BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Introduction

Author(s): James L. Broun

Email: J.Broun@sussex.ac.uk

Brief Encounters is an open access journal that supports the dissemination of knowledge to a global readership. All articles are free to read and accessible to all with no registration required. For more information please visit our journal homepage: http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE.

In association with

CHASE
Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England

Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Introduction

James L. Broun

One of the strengths of *Brief Encounters* – and certainly part of what makes it unique – is its interdisciplinary nature. The diverse range of submissions we have had this year bears testament to the variety of fields our authors are working in, which reflects positively on the wider academic community. However, my job has turned to writing an introduction and, in some ways, that same variety makes it hard for me to find cohering themes – a perennial challenge for editors of this journal. The process is not helped by the way that the Senior Editor pores over each submission in an iterative fashion – focusing more intensively each time on the nuances of prose and the minutiae of formatting. By the time I came to put together this introduction, I had been so focused on looking at each article – indeed, each sentence – in isolation that the broader themes and concepts were harder to see. As if studying a painting in a gallery, I had been standing inches away admiring each brushstroke and splash of colour. But to write this introduction, I needed to step back and view the whole picture – the much greater product of those parts.

Stepping back a little farther from the canvas has allowed me to reflect on what unifies this issue. There are, in fact, a remarkable number of connections between submissions which initially seem totally distinct. While most of the articles examine one or two case studies in depth – and these analyses are what one is confronted with immediately – it becomes clear that the authors use these cases as 'ways in' that allow them to interrogate much wider issues and critically reflect on bigger questions. Individual cases aside, the theories, concepts and themes used or discussed in one article turn up in others.

Putting together this introduction therefore reminds me of Natalie Burton's article in this issue. It examines Gerald Finzi's song cycle *Earth and Air and Wind*.[1] As several musical scholars have argued, this cycle is a work which lacks internal unity – its most unifying feature is its 'structural pluralism'. But Burton takes a different view. Looking at the cycle non-sequentially and diffractively, one can see patterns. Five of the ten songs, taken together, form their own narrative. This is an important conclusion for Finzi scholars and musicologists, but more generally it serves to remind us that shifting our perspective can offer new ways of seeing connections between apparently disparate things.

For instance, take state violence, a theme which turns up in this issue in very different places. In her analysis of two short Afrofuturist stories,[2] Caren Holmes explores how Black authors imagine resistance to state violence, which is structural and tied up with racialised 'necropolitics' – Achille Mbembe's term for the power to decide who lives and who dies. Holmes argues that science fiction offers a space for Black authors to reject sub-humanity and conceive of a possibility for them to 'live in creative struggles and explorations of the "beyond human"'. This, Holmes argues, is bound up with Afrofuturism's attempt to '[create] space for authors and readers to imagine worlds in which the "institutionalised proximity to death" and violence against Black and Brown communities is reversed, disrupted, confronted, disappeared or amplified'.[3]

---

[1] Natalie Burton, 'Structural Pluralism in Gerald Finzi's *Earth and Air and Rain*', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 1–11 < ttps://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.179>.

[2] Caren Holmes, 'Afrofuturist Responses to State Violence', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 12–18 <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.169>.

[3] Holmes, p. 12.

In her article Emma Jacobs also explores state violence but in a different context. She analyses the way that the state and media in the United Kingdom have ascribed a discourse of riskiness onto the actions of migrants trying to cross the English Channel.[4] This, she argues, casts them as irresponsible and dangerous, when in fact it is the increasingly harsh policies of deterrence and the bureaucratic complexities of asylum-seeking which lead desperate people to do desperate (and dangerous) things.

A related theme is colonialism and this is also discussed in several articles. Manizha Sepas offers a compelling analysis and contextualisation of Sony Labou Tansi's novel *Life and a Half*, a story set in a fictional African state run by a cannibalistic dictator.[5] The novel follows the life and charts the gruesome death of the opposition leader Martial, as well as the violence inflicted on his family and the ravages carried out on the country by the state. But, as Sepas shows, this is a story which draws on Sony's experience of violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Sony demonstrates powerfully how the violence inflicted by the modern African state in his novel has its roots in the bloodiness of colonial rule and is perpetuated by 'foreign powers' to this day. As Sepas argues, *Life and a Half* 'forefronts struggle against power' but also 'against forgetting'.[6]

Holly May Treadwell examines another legacy of colonialism, but not in relation to direct violence. She examines Native American (Navajo and Lakota) understandings of sex and gender, highlighting how those cultures often understood (and often continue to conceptualise) sex as multifarious and non-binary, and gender as diverse and complex – ideas which are usually traced by Western scholars instead to Judith Butler's work on gender and queer theory from the 1990s. Treadwell highlights how colonial processes 'eras[ed] and occlude[ed] practises that would have helped societies such as those in America and the UK see and articulate queer realities long before 1990'.[7]

Also exploring colonial practices in her study of the English Channel migrant 'crisis', Jacobs demonstrates how 'risk management' can become a colonising strategy, not just over people but their futures too; as she writes, it is a strategy 'applied systemically by sovereign powers to vulnerable populations'.[8] The future is central to another one of our articles: Heather McKnight's study of utopianism within the School Strike for Climate Change movement.[9] Analysing the speeches and statements given by a number of striking students and activists, McKnight suggests that 'the movement goes beyond just presenting a vision of an inescapable future, or a simple request for adults to listen to science. Instead, their vision is constructive of a better world'. They have created a movement built around 'militant optimism' and 'open-ended utopian processes'; the strikes have emerged out of the 'darkness' and 'inertia' of the 'now', presenting alternative visions of the future.[10]

This, of course, is also a highly current and important study about resistance and the politics of change. And in many ways, so is Zainabb Hull's article which examines representations of gender in two recent films released for Pakistani cinema – *Dukhtar* and *My Pure Land*.[11] While Hull's analysis focuses on

---

[4] Emma Jacobs, '"Colonising the Future": Migrant Crossings on the English Channel and the Discourse of Risk', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 37–47 <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.173>.

[5] Manizha Sepas, 'The Allegory of Political Violence in Sony Labou Tansi's *Life and a Half*', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 75–81 <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.198>.

[6] Sepas, p. 75.

[7] Holly May Treadwell, 'Contextualising Queer Theory: Sex and Gender in the American Philosophy of Judith Butler *v.* Native American Theory and Cultures', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 91–100 (p. 91) <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.193>.

[8] Jacobs, p. 42.

[9] Heather McKnight, '"The Oceans are Rising and So Are We": Exploring Utopian Discourses of the School Student Strike For Climate', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 48–63 <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.217>.

[10] McKnight, p. 48.

[11] Zainabb Hull, 'Filming the Motherland: Gendered Violence and Pakistani Female Empowerment in *Dukhtar* and *My Pure Land*', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 28–36 <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.174>.

the complex portrayal of gendered violence in these films, it also highlights how a small number of movies like these are challenging a largely patriarchal status quo. This is not shown to be an easy struggle, of course (in one of these films, some of the women must wield machine guns to assert their independence; in the other, they have to rely on a man). But, as Hull puts it, these movies nevertheless:

> reject simplistic western perceptions of Pakistan whilst demanding accountability for gendered violence, suggesting pathways to female empowerment and gender equality through women's economic and social independence, and a reshaping of popular concepts of 'honour' and value that define a woman's worth only in relation to men.[12]

There is also something to be said here for the complex interplay between politics, identity (in this case gender) and the nation. Daniel Rathbone also examines these themes in a very different way.[13] He has taken a deeply personal historical source – a set of his family's home movies – and dissected them to reveal, in the most textured terms, the complex tensions at the heart of family life and settler identities in Southern Africa as white rule began to wane in the 1950s and 1960s. Colonialism and racism appear here too, but so do ideas about the nation. Hull's analysis of *Dukhtar* and *My Pure Land* identifies the landscape as a crucial component of story-telling and nation-building; Rathbone grapples with the same themes, but to address different problems. How did white settlers construct a national identity around a landscape which was not theirs? Rathbone offers insights into that and other questions by employing a type of source that is underused in historical research (indeed, his article will be of use to people interested in home video as source material).

The family also sits at the forefront of Linda Horsnell's analysis of James Joyce's story 'Eveline'.[14] In this article, Horsnell employs (in an original fashion) John Bowlby's Attachment Theory to offer new insights into the text. The theory is that a child needs to develop a relationship with their caregiver for their emotional development to carry on healthily; if they do not, then a variety of personality traits emerge. Armed with this, it becomes possible to read much of the behaviour of the title character in Joyce's 'Eveline' as a product of grief and loss.

In an interesting essay Andrea Smith also explores death. Her study of Shakespeare's Earl of Warwick as he appears in *Henry VI, Part 2* posits that he might be English fiction's first forensic pathologist.[15] Smith is, of course, not suggesting that Warwick had swapped his suit of armour for a laboratory coat or his coronet for a cranial drill; but, she demonstrates how Shakespeare had Warwick examine the battered corpse of the Duke of Gloucester, look for clues about the cause of his death and then pronounce that he had, in fact, met an unnatural end. Quite convincingly, she argues that this set a precedent for the contemporary forensic pathologist who appears in detective books and murder mystery television programmes, and reflects a peculiar episode in the history of the interface between science and literature.

The last of the articles in this issue is Patrick Ian Wright's analysis of Michael Symmons Roberts' poetry collection *Drysalter*. A recurrent theme in Roberts' work is the sacred, and he poses interesting questions and answers to how the sacred might reveal itself to us in this secular, scientific (and perhaps even post-secular) age. Wright argues that, in Roberts' poetry, the sacred 'is dispersed, non-hierarchical,

---

[12] Hull, p. 28.

[13] Daniel Clayton Rathbone, '"I Looked and Beheld a Country": Home Movies, Homesteads and the Family Archive', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 64–74 <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.208>.

[14] Linda Horsnell, 'Unresolved Grief and the Pull of the Dead in James Joyce's 'Eveline': An Interpretation Using Attachment Theory', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 19–27 <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.181>.

[15] Andrea Smith, '"See How the Blood is Settled in His Face": Warwick: Fiction's First Pathologist', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 82–90 <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.203>.

immanent'; it has been banished by the Enlightenment, but subsists in its own opposite, the profane. This means, for Roberts, in everyday items and the mundane.[16]

The Creative Encounters which we have printed in this issue are equally engaging. The first, Alanna McArdle's poem *Voice*, 'uses the lyric "I" and considers the radical possibilities of its application in the interrogation of trauma and selfhood, and the conflict between self-definition and medical/institutional definition'.[17] The poem explores how the self relates to others and what this external recognition means in the context of addressing trauma and mental illness. The process of constantly being defined by institutions is a core part of this question, but so is the act of writing the poem itself – as an act of self-definition. How are the definitions of others situated in power relations? Can writing be a way of reclaiming for oneself the 'oppressive' language of diagnoses? This poem powerfully explores these and other connected questions.

The second creative work, published pseudonymously by A. Rose, is *Hug Skill Increase*, a short story told from the perspective of a boy with autism.[18] It adds to the growing body of literature written from the point of view of people with disabilities, featuring protagonists in positive ways. It portrays several autistic traits, for instance in showing the character interpret the world literally and by featuring only internal monologue and the voices of others (reflecting the selective mutism of some autistic children, which stands in contrast to their busy thoughts). The story ends by showing the boy's mother engage in hug therapy with him.

The third and last of our Creative Encounters is Elisina De Zulueta's *The Other Robinson*, a work which immerses itself in all things Robinson – finding the eponymous character in the works of Daniel Defoe, J. M. Coetzee, Michel Tournier, Patrick Keiller, and others in between, it aims to present 'a collection or genealogy of Robinsons'. Partly inspired by post-structuralist readings of the original Robinson, the title character in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, it considers the novel 'as a recursive mode of producing existential territory'; as the author admits, this is an approach which is 'necessarily oblique and traverses multiple registers'. The author poses several questions, inviting the reader to answer them: 'What is important? How do we form skins and shorelines? Are other islands and other Robinsons possible? How can alterity produce itself and how might we experience it?'[19]

Finally, but by no means least importantly, we have one review article for this issue. Alexandros Daniilidis gives a critical account of the sociologist Iain Borden's recent history of skateboarding, offering (as Daniilidis demonstrates) a rounded and interdisciplinary look at the sport.[20]

This brings me to the end of my introduction. The reader will no doubt be left with an impression of the remarkable diversity of articles, creative pieces and reviews that we have been able to bring them in this issue. Hopefully they will enjoy piecing together all sorts of other connections between the varied submissions we have published. Perhaps we might even inspire some new insights into their own research. Whatever the case, reading over these pieces once again has reminded me of the joys of opening one's mind to other subject areas, research and arguments which seem, at first, far removed from what feels familiar. It has been a refreshing and rewarding experience which I hope many others will share with me.

---

[16] Patrick Ian Wright, '"Sunlit Now, We See the Devastation": Apocalyptic Themes in Michael Symmons Roberts' *Drysalter*', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 101–109 (p. 101) <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.168>.

[17] Alanna McArdle, '*Voice*', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 110–122 (p. 110) <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.172>.

[18] A. Rose, '*Hug Skill Increase*', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 123–127 <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.175>.

[19] Elisina De Zulueta, '*The Other Robinson*', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 128–149 (p. 128; abstract) <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.197>.

[20] Alexandros Daniilidis, 'Review of Iain Borden, *Skateboarding and the City: A Complete History*' (London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2019)', *Brief Encounters*, 4.1 (2020), 150–152 <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.199>.