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Introduction: Brief Encounters in Solidarity

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Introduction to *Brief Encounters* issue 9.

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In association with

Introduction: Brief Encounters in Solidarity

Millie Riddell

'We have come together as Palestinian academics and staff of Gaza universities to affirm our existence, the existence of our colleagues and our students, and the insistence on our future, in the face of all current attempts to erase us. The Israeli occupation forces have demolished our buildings but our universities live on. We reaffirm our collective determination to remain on our land and to resume teaching, study, and research in Gaza, at our own Palestinian universities, at the earliest opportunity'.¹

This is the opening to the emergency statement issued by over 150 academics and administrators from universities in Gaza on 24 May 2024. The statement goes on to call upon friends and colleagues around the world to resist Israel's ongoing campaign of scholasticide in Palestine, to work alongside Palestinian academics and administrators in rebuilding their demolished universities, and to refuse all plans seeking to bypass, erase, or weaken the integrity of Palestine's academic institutions.

Taking inspiration from this call, our call for papers for Issue 9 of *Brief Encounters* invited submissions on solidarity—how it might be practised by researchers, academics and administrators across disciplinary, institutional, and geographic divides; modes of scholarly exchange in times of crisis; and collaboration as a form of resilience in the arts and humanities. The pieces in this issue demonstrate the range and complexity of that term, "solidarity". Through this lens we encounter poet Stanley Richardson's social and artistic networks, the legacy of Hilma af Klint and spiritual practice as a form of radical resistance, and alternative approaches to anthropocentric paradigms of environmental governance.

Other pieces delve into *beautiful writing* and its place in contemporary Black feminist theory, present new research on the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the role of feminist pacifism in World War II, and consider the 1932 correspondence of Einstein and Freud, questioning the limits and possibilities of intellectual solidarity when the very foundations of knowledge are under siege. Creative encounters explore leisurely confrontations with archival collections, intersections of Japanese and Latin American literary traditions against an Edinburgh backdrop, and flash fiction dialogue exploring the intellectual origins of war.

¹ Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza, "Unified Emergency Statement by Palestinian Academics and Administrators of Gaza Universities", <https://www.gazauniversities.org/call>.

Our cover art, by Maha Gaad, is a photo taken during fieldwork for her PhD in the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, which explores how women working in handicraft workshops in urban Egypt perceive, vernacularise and experience empowerment. Taken in the Sayeda Ayesha neighbourhood of Cairo, one of Egypt's poorest "shanti towns", the photograph was taken on a walk between the workshop and local neighbourhood association (*gam'eya*), which runs a nursery for women while at the workshop. The vibrancy of the image, for Gaad, hints at the possibilities created through these workshops: of sisterhood, collective solidarity and hope.

The scope and depth of all these contributions remind us that solidarity takes many forms. It is unburdened by temporality, geography, language or species, but it does demand action, critical attention and community if it is to be more than an empty platitude. The thoughtful consideration given to different forms and approaches to solidarity in this issue serve as a reminder of the role the academic community can play in the face of crisis, and the many different modes of meaningful activism, resistance and rebellion.

At the time of writing, nearly eighteen months after the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza's statement, Friends of Palestinian Universities report escalating assaults on schools and universities across both Gaza and the West Bank.² Still, teachers continue teaching and students continue studying—online, in tents, persisting through starvation and exhaustion. In the words of Dr Ahmed Kamal Junina of Al-Aqsa University: "it is about refusing to disappear. About resisting the slow erasure that comes with war and famine. About insisting that our thoughts and our work continue, even when it must be done in the ruins".³

In March 2025 Dr Junina launched RECONNECT, an initiative that strives to restore access to education for students in the English department at Al-Aqsa University by providing guidance on study opportunities; hosting online seminars, workshops and knowledge-sharing events; and offering academic support and connections to the global academic community, with the support of scholars from around the world. A forthcoming special issue of *Brief Encounters*, guest edited by Dr Junina, will spotlight the work of students participating in RECONNECT. The special issue reaffirms the right

² Friends of Palestinian Universities, "Updates from Higher Education in Palestine: Escalating Assaults in Palestinian Universities and the Right to Learn", 16 October 2025, <https://fobzu.org/blog/2025/10/16/updates-from-higher-education-in-palestine-escalating-assaults-on-palestinian-universities-and-the-right-to-learn/>.

³ Ahmed Kamal Junina, "'Too hungry to think, too weak to sit upright. Concentration slips away': the struggle to stay focused as an academic in Gaza." *The Guardian*, 19 August 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/aug/19/too-hungry-to-think-too-weak-to-sit-upright-concentration-slips-away-the-struggle-to-stay-focussed-as-an-academic-in-gaza>.

to education as it extends to our peers in Gaza, reinforces the guiding ambition of *Brief Encounters* to support the dissemination of knowledge to a global readership and, we hope, contributes to a deeper understanding of how the global academic community can respond to crisis in a tangible way.

The creation of both Issue 9 and the upcoming special issue would not have been possible without the support of the CHASE team, with particular thanks to Joe Upton for his guidance and relentless encouragement. We are also grateful to all our peer reviewers for the time, care and thoughtful consideration they offered to our authors; Andy Byers and Simon Everett for support throughout the editorial process; and the team at Silicon Chips, without whom this issue could not have been made.

In the spirit of solidarity, I end with a reminder and a call to action from the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza:

'The rebuilding of Gaza's academic institutions is not just a matter of education; it is a testament to our resilience, determination, and unwavering commitment to securing a future for generations to come. The fate of higher education in Gaza belongs to the universities in Gaza, their faculty, staff, and students and to the Palestinian people as a whole. We appreciate the efforts of peoples and citizens around the world to bring an end to this ongoing genocide. We call upon our colleagues in the homeland and internationally to support our steadfast attempts to defend and preserve our universities for the sake of the future of our people, and our ability to remain on our Palestinian land in Gaza.

We built these universities from tents. And from tents, with the support of our friends, we will rebuild them once again'.⁴

⁴ Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza, "Unified Emergency Statement by Palestinian Academics and Administrators of Gaza Universities".