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Brief Encounters at the Borderline

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Brief Encounters at the Borderline

Jade Lee

In a recent letter to the *London Review of Books*, Jonathan Spencer referenced the conclusions reached half a century ago by a generation of sociologists and anthropologists such as Fredrik Barth (1928-2016):

What gives a group of people a sense of sameness is agreement on who they are not. The shared ‘cultural stuff’ is neither here nor there: the action happens on the boundary where small markers of difference identify the people ‘we’ are not.¹

The question of who we are and who we are *not* is not a new one though its answer may be radically different depending on the epoch, the geographical location and, perhaps most crucially, who has the authority to draw the lines between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The complexity of who draws these lines, whose position is sufficiently untainted by association with the ‘other’ is dealt with in Wiktor Komorowski’s piece on Aleksander Kobzdej, a Polish artist whose association with the Socialist-Realist art of the Soviet state (and the stigma attached to that during the Khrushchev Thaw) plays out in unexpected and fascinating ways in his work.

The task of delineating group identity may be a collaborative process but it is rarely, if ever, an entirely egalitarian one. In her fascinating article on the use of revitalised photographic techniques as a tool for anthropological research, Flora Bartlett underscores the need for the researcher to facilitate the voices of her ‘subjects’ rather than speak over them. The failure to heed these voices and the cultural distortion that inevitably follows is dealt with by Beth Hunt in her discussion of how Indian cultural artefacts are displayed within the confines of British imperial nostalgia.

We are, as individuals and as groups, defined by contrast. The borderline is knitted into the very fabric of our own identity: as Azelina Flint shows in her excellent piece on May Alcott Niereker, younger sister of the famous Louisa, who we are not is part of our most intimate relationships, and the shadow of the line between us and those closest to us can obscure and fragment the traces of an individual that are left behind.

¹ Jonathan Spencer, ‘Letters’, *London Review of Books*, 21 (November 2017), p. 4.

If, as Spencer says, the action is and has always been at the boundary it would still seem reasonable to suggest that we (in all the fraught, multiplicities of that term) find ourselves in an historical epoch where the boundary, the borderline between who we are and who we cannot and must not be is an especially fraught space. Whilst no specific theme was chosen for the second issue of *Brief Encounters*, all our authors contend in some way with encounters at and across the borderline. Steven Crawford, in his analysis of what post-apocalyptic literature can teach us about state formation and structure, reminds us of the fact that for those affected by the refugee crisis across Europe and elsewhere these boundaries are not abstract but concrete, enforced and often deadly. These borders can be understood in both literal and figurative terms as ‘marking transition points — or crossings — between statuses of humanity’.²

Becky Buchanan’s piece on the experiences of women who are both mothers and academics demonstrates the complexity and precarity of lives lived at and in the liminal spaces between the borderline of different identities. As academics, there is sometimes a pressure to shore up the validity of our own perspective by defining ourselves within the strict confines of one discipline, institution or worldview. The articles in this issue articulate both the risks and the advantages to probing and interrogating the boundaries we live within in. If Tallulah Harvey’s short story and accompanying commentary acts as a timely and compelling warning about the dangers of blurring the line between the digital (or simulated) and the ‘real’ (or tangible) then Emilia Halton-Hernandez’s review of David Hockney demonstrates how the artist’s willingness to utilize a range of media has ensured the durability and power of his work.³

Indeed, rather than threatening our position as academics, a willingness to question the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ can create new avenues for research and ways of thinking that problematize binary worldviews. One example of this is the burgeoning field of Medical Humanities, highlighted in Harriet Barratt’s excellent review of *The Edinburgh Review of the Critical Medical Humanities* (2016), which has led to new and valuable ways of talking about the physicality of being human.⁴ Another example of this kind of boundary-challenging thinking is showcased in Fani Cettl’s article which rethinks animism

² Steven Crawford ‘Re-reading Borders and Migration: Post-apocalyptic Fiction and the Nation-State’, *Brief Encounters*, 2.1 (2018), 13-25 (p. 14) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.24134/be.v2i1.92>>.

³ *Hockney* [exhibition], (Tate Britain: London, 9 February - 29 May 2017).

⁴ Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods (eds.), with Sarah Atkinson, Jane Macnaughton and Jennifer Richards (associate eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

in ways that question the continuing validity of our anthropocentric worldview. If it is possible (if not, in fact, necessary) to work collaboratively across academic disciplines to create a fuller picture of what it is to be human, might it also be time to question the distinctions made between humanity and other organisms, even those not traditionally seen as sharing any level of sentience?

As discussed in Bartlett's piece, however, these conversations at the borderline need not always seek to re-invent the wheel, whether in terms of resources or ideas. As both Bartlett's use of traditional photographic techniques and Sana Goyal's review of Chimimanda Ngozi Adiche's feminist manifesto show, a questioning of boundaries can also allow us as individuals and as a society to bring fresh ways of thinking to familiar ways of seeing and representing our own world and that of our 'others', whoever they may be.⁵ Indeed, as Steven Colburn demonstrates in his conversation with filmmaker Jorge Thielen-Armand, collapsing or at least softening the strict divide between documentary maker and 'subject' can lead to innovative work within an established discipline.

Many of the articles in this issue testify to the risk if not outright danger of living, writing and thinking at the borderline. Kaitlyn Rabach, in her account of 'weaving tours' which seek to build a sense of commonality between American/European women and those in the global south, cautions us to remember that the differences between people, societies and cultures cannot be wished away in an attempt to build solidarity. Nevertheless, as Rabach and all our authors show, in a time when walls (literal and otherwise) appear to be going up across our world, these encounters at the borderline, complex and challenging as they may be, are increasingly and unquestionably necessary.

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⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (London: 4th Estate, 2017).