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Encounters in Times of Polarisation

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Encounters in Times of Polarisation

Augusta Ivory-Peters

I want there to be a place in the world where people can engage in one another's differences in a way that is redemptive, full of hope and possibility.
– bell hooks¹

Today's world is increasingly polarised – from the ongoing conflict in Ukraine to the role of artificial intelligence models like ChatGPT. The inherent hostility of these and other encounters does not allow for dialogue, compromise, or negotiation; the opposing parties are instead pitted against each other resulting in a political and ideological stalemate.

Issue 7 of *Brief Encounters* responds to the adversarial nature of these encounters by reframing conflict and debate as a productive form of knowledge exchange. By engaging with ideologies from across the globe that both overlap and compete with our own, we are encouraged to consciously examine our intellectual assumptions and preconceptions. These conversations offer an exciting opportunity for the exchange of experiences and ideas across social, ideological, cultural, philosophical, and geographical boundaries – a hope-filled vision captured by bell hooks in the epitaph above.

Given the multifaceted concept of 'encountering', our objective as an editorial team was to invite new and creative ways to illuminate and challenge differences and polarisations. We hoped to leverage the full range of possibilities encompassed by the notion of 'encounters' and instigate vigorous academic debate, profound insights, and unique creative work. To 'encounter' is to engage in dialogue, to confront, to collide, to unexpectedly experience something or someone new. The founding editors of this journal took inspiration from the 1945 film *Brief Encounter* where 'a chance meeting on a train platform...ultimately forces two people to alter their worldviews.'² The articles and creative submissions in this issue serve as a conduit for the exchange of ideas, fostering a diverse array of academic encounters that bridge disciplines, explore archives, and engage communities both in person and online.

Craig Ryder's cover art for this issue illustrates the proliferation of political polarisation on social media. Under the hashtag #Aragalaya, meaning 'The Struggle' in local language Sinhala, the artwork presents a data visualisation extracted from Twitter API during the 2022 Sri Lankan anti-government protests. Each colour-coded cluster

¹ bell hooks, 'What's Passion Got To Do With It? An Interview with Marie-France Alderman', in *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 136–54 (p. 153).

² Emily Bartlett and Nicole Mennell, 'Brief Encounters of the Academic Kind', *Brief Encounters*, 1 (2017), p. 1 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.24134/be.v1i1.79>>.

represents a distinct voice in the debate, including the government and their supporters (blue), citizen activists (pink), and liberal media (green). The data reveals that the voices of the incumbent leaders are amplified by numerous bots, while the liberal media are impeded by self-censorship, leaving the citizen activists to fight for equality and democracy. Ryder's provocative cover art powerfully captures the diverse perspectives and clashes of ideas in digital spaces, providing a compelling backdrop for the thought-provoking articles and creative pieces in this issue.

In the first article, Benjamin Francis Potter delves deeper into the relationship between social media and the division of opinions in society, focusing on the question of why polarisation occurs and how we can address it. He challenges the prevailing notion that technology is solely responsible for polarisation and advocates for a philosophy of encounters to gain a deeper understanding of the issue. By re-evaluating the role that homophily plays in our interactions online, Potter highlights the need to consider broader societal factors, rather than just algorithmic structures, in understanding digital polarisation.

Jocelyn Chalmers' article shifts from digital encounters to real-world events, particularly the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court ruling in the United States, to bring attention to a troubling inconsistency in the application of libertarian principles to reproductive autonomy. Despite advocating for individual autonomy, self-identified libertarians tend to oppose women's rights to choose abortion, while supporting men's ability to veto decisions and withdraw financial support. The article critically analyses these findings and their implications for women's constitutional right to abortion in light of the recent reversal of Roe vs. Wade.

The theme of women's reproductive rights is continued in Jemma Walton's article where the author discusses Emma Brockes' memoir, *An Excellent Choice* – a book about Brockes' journey to becoming a single mother via sperm donation. Despite the expectations that, as a lesbian woman in their late 30s living in New York, Brockes' memoir would support non-conformist family models, the focus on personal choice and the pursuit of a traditional family structure is shown to inadvertently overlook the challenges faced by marginalised members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Moving from North America to Southeast Asia, Luigi Monteanni's article explores the vibrant encounter between *réak*, a traditional dance performance that originated in Bandung, and extreme metal music. Despite their resistance to assimilation, *réak* and metal music influence each other, with metal bands inviting *réak* troupes to perform and *réak* practitioners incorporating elements of metal music. This unique blending of styles

challenges traditional notions of hybridity while preserving the distinct identities of each genre. The study highlights the potential for different music styles to interact, create new forms, and offers fresh perspectives for genre analysis.

Also adopting a comparative approach, Jacopo Napoli explores the similarities between soft power in contemporary political science and the ideas expressed by Cicero, a Roman politician from the late 1st century BCE. The author discusses how these concepts can be used to analyse both ancient and contemporary international relations, emphasising the overlooked importance of soft power in understanding Roman history.

The second part of this issue is dedicated to a collection of submissions that delve into various creative encounters. Lindsey Beth Zelvin's creative piece courageously intertwines personal experiences of mental illness with scholarly insights from medical humanities and literary theory. This evocative work invites readers to explore the dual roles of the author as both a patient and an academic, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding mental health. Zelvin's self-reflexive writing also sparks conversations about the importance of portraying mental health in an authentic and ethical manner.

Rebekah Elizabeth Lattin-Rawstrone's creative essay explores their research and writing process in their novel, *All The Hollow Places*. Focusing on Gertrude Bell's role in the creation of modern Iraq, Lattin-Rawstrone employs techniques like 'critical fabulation' and 'fictive criticism' to reinterpret the past. Through personal and national explorations, alternative storytelling forms, and creative approaches to addressing archival gaps, Lattin-Rawstrone creates a hybrid novel combining biography, autobiography, essay, imagery, artefact, and archival quotation. This innovative approach opens new storytelling possibilities and challenges traditional narratives of the imperial project.

The final creative encounter by Basma Taysir El Doukhi reflects on the Great Fish and Chips Exhibition at the University of Kent in 2022. The exhibition explored migration stories within the fish and chips industry in Britain, and featured various forms of expression such as artwork, interviews, and a unique sensory food event called 'Taste the Archive'. The exhibition aimed to facilitate meaningful dialogue, challenge prevailing narratives, and promote a welcoming culture, while also underscoring the university's commitment to supporting initiatives related to migration and sanctuary-seeking.

Now in its seventh year, *Brief Encounters* remains committed to the exploration of academic encounters across diverse disciplines. We hope that this issue will serve as a valuable resource for postgraduate students, fostering interdisciplinary discussions and inspiring new avenues of research.

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