



(Mr Quiver
the awkward silence

PASSING
strangeness
of friendship

FIVE



This zine is one
in a series of five.

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Each contains an edited
version of a prelude to a
chapter from the book
Experiments in Listening
by Rajni Shah.

The book was published
by Rowman & Littlefield
in June 2021, as part of
the Performance Philosophy series.

If you would like to buy
the book, you can do so
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Between 2004 and 2006 I made and toured a show called *Mr Quiver*.¹ In its final version, it was a four-hour performance installation in which identities and maps were drawn and redrawn using costumes, salt, music, lights, and the bodies of three performers: myself, costume designer Lucille Acevedo-Jones, and lighting designer Cis O'Boyle. Each of us manipulated the materials in the performance space as the four hours passed, repeatedly creating and dismantling images around and between audience members as they navigated the room. My material was my body, and for most of the performance I moved between two costumes - deliberately quickly-sketched identities based on British-Indian cultural clichés: a version of Queen Elizabeth I in regal costume, wig, and make-up; and a generic 'Indian bride' figure, nameless, eyes cast down, wearing red and gold clothing and jewellery.

¹ Rajni Shah, *Mr Quiver* (2005)
<<http://www.rajnishah.com/mr-quiver>>.

² Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-3.

³ Ahmed, p. 128.

images from 'Mr Quiver' DVD by Theron Schmidt

invitation to listen (the invitation, literally, to be in *audience*). And with this structural invitation to listen comes the potential to hold interpretation open.

By this, I do not mean that theatre enables some kind of clean slate. It is easy to get caught up in the pursuit of an 'ideal listening' in which a listener brings no judgement, no traces of their past life, and somehow navigates the encounter without the influences of histories and geographies that shape a body and its thinking. But if listening, as I am proposing it, is a gathering of bodies and of attention, then it seems at best inadequate and at worst dangerous for that gathering to happen without an acknowledgement of the histories and geographies that have shaped those bodies and their capacity for attentiveness. Perhaps, then, an ideal listening – and the listening that might be possible within the act of being-in-audience – is not one in which the self is negated in order to hold the possibility of otherness, but rather a negotiation of attention between others who are at once embodied and attentive, refusing to move too quickly into a narrative of passing.

One day a friend was in my home and happened to see a DVD I had recently made to promote *Mr Quiver*. On one side of the DVD case was a picture of me dressed as Queen Elizabeth I, and on the other side was a picture of me dressed as the Indian bride.

My friend picked up the case exclaiming,

"Hey! Look! It's a picture of you dressed as Elizabeth I!"

and then he turned it over and said,

"And look!

It's a picture of you dressed as ..."

He paused, looking at the photograph of me on stage wearing a jewel on my forehead, an elaborate gold nose ring, and a red and gold headscarf.

"... you."

The pause was awkward, and telling.

I suspect that my friend paused because he was trying to say something that was *not* culturally insensitive. And yet, in the moment that he elided my brown body with my clichéd 'Indian bride' performance persona, I felt a small chasm opening between us.

I can't remember exactly how I responded. Perhaps I said nothing. Perhaps I laughed and explained that it was a picture of me *dressed as* an Indian bride. Perhaps my friend said something like, "Oh yes, of course" and we moved on.

In truth, though, his words had made a huge impression on me. I realised that although I had been using *Mr Quiver* to examine the interplay between the public and private body, I had underestimated the extent to which others would desire to read my body first and foremost as a racialised body, and the amount of work that it would take to be able to move away from this default.

Every act of recognition is characterised by assumption and appropriation at some level, functioning as an assertion of or challenge to the social structures surrounding it. But it feels important to remember that in the gap between 'already assumed' and 'yet to be assumed' - the gap which Ahmed identifies as a crisis of reading - is also the work of listening and potentiality. It is in this gap, before the construction of meaning or narrative becomes stable, that anything might be possible.

The work that was happening during my friend's pause was, of course, the very same work that I hoped would take place during performances of *Mr Quiver*. I had created the show precisely in order to confront and expose these easy collapses in the way a body is read. But in the context of the show there was no need, and indeed no invitation, to immediately declare a position in response to what was being presented. In the theatrical context, audience and performers alike are invited to replace the immediate obligation to be visible through speaking or declaring with a structural

In the encounter between my friend and me, there was a hesitation, a not-knowing, before my friend put into words a version of me that did not fit well with the image I had created for myself. One account of what happened in that moment is that I ceased to pass as 'white' and therefore became unfamiliar to both my ('white') friend and to myself. In that small moment of crisis, we were not able to rely on the modes of recognition to which we had become accustomed, which would have allowed us to gloss over the differences between our embodied selves.

However, I don't think that this memory has stayed with me simply because I was disappointed by this failure of recognition. On the contrary, I think that it has stayed with me because it held the possibility of moving in a different direction. In the moment before I said anything, there was potential for a process of reorientation between us based on difference rather than an assumption of sameness. But I was too quick to move us along into what felt like a more familiar mode, one in which we were able to recognise and claim our (former) relationship.

After this strange encounter with my friend I developed the Indian bride costume in a number of ways, including shaving my head and buying a wig of thick black hair pulled into a large bun. This, I felt, might create just enough distance between the visual signifiers of my body and the figure of the Indian bride to allow for the more nuanced and complex set of readings that I had hoped to evoke with the show.

In some ways, of course, my friend's hesitation was understandable: the image of Elizabeth I, a well-known historical figure, was easy to recognise and name; the 'Indian bride' was not. But over the years, something about that moment has stayed with me, resonating like the memory of a wound or a small persistent unanswered question in the back of my mind. What interests me now is not so much the fact that my friend was at a loss for words, but the nature of the work that was happening during his pause and in my own response. Confronted with the difficulty in finding the right noun to describe the image he saw, but already committed to saying *something*, my friend

found himself collapsing 'Indian-looking woman' with 'Rajni'. This was the easiest or quickest path for him; it was a shortcut to legibility. In response, though I do not remember my exact words or actions, I know that - rather than voice my unease or allow an awkward silence between us - I quickly moved the conversation on.

I could spend a lot of time dissecting this particular exchange, analysing the gendered and racialised behaviours we both fell into. In those extended moments during his pause and before my response, my friend and I were silently navigating the social and political histories enacted by and through our bodies, as well as the delicate and complicated encounter that was occurring between them. But I am not recounting this story because its content is unusual. I am telling it because it enacts something that is present in all conversations, and that silently or less silently occurs in the listening and speaking between one person and another person every day - even, perhaps, in the listening and speaking within one person.

Passing, then, is impossible to pin down because it exists within particular moments of encounter that are between, not within, people. Whether successful or unsuccessful, passing is an act that brings to the surface the fictions that human beings place on each other all the time. And when passing fails, a certain set of expectations are not fulfilled, which means that a certain narrative fails to move forward.

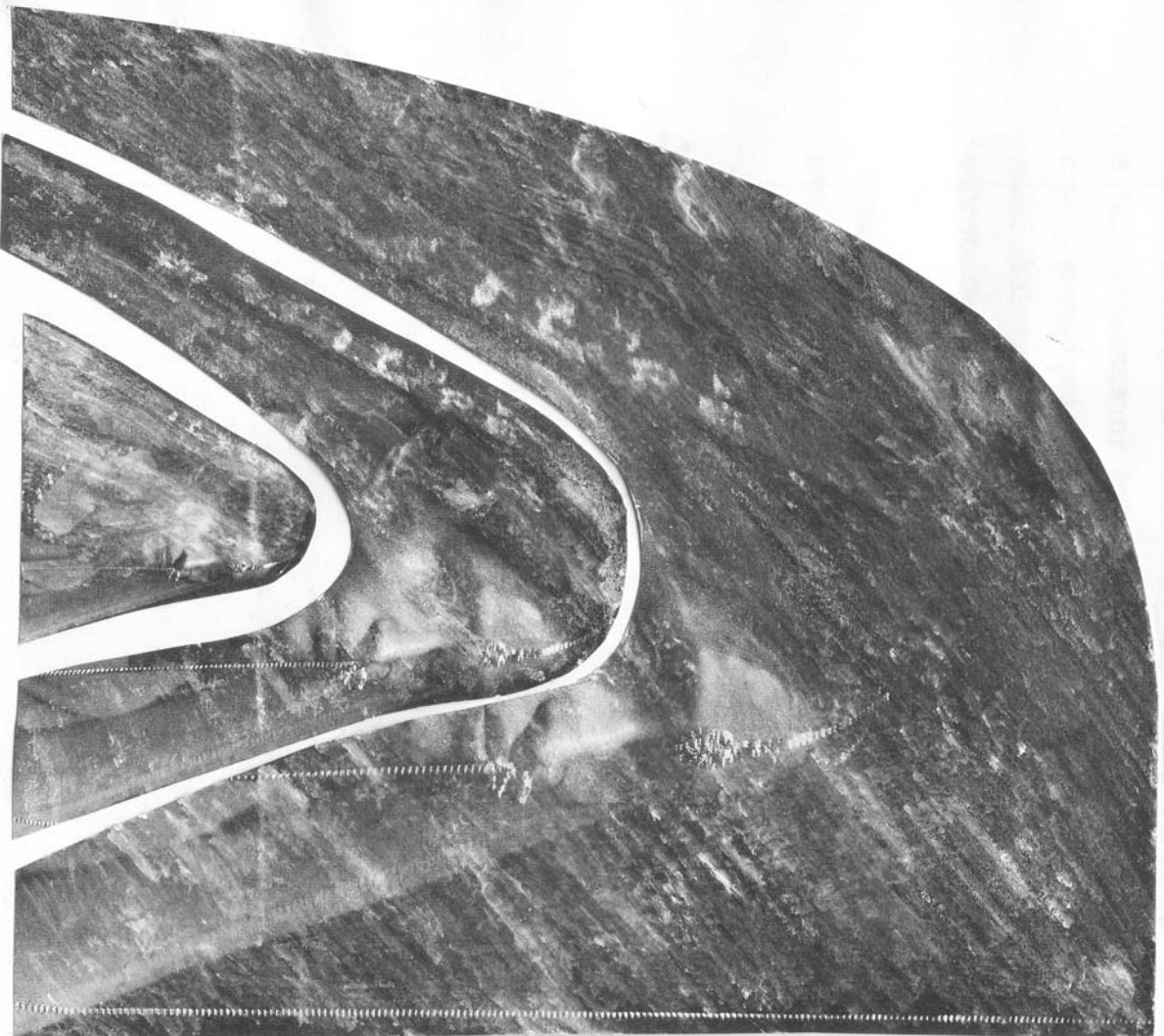


- is created. This smoothing-out disappears a certain movement or instability - a hesitation - that Ahmed goes on to argue might otherwise productively define relationships between 'embodied others'.

Passing then cannot be simply theorised as a logic of the subject (= the transformation that takes place in the subject when she or he assumes an image). Rather, we can consider how passing takes place through strange encounters with embodied others in which there is a crisis of reading, a crisis that hesitates over the gap between an image that is already assumed and an image that is yet to be assumed. [...] Passing involves strange encounters: encounters where 'what is encountered' is under dispute. Such encounters represent precisely the impossibility of fixing the meaning of passing; it is the undecidable moment that repeats itself as others are addressed, as we address each other.²

I am telling this particular story because in this story something becomes foregrounded for a moment that is usually in the background. And in this moment of foregrounding, an idea like 'friendship' that is held between two people is revealed to rest upon a network of power differentials and hierarchies just as much as it might be founded on a desire for stability and equality.





In her book *Strange Encounters*, Sara Ahmed writes about the complex work of 'passing' as relates to the figure of the stranger in so-called post-colonial narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She opens the book with a simple proposition: that the label 'stranger' creates an identity, and so the figure of the stranger, paradoxically, can only ever be perceived as strange when they are read within the confines of that label - when they 'pass' as 'strange' in some way - thus inevitably creating the identifier 'stranger' simultaneously with the identifier 'not-stranger' (or 'we').

This means that, strangeness, seemingly an indicator of what does not fit, is in fact a form of identification. And woven into this is a notion of narrative coherence. The stranger is a figure that is perceived to fit within certain narrative lines, and is drawn and redrawn according to those lines; but those narrative lines repeatedly smooth out the process whereby the construct of 'passing' - and therefore of narrative coherence itself