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Urban encounters: Introduction to the special issue

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Since the 1990s, social scientists have noted that public spaces in cities have become increasingly inhospitable to the 'other', debating whether the spatial component of interaction between strangers is capable of mediating social and cultural differences (Fincher and Iveson 2008; Amin 2012; Hall 2012; Sennett 2018; Berg and Nowicka 2019). The theme of this Special Issue—'Urban encounters: living with difference in cities'—speaks to a need to explore topics of belonging, identity, participation and interaction with others within urban spaces more deeply. It aims to unpack the concepts of encounter and interaction with others (Valentine 2008; Mayblin et al. 2016) in the hope of building pathways between disciplines and approaches. Daily life, here, becomes a point of enquiry and a practical challenge. Looking at everyday spaces and the quotidian as a sphere of interaction, the key concepts which emerge—relating to the management of diversity and contestations of identity and belonging—are as conflicted as the situations they tend to describe.

This Special Issue engages with the literature on 'encounters' as an analytical framework—a literature which views these situations not as happenstance, but as intrinsically shaped by sociocultural and socio-economic contexts and the specific spaces which facilitate them. In a recent review of academic debates on the topic, and building on Wilson's (2017) geographical work on encounters, Vertovec (2023: 1280) broadly defines these as 'interactions across social categories and boundaries of difference'. It is a notion that is most commonly used to analyse situations where there are 'clear distinctions of social identity and categorization, with an attention to how difference is negotiated, constructed and legitimated within contingent moments of encounter' (Wilson 2017: 454). The contributions in this issue then build on this scholarship by developing and questioning our understanding of what makes encounters 'meaningful': that is, those which shift entrenched, negative views of others, offer opportunities to rethink the inclusion of refugees and migrants and acknowledge the role of local communities in this process (Valentine 2008; Matejskova and Leitner 2011; Wilson 2011; 2017; Valentine and Sadgrove 2014).

The literature on 'spaces of encounter' has attempted to describe the attributes which lead to such shifts (Ahmed 2000; Fincher 2003; Thrift 2005; Valentine 2008), without adopting a distinct position. On the one hand, it has been shown that habitual contact or

fleeting encounters do not necessarily lead to intercultural exchange (Amin 2002; Sandercock 2003; Valentine 2008; Ettlinger 2009; Wessel 2009). On the other hand, scholars suggest that fleeting encounters can contribute to a sense of familiarity by making diversity commonplace and promoting feelings of community and belonging (Boyd 2006; Vertovec 2007; Blokland and Nast 2014; Wessendorf 2014; Ye 2016). A common position is that such encounters can maintain a façade of conviviality while preserving or strengthening private prejudices (Wise 2005; Watson 2006; Valentine 2008; Noble 2013, Monson 2024). Meetings at school gates, for example, may lead to familiarity and friendships between parents, but class-based, religious and racial hierarchies and issues of belonging can still persist (Wilson 2013; 2014). These positions have been subjected to extensive empirical research in a range of settings and at a range of scales: for example, in parks (Cattell et al. 2008; Clayton 2009; Neal et al. 2015), in cafés (Jones et al. 2015), on streets (Simpson 2011; Hall 2012; Powell and Rishbeth 2012; Koch and Latham 2013), in markets and malls (Anderson 2004; Watson 2009), on buses (Wilson 2011) and in community gardens (Rishbeth et al. 2019), among other places.

The papers of this Special Issue on 'Urban encounters' offer key contributions to this growing field: a field deeply rooted in place-based approaches to migration-related diversification, with a long tradition in sociological enquiry focused on cities. Back in the 1920s, scholars from the Chicago School of Sociology were already examining local neighbourhoods and how city dwellers who had arrived from elsewhere adapted to these places and interacted with each other (Park 1928). This tradition continued throughout the twentieth century, in various contexts (Hannerz 1980; Baumann 1996; Parnell and Robinson 2012; Dines et al. 2021). While much of this scholarship has focused on specific 'ethnic groups', new conditions of migration and increased diversification of many urban areas—coupled with the political and discursive backlash against multiculturalism in Europe (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010)—have led to a proliferation of studies from around the globe looking at encounters and social relations between groups and individuals of different ethnic, religious, class, racial, and educational backgrounds (Wessendorf 2014; Kathiravelu 2015; Wise 2016; Biehl 2018; Horgan and Liinamaa 2023; Wessendorf and Monson 2023). This 'local turn' has helped to move away from previous 'methodologically ethnicist' (King 2001) approaches to studying urban diversity, allowing categories of difference to emerge empirically—albeit with the risk of 'methodological neighbourhoodism', which assumes the reification of places as naturally bound and coherent (Berg et al. 2019: 27).

During an era of continuing international mobility across the globe and mostly to urban centres, and at a time of increasing discursive polarization between 'us' and 'them' in political and media discourse, this Special Issue builds on this scholarship and addresses the persisting need to look at how people in such urban areas negotiate their differences. While there is an extensive literature on encounters based on research undertaken in the Global North, and especially in Northern Europe, this Special Issue expands this focus to also include contexts in the European South and beyond Europe. By bringing forth contributions beyond mainstream Western contexts, historical trajectories of migration, colonial legacies, and varied socio-economic structures and their influence on the nature of urban encounters can be discussed anew. In doing so, they offer fresh perspectives on the formation and renegotiation of social identities, community solidarity and mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion—thus underscoring the importance of expanding our analytical and empirical horizons. Through an expanded lens, conceptually and geographically, the papers in this Special Issue collectively broaden the research agenda and offer refreshing takes on methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks and empirical insights which enrich our understanding of particular aspects of urban encounters.

Social boundaries, and their negotiations via encounters in public urban spaces, hence, continue to be of social scientific and societal relevance. Much of the scholarship investigating place-based encounters across various categorical differences is fundamentally

concerned with these processes of boundary-making, which is reflected in this Special Issue (see, e.g., Monson, Lundsteen, Vine). Originally, social scientific work on boundary-making did not only look at contexts characterized by migration-related diversification, but social contexts characterized by a mix of social groups differentiated along various categorical lines (Barth 1969; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2013). In contexts shaped by social complexity, the conceptual lens of boundary-making allows for categories of differentiation to emerge on the ground: an approach which many of the papers in this Special Issue have used. For example, Vine (2024) shows that new alliances are formed between white British residents and newcomers who share the same religion, while in the context of increasing socio-economic precarity, the absence of people from other faiths might build divisions in the future. Socio-economic marginalisation and the retreat of the welfare state are also themes reflected in several of the papers featured, showing how processes of 'othering' or boundary-making are deeply rooted within the structural inequalities in these places. In these contexts of increased precarity and thus increased competition over resources, it is often newcomers who are blamed for larger structural changes caused by neoliberalism and the shrinking of welfare support (see Hunt 2024, Lundsteen 2024, Vine 2024).

This puts a strain on the ability of communities of certain urban areas to live together convivially—and indeed brings the very concepts and possibilities of 'conviviality' and 'community' into question. 'Conviviality' is frequently compared to 'community', as both navigate issues of identity and belonging (Brah 1996; Levitt 2001; Sigona et al. 2015). So far conviviality has been engaged with as either a fluid network of relations which result in a peaceful life, or frictions—offering an alternative to the strict boundaries of community allegiance. Rabo (2012), in a study conducted in Aleppo, not only found conviviality to exist outside of community but placed conviviality at conflict with community—suggesting that the former only exists without the other. However, scholars such as Blokland (2008) remain adamant that community remains an important attribute in the daily lives of individuals and does not preclude conviviality. Amin (2012) openly refutes the importance of conviviality and its capacity to explain or address the divided plural society. He proposes that people might mingle with a degree of disinterest that becomes inconsequential, while having privately held xenophobic views of individuals that under the public eye are framed as tolerant (Valentine 2008).

Collectively, the papers of this Special Issue build upon such key theoretical concepts as boundary-making, community, and conviviality, while also investigating the social impacts of socio-economic and structural inequalities in urban settings. Through innovative methodologies, they provide rich descriptions of everyday urban encounters around the world—from the seafront of Beirut, informal settlements in South Africa and local neighbourhoods in London and the north of England to a small Catalan town and the cities of Johannesburg and Thessaloniki. By doing so, they contribute significantly to the growing field of encounters research in migration studies.

It can be said that they take three approaches to the overall theme of 'urban encounters': namely, they explore how situated interactions are 'experienced', 'created', and 'theorised', and discuss the implications this has for the (un-)making of social boundaries, communities and conviviality. By taking these different perspectives, they also fill gaps in knowledge which become apparent when shifting the research lens away from Northern Europe and the West.

The first three papers focus on 'experiencing encounters'—that is, they detail migrants' daily experiences of engaging in city space—and they pay particular attention to how socio-economic inequality intersects with other types of difference. Khayat and Rishbeth (2024), for example, take us to Lebanon and zoom in on four case study sites which highlight different experiences of space amid the 'co-presence' of a diverse population. Through employing a varied methodological approach, involving interviews and questionnaires, they capture both migrant presence and narratives of experience in these locations. Their

exploration proposes that the seafront, beyond being a leisure resource for a diverse population, also functions as a space where hierarchies of privilege and patterns of inequality frame urban encounters—and thus also the migrant experience. Commenting on the characteristics of the seafront as an open, free resource of 'elective leisure' (Neal et al. 2015) within a post-conflict, high-migration context, they conclude by cautioning against the equality it promises—observing that inequalities persist and permeate these spaces, even while still being enjoyed via varied leisure practices. This flips the arguments of previous research in this area (e.g., Deeb and Harb 2013), which has found that *despite* instances of racism, such spaces *can* support a sense of belonging in a multicultural environment.

Vine (2024) also touches on the co-existence of inclusion and exclusion in specific places. Her article builds on the concept of chronic urban trauma (Pain 2019) to conceptualise long-established residents' reactions to newcomers. It draws on research in three economically deprived neighbourhoods in Sheffield with a limited history of immigration. Vine shows how reactions to newcomers are strongly shaped by long-term exposure to marginalisation and deprivation resulting from decades of withdrawal of state support for housing and community development. Over time, this state withdrawal has undermined residents' trust in local authorities. The article shows how provision gaps left by the state have primarily been filled by local churches, who provide foodbanks and other services. It describes how this transfer of services from secular to religious spaces might lead to these areas becoming less favourable environments for people of minority faiths. Vine contrasts these provisions with the role of a library in one of the areas, where interactions between people of different class, ethnic and religious backgrounds were facilitated: highlighting, as mentioned above, the role of local actors in shaping (and indeed, potentially limiting) encounters. This builds on previous research which has found that faith communities can facilitate encounters across difference and can indeed foster resilience in deprived communities (Furbey 2008). However, while applauding their efforts, Vine highlights how the absence of possibilities for meeting across religious divides, coupled with chronic urban trauma and negative media portrayals of newcomers of minority faiths, can combine to build increased support for far-right extremism.

The third paper, by Lundsteen (2024), similarly captures how socio-economic decline can exacerbate processes of othering and exclusion—thus deepening historic divisions along 'ethno-cultural, socio-economic, legal status, age, social networks, socio-labour insertion, and gender' lines (11). By drawing on theories of moral geography and b/ordering (Cresswell 2005), Lundsteen's article explores this emergence and functioning of such exclusionary perspectives within super-diverse neighbourhoods. Lundsteen undertakes a historical analysis of how deprivation and competition over resources accumulate to result in resentment towards newcomers, exacerbated by media discourses. Taking as its point of departure Salt, a small Catalan town next to Girona, and through a series of ethnographic examples, the article shows how economic uncertainty and instability are translated into spatial appropriations among long-established residents. In this site, where encounters between 'the ones from here' and 'those from outside' are increasing due to 'continuous changes in the economic-political system and its intrinsic human mobilities' (Lundsteen 2024: 11)—it is the ethno-cultural 'other' who is seen to be responsible for the decline of the neighbourhood. As Lundsteen concludes, while much research until recently has rendered cultural conflicts and racism abstract phenomena, studies such as this re-centre the important role of space in shaping social relations in super-diverse settings—and especially its specific characteristics such as local real estate markets and gentrification practices. Furthermore, beyond work on moral geography and b/ordering, the literature has also failed to sufficiently address how moral and affective aspects of space are implicated in its social construction and production—instead focusing on material and ideological aspects.

The next two papers shift our focus onto practices which aim at 'creating encounters', by looking at micro-spaces of 'organised' or 'engineered' encounters and suggesting innovative

methodologies to study interactions within them. Firstly, in her ethnographic work from Thessaloniki, Greece, Hunt (2024) addresses how urban space is socially constructed between new- and oldcomers, using the specific example of arts education spaces for young refugees run by solidarity initiatives. She conceptualises these as '(en)counterspaces'—combining the concept of 'counterspaces' from critical race, leisure and youth studies with the literature on 'encounters' from migration and urban studies. This is because, as Hunt argues, sites such as dance studios and other borrowed spaces can provide safe, productive 'sanctuaries' for youth of similar racialisation and migratory backgrounds, while also serving as transient but potentially valuable meeting places in which encounters are mediated by arts practices and local 'solidarian' actors. This again emphasises the role of 'gatekeepers' in fostering and shaping interactions, by elaborating on and indeed questioning their specific practices—from pedagogy to communication. It builds on ethnographic work into encounters by honing in on one particular, understudied site and form of activity (i.e. non-formal arts education), and a case study programme which explicitly aimed at engineering contact (as in Mayblin et al. 2016). It offers a new way of conceptualising such spaces, to encourage considerations of ownership, safety and agency when discussing marginalised young people's choices to engage in both these particular environments in the first place, and then in the cross-cultural interactions within them.

The following contribution, from Luise Vormittag, then reflects on the possibilities of creative and participatory methodologies as opportunities for encounters in themselves, as well as a means of better understanding migrants' relationships with urban space. Vormittag takes us to London and describes the collective map-making workshops she organised with Latin Americans in the neighbourhood of Elephant and Castle. In her paper, Vormittag (2024: 26) proposes that collaborative, group-based illustration sessions have the potential to catalyse migrants' engagement with place—as in the act of drawing together, they can render the world they share, with their creations subsequently emerging as a record of the encounter. Community, Vormittag argues, is created through such forms of communication. This line of argument draws from Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophical work on community (1991; 1997; 2017), and specifically his social-ontological conception of community as one of communication between 'singularities directed towards one another' (Vormittag, 2024: 26). Vormittag's work brought together not only participants directed towards one another, but also scholarship from philosophy, the arts and geography—and in doing so, she pushes us to reflect on the entanglement of the researcher and the groups with which they are engaged. Indeed, throughout the research process, various encounters are engineered and enacted; with the ramifications of this extending well into the social worlds of all involved, and well beyond the life of a project. As in the previous paper, this adds to the scholarship on everyday encounters the need to reflect on the materiality of such interactions, and in this case, the tools involved: being the paper and pens which produced 'a framework to reconsider, record, and reflect' (26).

The final paper of this Special Issue then goes deeper into 'theorising encounters'. This closing piece from Monson (2024) reflects on her fieldwork in the informal settlement of Mshongo, South Africa, and poses questions about the knowledge-power relations implicit in the encounters we analyse, considering directions towards epistemic justice in the analytical framework of 'encounters'. Drawing on 4 years of ethnographic fieldwork in Mshongo, involving interviews, focus groups and observational walks, Monson's work critically interrogates the concept of 'meaningful' encounters and challenges conventional assumptions about their normative implications. More specifically, she unpacks the commonly held but 'normatively loaded' notion that a 'meaningful encounter' is one which 'changes values and translates beyond the specifics of the individual moment into a more general positive respect for—rather than merely tolerance of—others' (Valentine 2008: 325). Through meticulously analysing various interactions in the settlement, the paper vividly illustrates how encounters can be significant yet not necessarily conducive to tolerance

or respect for diversity. The research again underscores the importance of considering the complexities of embodiment, materiality, inequality and space in understanding urban encounters. As such, the paper not only contributes to the theoretical discourse on urban migration studies but also calls for a reconsideration of how we perceive and evaluate social interactions in diverse urban landscapes. In doing so, Monson reiterates a call for epistemic justice (Bhambra 2007; Grosfoguel 2007): urging scholars to question universalistic points of view, 'in recognition of the embodied, situated, and subjective nature of knowledge, to decentre the West, and scrutinise the assumptions upon which our thinking is premised' (Monson 2024: 17).

Thus, through the lenses of 'experiencing', 'creating', and 'theorising' encounters, the papers of this Special Issue highlight the continuing relevance of studying encounters in contexts characterised by diversification, and the importance of drawing on adjacent concepts and theories such as conviviality, boundary-making and b/ordering. Beyond contributing thick descriptions of 'urban encounters' from multiple geographical contexts, this collection of papers engages with and builds upon key theoretical, methodological, and political literatures and debates. Whether through in-depth historical analysis of the changes within specific urban areas (such as in the Catalan city of Salt), or arts-based methods (such as in Thessaloniki and London), the papers in this Special Issue are all grounded in long-term ethnographic engagement with research participants. Through this engagement, the authors have uncovered the nuances of encounters across difference and how these are both situational and shaped by individuals' positionalities. Importantly, the papers show that encounters in all of these urban spaces are underpinned by deep socio-economic inequalities which many inhabitants experience on a daily basis—and especially in contexts of heightened and multifaceted precarity. Across the sites, perceptions of these inequalities shape who is seen as an ally or someone who potentially competes over already scarce resources. In these contexts, it is not only the existing social inequalities which underpin encounters, but also prospects for the future and differences in opportunities for social mobility.

It is our hope that the issue will draw future lines of enquiry for the field of migration studies and beyond—as well as influencing and inspiring local and national policy-makers—by expanding our perspectives on the critical question of how we can live together in cities.

This Special Issue was born out of the Urban Encounters symposium held at the University of Oxford in October 2020. The event aimed to create a discussion forum between scholars and non-academic practitioners interested in issues of migration, with a particular focus on belonging, identity, participation and interaction within the city. During the event, papers were presented and developed in discussion with experts in the field: including Susanne Wessendorf (guest editor of this issue—Coventry), Mette Louise Berg (UCL), Irit Katz (Cambridge) and Idalina Baptista (Oxford).

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