Guest editors' introduction

The potentiality of the encounter

Sabine Bauer–Amin & Aleksandra Reczuch

In anthropology, ethnology, and their neighbouring disciplines, there is no shortage of theorising about encounters. Explored in terms of peaceful or violent meetings of groups to various degrees, issues of intercultural exchange, acculturation, appropriation, and colonialism are common themes in analysing encounters. Although the openness of the concept allows its application in a variety of situations, it is not simply a placeholder for any form of contact. Key to most usages of the term is that it needs two groups that are "different" or at least "not the same" (see also Faier & Rofel 2014: 363). Furthermore, defining these groups as "different" requires a preceding process of knowledge production about the respective "other". Because such processes rarely happen on symmetrical grounds, shaped as they are by power asymmetries, several researchers have argued for a nuanced application of "encounters" where they are seen as objects of study in addition to a theoretical concept (e.g., Fountain 2016; Schioccet et al. 2020).

With this thematic section we explore the concept of encounter and what such a nuanced application of the term can mean for analysis as well as methodology. The contributions in this issue continue the discussions that began among panellists of a session titled "The Potentiality of Encounters" at the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences Congress 2020. As with the panel, contributors consider specific examples of encounters and their consequences to ask several interrelated questions: What are the lived consequences of the encounter? How do encounters shape reality and relations between people? Do encounters preserve power relations or dismantle them? By asking these questions, we explore how encounters become a starting point from which to study social processes, connections, and trajectories and how this shapes ethnographic research. Using their respective cases as entry points, each author explores a particular way of understanding events, phenomena, and knowledge production that becomes possible by researching the encounter simultaneously as a theoretical concept and an object of study.

Starting with a brief discussion of the features of the encounter as a concept, recent research is discussed for the relational quality that characterises encounters. As each contribution demonstrates, there is a potential in an encounter perspective to understand the production of difference that motivates its applicability to anthropological research. In reflecting on the methodological and descriptive applications of this approach, the contributions in this thematic section argue for the relevance of affect, imaginaries, intersectionality, and transformativity as lenses through which to analyse encounters.

Encounter and difference

In speaking about the role of difference in the study of encounters, each of the authors in this theme section works from an understanding that difference is not an inherent or pre-existing quality but something that is produced through power relations (Said 1978; Gupta & Ferguson 1992). For any meeting of "different" groups, the basis of perceived or constructed difference can be investigated. This holds true especially where "difference" is used as a way to motivate social policies, supremacy theories or other products of power asymmetries grounded in imperial, colonial, and other hegemonic legacies that are normalised in social discourse and thereby continue to influence how various groups interact with each other.

Analysing the "encounter" in relation to such asymmetries brings to the surface both the ways in which ideas, representations, and affections attached to other social groups are embedded in power dynamics, and how these dynamics shape interactions between groups. The empirical ramifications of this kind of potentialities, and the transformative power of encounters, lead to questions that are of interest for ethnographers: What can a study of encounters tell us about how groups navigate life in polarised societies? Or, in turn, what kind of subjectivities and affective reactions are elicited by the potential for encounters across differences?

There are several interrelated features of an encounter perspective that motivate its relevance as an entry point for analysis. In addition to acknowledging how notions of difference are constantly unfolding, encounters are the product of multiple knowledge systems coming into contact with one another through the people involved in them. Importantly this contact can have an impact on individual and collective subjectivities, as well as result in new social phenomena as groups negotiate and produce new knowledge. Rather than taking the meeting of groups as an event, this

perspective shifts focus towards the context in which encounters take place and the processes they set in motion through their inherent potentiality. It is these contexts and processes that contributors analyse to understand the interconnected trajectories of groups that lead to and result from encounters.

Encounter: Methodological and descriptive tools

Our understanding of the methodological application of the encounter builds on Philip Fountain's (2016) argument that investigating specific encounters offers a way to also explore broader global and historical connections, power asymmetries, and expectations that lead up to meetings, as well as the transformations that are caused by them. For Fountain, these are important contexts that shape encounters. Approaching encounters thusly situates the people involved in them as the focus of investigation. This is because encounters can be understood as "dynamic spaces" of transformative potential where knowledge is "negotiated, contested, and constructed during the encounter itself" (Fountain 2016: 164). Their dynamic nature means that fieldwork and analysis can lead researchers along a range of social, historical, and political trajectories as relevant to develop context about the setting in which an encounter occurs.

At the same time, researchers may also find themselves following the trajectories of personal experience to understand sentiments, affects, and emotions that shape encounters and emerge through them. There is a particular need for more theorisation on the emotional and affective trajectories of encounters. This thematic collection of articles was in part motivated by an interest to contribute to such theorisation, doing so through deeper engagement with four dimensions of encounters – their *affective*, *imaginary*, *intersectional*, and *transformative* potential – that have contributed to each author's understanding of the relational dynamics that shape these meetings and their outcomes.

Dimensions of an encounter

Affect

Encounters involve more than meetings of individual trajectories based on unequal power dynamics. The knowledge production preceding an encounter creates assumptions and anticipation towards other parties and the outcome of meeting them, which are evaluated against moral and cultural imaginaries. Encounters are not approached from a neutral emotional state, but are feared or desired to varying degrees, informed by the extent to which the encounter is expected to unsettle previous understandings. The anticipation through which dealings with "the Other" are framed thus creates an affective space emerging during an encounter that can enable and create conditions for social and

personal transformation (Stenner & Clinch 2013). By anticipating certain behaviours, feelings, or outcomes when they imagine the encounter, actors are being fuelled by existing and unfolding power asymmetries, which in turn shape the knowledge production about "the Other".

Imaginary

Affective investment and the knowledge production that precedes it work from imaginaries about the characteristics of something or someone believed to not be the same. For Salazar (2011), an imaginary is a set of representational assemblages that are transmitted socially and often structured by dichotomies that might be difficult to discern in practice (2011: 2). As with Ricœur (1994), he underscores the duality of the imaginary as both producing meanings and being the product of the self-same process: "The vernacular imaginings people rely on, from the most spectacular fantasies to the most mundane reveries, are usually not expressed in theoretical terms but in images and discourses" (Salazar 2011: 2). Brann argues that to "remake the world imaginatively" is "our most specifically human mission" (Brann 1991: 774). Often, imaginaries about others are not explicitly named, but work according to subtle, unspoken schemas that shape our orientation to the world and others. The encounter, and hence how people interact with each other, therefore, starts much earlier than an actual physical meeting. It begins in the process of knowledge production about the "other", as stereotypes, examinations, and imaginations about the other evolve and become constituted as categories of social knowledge.

Intersectionality

Discourses of othering are necessarily relational in character. The context and content of how people are othered depend on the locations and positionalities of those involved in relation to one another. Applying intersectional approaches, the authors of the articles in this thematic section examine the role of power structures and processes of distinction, differentiation, and marginalisation as they shape encounters. As Anthias (2012) observes, groups should not be treated as unitary and with common experience, but rather as differentiated by the living circumstances, racial and ethno-religious differences, gender, and other axes of difference that are mobilised.

These differences are sharply presented in the contributions of Sandra A. Fernandez and Miriam Alves de Souza (both in this issue), where identification based on a single facet of identity would ignore the complexity of racial relations in Egypt and religion in Brazil respectively, and the important ways in which each intersects with gender. In this way, studying encounters serves in analyses of how multiple parameters of sameness and difference can shape the context and conditions of

encounters. While applying this understanding in different context, contributors each problematise and critique power relations observed in the field through an intersectional lens, illuminating how strategies of resistance and emancipatory practices can also fuel discourses of othering that legitimise marginalisation (see Carbado et al. 2013: 304). To the extent that encounters constitute "everyday engagements across difference" (Faier & Rofel 2014: 363), the articles collected here engage with the intersections of those differences in specific contexts.

Transformative potential

Encounters have an inherent potentiality that can lead to transformations beyond their spatial and temporal location. While the asymmetry in encounters might also perpetuate preconceptions about the self and other, embodied practices and intrinsic power differences, they also have a transformative potential, able to influence knowledge production and subjectivities to the extent ideas about the other might change, thereby opening new possibilities of interaction. Through the capacity to transcend abstract ideas about "the Other" and replace this with concrete experience, the encounter opens space for dynamic negotiation and contestation. Following Fountain, encounter is "not simply the unfurling of predetermined scripts, but rather dynamic spaces of negotiation […] "negotiated, contested, and constructed during the encounter itself" (2016: 163–164). What is intriguing is that even encounters that have not (yet) happened can cause affective reactions and reshape social configurations. As Michał Buchowski shows in his investigation of the encounter between the Polish public and a "phantom" Muslim refugee population that is largely absent from the country, encounters that have not (yet) happened can shape, and motivate people, transforming subjectivities and the production of knowledge Others (Buchowski 2017, see e.g., Biehl et al. 2017; Zahavi 2014).

Encounters as lenses: Exploring social phenomena through physical and imagined interactions

This thematic journal section presents a collection of articles that work with different aspects of encounters, both physical and imagined. While each contribution differs in its focus, a commonality among all of them is how the encounter acts as a lens through which to examine a wider range of social phenomena than just the encounter itself.

Overview of articles

As Miriam Alves de Souza demonstrates in her article, the assumptions made before and during an encounter can lead to a strong affective response, sometimes reinforcing the stereotypes. Using the example of humanitarian work with Muslim refugees in Brazil as her case study, Alves de Souza discusses the confusion of humanitarians towards their beneficiaries when they do not behave according to their stereotypes about family roles in Islam. In doing so, she addresses the ways in which knowledge production in Brazil as it concerns Islam, tradition, and refugeehood can hinder humanitarian actors from questioning their own assumptions, reinforcing stereotypes by expecting certain values and behaviours of refugee "others". Shaped by stereotypical expectations on Muslim refugee women, the encounter she studied reflects a power imbalance between those who are helping and those who are helped, showing the intensity and power of preconceptions in anticipations of encounters. Alves de Souza also addresses how the material symbols of gendered religiosity (the hijab, in this case) determines perception and is used to explain the behaviour of others in a manner that ignores their lived experience and actual motivations.

Assumptions and their reinforcement through physical encounters are also discussed in Cecília dos Guimarães Bastos's text, where she analyses the transformative power of travel encounters in India. As she points out, there is an affective aspect attributed to travel through the potential for redefinition that affects travellers. Unpacking the travel encounters of students' influences on a Brazilian Vedanta group she sees the encounter as a driving force behind creating the relationships and shaping images, representations of different cultures. By exploring the symbolic meanings in the sense of secular rituals and ruptures with the ordinary, she captures the encounter as a process in which perception is negotiated. In doing so, she illustrates how new ideas and practices are woven in beyond the actual encounter. She demonstrates the potentiality for practices, knowledge, and subjectivities in her ethnography.

In her contribution, Sabine Bauer-Amin considers how an Arab artist collective attempts to engage an imagined Austrian public. She explores how this collective constructs their own ideas about an Occidental "other" in their efforts to reach this public. Seeking to overcome the asymmetry inscribed in their day-to-day encounters with Austrian public servants by creating new forms of engagement through art, the desired encounter does not play out as hoped. As Bauer-Amin describes, expectations do not always match reality, as the encounter remains in the sphere of a desired, as yet unrealised meeting. Arguing that this does not make the encounter any less meaningful, she analyses how the potentiality of the encounter creates an affective investment that motivates knowledge production about both the collective self and the Austrian public "other". In doing so, the text puts forth considerations for analysing how hopes, wishes, and fears can govern the trajectories of groups whether or not an encounter is realised.

As Sandra A. Fernandez demonstrates in her auto-ethnographic reflection on her experience as a researcher in Cairo, Egypt, subtle expectations driven by local understandings of gender and race can shape a researcher's presence in the field and how interlocutors engage with them. Importantly, her intersectional analysis addresses how black female bodies are not only racialised but also sexualised. Through analysing her own presence in the streets of Cairo, and the ways in which she is read by different residents, Fernandez shows how race and gender at times override any privileges she may have had as a Western researcher. While some of her ascribed identities put her in a position of privilege, others place her in situations that are rather disadvantageous, or even dangerous. As Fernandez underscores, encounters are not one-sided processes, but interactions marked by multiple exchanges, each reflecting different levels of privilege on all sides (Fernandez, in this issue).

This special section demonstrates the different ways in which encounters – and thus how people interact with each other – begin well before any physical meeting. Beginning with knowledge production about others and the stereotypes, expectations, fantasies, and imaginaries through which difference and similarity are constructed, we can understand how encounters come to be feared or desired. Equally, we can better appreciate how encounters are in a constant state of becoming and re-imagining.

Research on the encounter must bring the people involved in them to the forefront, accounting for the varied motivations, desires, emotions, and power dynamics that affect the meetings of groups. By demonstrating how encounters develop a transformative potential through the creation of affective spaces filled with ascriptions and anticipations based on stereotypes about intersectional constellations of racial, gender, religious, refugee, or professional status, the contributions to this issue give due attention to the emotions and imaginings that lend encounters their power. Just the act of imagining the outcome of an encounter creates the potential for change, whether such change realigns positionalities, power dynamics or self-understandings or reinforces them. In this sense, an encounter perspective is inclusive of plasticity and potentiality. Whether realised or not, as the authors each show in their own examples, encounters are not fixed in time, beginning well before a meeting, and continuing to shape experiences and future encounters well after they occur.

Author bio

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