authority and power that are at stake in those encounters, which affect the (ethical) life in organizations, and drafting reflections and theories about it. Considering the former point, it has been important to take notice of the given permission to fail at “knowing the Other,”
which is seen in Westwood’s (2015) and Rhodes and Westwood’s (2007) Levinesian argument on letting go of knowledge in order to retain ethics and what has been expressed as allowing “for the ‘unknown’ to exist without colonization” (Calás, 1992, p. 220). Yet knowledge of that which we fail to know still belongs to us and “the unknowable is a relation to what is already assumed to be known” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 73) and hence without close encounters between embodied others, otherness and difference stays fixed. This guides us not only to recognize the limits of the system of representations but the limitations of the ways in which we recognize others. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask—what can we actually know through knowledge that has been, and still is, produced by and through somebodies rather than other? And crucially, to whom does this knowledge belong to and what kinds of possibilities for belonging does it create, and for whom?

5 | DISCUSSION TO AN OPEN-END

Coming to an end, a reader might notice that the flow of this paper may not have been constant. This paper has been written inconsistently throughout 3 years, through many close encounters, and different kinds of bodies that have leaked into the text. Bodies of others and my own—a body that has lost, grieved, healed, and created, been exhausted by demands, hidden, shamed, felt incomplete, found comfort, security, and joy not only from home but also from small parts of that epistemic community I have been referring to, in affective solidarity. Yet some readers probably find this text lacking—lacking rigor, mastery, and rationality as metrics of science (Phillips et al., 2014), but this type of organizational knowledge has not helped us overcome the oppressive and hierarchical structures that continue to frame organizational relationships. Well-regulated writing has kept academic texts pure—theoretical, serious, and uncontaminated—by alienating the Other via abstraction and incorporation into an abstract body (of representational text) (Höpfl, 2000). I myself have been writing of theorizing, theorizing the moment of a close encounter. The etymology of the word theory presents that it is derived from theorein, “to make visible” (Spivak, 1993). So, what is it in particular that I have wanted to make visible for organization scholars through the concept of close encounters? The subject matter has become clear in the earlier sections, but writing of theorization has been a double gesture in itself. I continue with Spivak, and yet another question: what is it to learn? Most certainly it has not been about learning to authorize a text as knowledge through theorization. This paper has been about learning to do something “within which the ‘talking about’ is a moment, the theoretical is a moment” (Spivak, 1993, p. 32) that has the potential for something else. The theoretical moment has become a moment of activism, a resistive act (against the dominant organizational order, based on hegemonic masculinity and colonial hierarchies) that desires to take part in reimagining more caring, affective, and socially just organizations. Writing this text has been an incomplete attempt to show how research can become a matter of relating to others and difference (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 326). It has aimed to show how close encounters touch and create writing that touches, creates words that resonate with other people’s words, and is thus able to create both affective solidarity (Vacchani & Pullen, 2019) and affective sociality between readers and writers (Pullen, 2018) and individuals in organizations.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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