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Brief Encounters of the Academic Kind

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Brief Encounters of the Academic Kind

Emily Bartlett and Nicole Mennell

The 1945 film *Brief Encounter* centres around a chance meeting on a train platform.¹ The consequences of this meeting are not necessarily positive, but it ultimately forces two people to alter their worldviews. Although it may seem somewhat odd for an academic journal to take inspiration from a film about emotional adultery, there are unexpected parallels to be drawn between this narrative and the ‘encounters’ (of the strictly academic kind) experienced at the biannual Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England (CHASE) conference of the same name.² During ‘Encounters’, students separated by geographical distances are briefly brought together (usually having travelled by train) to examine their research findings, methodologies, and professional development.

In founding *Brief Encounters*, the Editorial Board’s principal motivation was to create a journal which encapsulates the aims of CHASE in bringing together students across a number of geographical boundaries to exchange ideas and explore innovative interdisciplinary methodological approaches. We aimed to provide a platform (pun intended) for postgraduate students to publish work that would otherwise be limited to single-discipline conferences, conversations within institutions, or an inspired scribble in a notepad. Establishing an online open access journal allowed us to realise these aims by making authors’ work available to a global audience.

Although we did not impose an official theme on the inaugural issue of this journal, ‘encounters’ has emerged as a unifying concept. We were initially surprised to find that the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of ‘encounter’ are largely combative: ‘a meeting in conflict’; ‘to oppose’; ‘to contest, dispute’; ‘to meet as an adversary’; ‘to be placed opposite,

¹ *Brief Encounter*, dir. David Lean (Cineguild Productions, 1945).

² ‘Encounters’, CHASE <<http://www.chase.ac.uk/encounters-november-2016>> [accessed 31 January 2017].

or in opposite directions, to (each other).³ We soon realised that for postgraduate students these definitions are somewhat accurate, as they resemble the many intimidating encounters we experience as academics — whether these are challenging questions asked after conference papers, having our research findings interrogated during thesis panels, or an article being rejected by a peer reviewer. We are encouraged to challenge our peers and frame our work in opposition to established views, which is why so many of us dread encountering our PhD *doppelgänger*. Perhaps it is fitting that an ‘encounter group’ meets ‘in order to improve the emotional adjustments of its members’ through, among other things, ‘confrontation’.⁴ While this evokes sympathetic and consolatory conversations with fellow postgraduates, it also brings to mind exhilarating discussions that challenge our research and force us to defend our opinions, often yielding fruitful outcomes.

Academic encounters may not always be harmonious, but these challenges are necessary in order to develop our research and advance the fields in which we work. It is usually when our research findings are held to account that we find the angle from which to frame our arguments convincingly and ‘face resolutely’ any challenge against our views.⁵ This culture of opposition causes academics to question every approach, even our own, and produce ground-breaking research. While the definition of ‘encounter’ as an ‘idea that suddenly presents itself, as it were by accident; a happy thought’ is now ‘*Obs. rare*’, it is these occurrences that make the hours spent researching our topics worthwhile.⁶

As postgraduates we engage in a number of productive academic encounters with our fellow students, the individuals with whose work we engage, and the research materials with

³ ‘encounter, n.’, in *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edn, December 2016 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/61781>> [accessed 31 January 2017]; ‘encounter, v.’, in *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edn, December 2016 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/61782>> [accessed 31 January 2017].

⁴ ‘encounter, n.’, *OED*.

⁵ ‘encounter, v.’, *OED*.

⁶ ‘encounter, n.’, *OED*.

which we often find ourselves locked away. These encounters celebrate the generosity and kindness of fellow scholars, and foster a sense of academic community. As an open access journal *Brief Encounters* hopes to extend this collaboration online.

Publishing our research — perhaps one of the most daunting but undoubtedly vital components of establishing a successful academic career — is an epic encounter in itself. Indeed, the first issue of *Brief Encounters* represents a diverse array of academic encounters between institutions, not least because, in a happy coincidence, the submissions published in this issue are written by at least one postgraduate student from each of the nine CHASE institutions: the Universities of East Anglia, Essex, Kent and Sussex; the Open University; the Courtauld Institute of Art; Goldsmiths, University of London; Birkbeck, University of London; and SOAS, University of London. In content, the submissions include encounters between communities (both in person and online), disciplines, and archives, as well as across periods of history, geographical spaces, and religious and political systems of thought.

The first article featured in this issue is Emma Winston's discussion of nightcore; a genre of music which exists solely online. In many ways *Brief Encounters* is like nightcore, with its do-it-yourself approach, online existence, and collaborative nature, which, comparable to the nightcore scene, provides admittance to scholars regardless of geographical distance and prior experience. In our second musical contribution, Barry Sanders utilises academic discussions of digetic and non-digetic music to inform his research on the effects of music upon film narrative, using the 2013 thriller *Byzantium* as a case study.

Departing from analysis of contemporary culture, Louise Horton's article uses the example of John Bradford's mother's prayer to challenge how we read early modern edited collections that remove texts from their original contexts and raises questions about the ways that these encounters misrepresent authorial identities. Continuing in the early modern period, Eva Lauenstein explores the encounters between the living and dead in her discussion of sixteenth-century funerary monuments and, in so doing, illuminates the importance of

text, space, and material culture in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century churches. Moving from dead bodies to ‘bog bodies’, Patrick Wright illustrates the evocation of the sublime within the poetry of Seamus Heaney and re-casts recent feminist debates surrounding the poet’s work.

In its consideration of Lois McNay’s discussion of radical democratic theory, Tom Henderson’s article offers an encounter between politics and philosophy that defends ontological theories of the political. Dylan Williams continues this engagement with philosophical theories through his assessment of Michel Serres’s concept of folded temporality as a critical tool for understanding the representation of time in Iain Sinclair’s *White Chappell Scarlett Tracings* and J. G. Ballard’s *The Unlimited Dream Company*. Vera da Silva Sinha, Wany Sampaio and Christopher Sinha similarly explore the human need to quantify the world in their report on the counting systems of indigenous Amazonian languages. In the final contribution to our articles section, Peter Lloyd explores the artistic inspiration of Piet Mondrian’s paintings on the metro maps created by Henry Beck and George Salomon, causing us to reconsider the essential tools that guide our journeys.

Our special articles exemplify the creative practice encouraged by CHASE. Like Lloyd, Beth Hunt explores our understanding of journeys in a travelogue of her cruise through Peckham on a skateboard, and reveals the value of encountering a familiar city space in a new way, whilst Penny Simpson gives a voice to those who have been silenced in an extract from her novel *Buried*, an example of liminal fiction that transgresses the boundaries between the archive, literature, history, art, and law.

Our reviews offer an insight into the encounters we regularly have as academics; the time spent reading the work of our colleagues. Katherine Kruger provides an optimistic view on the worth of the arts and humanities more generally through her reading of Peter Boxall’s *The Value of the Novel* (2015). Marc Farrant’s aptly titled review interrogates J. M. Coetzee’s ‘slow philosophy’, while Maggie Crosland deftly demonstrates the benefit of the

interdisciplinary approach taken in Elizabeth Morrison and Zrinka Stahuljak's volume *The Adventures of Gillion de Trazegnies: Chivalry and Romance in the Medieval East* (2015). Last, but in no way least, Sabrina Villani's review is an encounter with "briefs" themselves (drawing attention to our journal's shared name with the ITV drama *Brief Encounters*), by taking us on her journey through the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition *Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear* (Saturday 16 April 2016 – Sunday 12 March 2017).

To cite Beth Hunt, the first issue of *Brief Encounters* is a 'patchwork quilt', richly textured with the interdisciplinary threads of the CHASE consortium, revealing hidden and often surprising connections.⁷ The first issue is only the beginning of what we believe will be a very long journey and we look forward to receiving and publishing work from past, current, and future CHASE-funded and affiliated individuals. For now, we hope that you enjoy, and are challenged by, your encounters with the submissions featured in this first issue.

⁷ Beth Hunt, 'A Peckham Pilgrimage: Looking for Lagos & Considering "Community"', *Brief Encounters*, 1.1 (2017), 1-15 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.24134/be.v1i1.18>> [accessed 6 February 2017] (p. 9).