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Introduction

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In association with

Introduction

Magdalena Wojcik

Like our predecessors from Issue 5, we have never planned a topical issue, even less so for a COVID-19-themed one. Still, it is my impression that, albeit unintentionally, Issue 6 of *Brief Encounters* is underlaid by the story of how we, as a society, have come out of the pandemic and how it has changed our perspective. We have chosen the cover image of hands reaching toward the light to embrace the ideas of rebirth (borrowed from Luca Proietti's review article) and resilience that reflect the post-pandemic healing we must undertake, less in a literal sense but more so to reflect the overarching attitudes of community and solidarity.

We begin Issue 6 by inviting the readers to journey into the sixteenth-century English village of Warboys amid a witchcraft drama, where the author, Oscar Joyce, brings to light the themes of emotional control and disposition, their role in the contemporary understanding of witchcraft and the unexpected fluidity of the divide between the witch and bewitched. Observing similarly blurring lines, Tristan Venturi poses questions about the queer sublime at the 'margins and surfaces and unresolvable tension between not-so-separate entities', as a lens of strangeness and difference, ultimately destabilising regimes of cis-hetero-normativity reflected by German films Werner Schroeter's *Der Rosenkönig* (1986) and Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (1989).

And thus, Venturi opens a wider discussion set on the pages of *Brief Encounters* about gender, identity, and prejudice along with the violence they, unfortunately, may provoke. Under the same notion, Lydia Hiraide uses American rapper Cardi B, unapologetically bringing attention to her own pleasure, to reclaim the sexuality of Black women and challenge the long-lasting historical trauma and oppression inflicted upon them. In a different context (examining Colombia's most recent peace process) but departing from an aligned standpoint, Hazel Ebenezer advocates for recognising and protecting from gender-based violence.

Paige Isaacson refers to an array of anti-democratic, racist and xenophobic images from our recent, pandemic-induced history, which allowed the populist movements to magnify the social divisions epitomised by the COVID-19 and leave us feeling increasingly isolated and angry. Baljit Kaur and Samantha Pointon address the same issues as Isaacson but, perhaps in a more Rousseauian spirit, show us how mutual aid, peer support and consciousness-raising groups create a space for us to face the threats of extremism and populism highlighted by the COVID-19. On the note of resilience and healing already mentioned, Luca Proietti brings to attention *2R0I2P0*, a collaborative album released in December 2020 by the Japanese experimental band Boris and noise musician Merzbow, which Proietti interprets as embodying a new chapter for humanity, replacing COVID-19-related collective powerlessness with solidarity. Mindfulness, familiar to so many of us battling feelings of anxiety and isolation, intensified by the pandemic lockdowns, is at the centre of the story told by Stephen Morris. Morris recounts how mindfulness has travelled from the site of spiritual practice to become a medicalised meditation.

Like Isaacson, Dylan Wang analyses actors distorting and reshaping the narrative to fulfil their agenda, although taking place decades earlier, by discussing how the multi-level political revisionism operated in mid-twentieth-century China to consolidate the Communist Party's regime. Adam Maric-Cleaver's analysis of British novelist Anna Kavan's short story is concerned with the networked and technological connectivity of the world and, more broadly, globalisation and complexities of the forms of power. Although Wang and Maric-Cleaver's works are rooted in the context of the previous century, they pose intensely relevant questions about the systems of power that shape the present and the past as well as the role of culture and technology in these processes.

We witness *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion*, the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition and its array of concepts and ensembles through reviewer Lacey Minot's eyes, who considers the intertwining of fashion, identity and inclusivity/exclusivity dichotomy. Creative encounters authored by Craig Ryder and Aaron Locke also take the cultural artefacts to reflect on the social value we attach to items such as books and CDs, how these values change and what their place is in social history. Perhaps similar to Minot, although on a much more personal level, Jacqui Griffin, in her poem 'Metamorphosis', touches upon the notions of patriarchy, gendered identity and definition while sharing an intimate self-

identity journey with us. Patrick Quinlan also reflects on his origin but as a starting point of a broader reflection on a dark period of Irish history, when thousands of women were condemned to servitude and confinement in the Magdalen Laundries. Quinlan ultimately encourages us to connect with an individual rather than jump to the judgement and solidify the wicked nun's stereotype. Filippo Ursitti's opinion piece closing the issue leaves us to reflect on another atrocious period, revoking German philosopher Günther Anders' consideration of Auschwitz and Hiroshima as no-return points for humanity's potential and ability to self-annihilate.

I would like to think that the research broadcasted here is by no means a herald of the defeatist or hopeless. Issue 6 of *Brief Encounters* was not to be themed; however, the scholars who have shared their observations with us have indeed constructed a unifying theme. By posing questions about the past, both recent and distant, especially about the periods that make us feel uncomfortable, looking at them from fresh perspectives, enriched by our pandemic experiences, they inspire us to face the future as a community, healing, building and improving together.