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FINAL VERSION: On the paradox of ‘organised’ encounter

1. Introduction

Much research across the social sciences is underlined by the assumption that being-together, co-presence, dialogue and intermingling can, under the right conditions, educate, create familiarity, inspire social transformation, and play a significant role in the development of democratic values (Carter, 2013; Darling and Wilson, 2016). These assumptions can be seen in a range of work that has considered the value of meeting and encounter in a number of different contexts and spaces – both planned and unplanned. Spaces of propinquity and routine have long been a site of interest for those wishing to understand how encounters with unknown others shift attitudes and build relations, leading to a significant body of work that has spanned a variety of sites. These include public transportation, school playgrounds, streets, classrooms, libraries, cafés, sports stadiums, religious institutions, and homes, to name just some of the spaces that have garnered interest (Wilson, 2011; Lepp, forthcoming; Lobo, 2014; Schuermans, 2016; Wessendorf, 2016). Whilst these spaces are largely characterised by unplanned forms of contact, an interest in the possibilities of encounter has unsurprisingly coincided with an interest in the virtues of ‘organised’ encounter. Here, the examples are wide-ranging and varied; art projects that seek to bring communities together (McNally, 2017; Pikner, 2016); workshops that aim to transform behaviour (Wilson 2013; 2017); drop-in centres that build support and learning (Darling, 2010; 2011); public spaces that are designed to develop conviviality (Wise, 2016; Wood and Landry, 2007); and different forms of tourism

that claim to educate and enact new kinds of citizenship and responsibility (Dürr, 2012a; Ince, 2015).

Whilst each example evidences a different understanding about when, how, and for whom encounter comes to matter, they all share an investment in the potentials of encounter for effecting change. This raises questions about how and why encounters effect transformation, what this transformation looks like, and what implications there might be for how we understand the scale at which social change occurs. To address some of these issues, and offer an intervention, the paper focuses on sites of encounter that are in some way considered ‘organised’, and develops a *conceptual* interrogation of ‘encounter’ to outline how it might be characterised as a very particular genre of contact. In so doing, the paper demonstrates what is at stake when encounters become a site of organisation and hones in on questions of power, privilege, and risk, to argue that the promise of encounter necessarily stands in tension with the recognition that encounters are inherently unpredictable and often shaped by inequality (Wilson, 2016a).

To develop these points, the paper starts with the ‘allure’ of encounter, to consider how encounters have come to occupy a central position in projects of political and pedagogical transformation. By attending to the etymology of encounter, I underline the forms of antagonism, opposition and surprise that often characterise it as a particular form of contact and ask what implications this has for efforts that try to organise it. Taking these points forward, and following a number of examples, Section 4 draws out two chief concerns. First, a concern with what happens when something that is inherently unpredictable becomes a site of intervention and second,

a concern with the risks of encounter and the demand for knowability. With these concerns in mind, the paper then reflects on what it might mean to embrace the unpredictability of encounter through calls to cultivate dispositions that are better able to respond to the ‘surprise’ of other selves (Bennett 2001), and considers what is at stake when encounters are actively sought out as part of an ethical project of self-transformation. By drawing out some of the paradoxes that shape projects of organised encounter I do not intend to discredit or devalue such projects. Instead, I argue that grappling with the characteristics of encounter and the (im)possibilities of organising it are central to keeping the hierarchies, privilege, and assumptions of such organisation in view.

2. The allure of encounter

The draw of cultural encounters is their supposedly inventive potential. Through encounter all kinds of transformation can happen; shifts in affective experience or thought (Anderson, 2014; Stevens 2007); the destabilisation of hierarchies (Fárias, 2016); or modifications in ways of relating (Barnett 2005; Harrison, 2008; Todd, 2003). This positive investment in encounter has a long and wide-ranging history. For example, it can be seen in an extensive lineage of urban writing that has celebrated the opportunities presented by spaces of ‘throwntogetherness’ (Massey, 2005; Wilson 2016b) – where different, unrelated trajectories and people come together (Wilson and Darling, 2016; Amin and Thrift, 2002). For Jacobs (1961), ‘incidental encounter’ was significant to the development of trust, respect and the organisation of public life, a sentiment echoed by others who have noted the potential of encounter to foster conviviality, vibrancy and improvisation (Amin 2008; Stevens 2007; Watson, 2006;

Young, 2011[1990]). Whilst drawing on a different lineage of thought (e.g. Lefebvre 1996), recent work on urban politics has used the concept of encounter to consider how the negotiation of boundaries in the minutiae of contact between diverse people can enable the formation of new social relations that ‘sit in opposition to capitalist society’ (Halvorsen 2015: 320; see also Merrifield 2013). Attending to the politics of encounter in this context is thus about tracing the possibilities for forging new forms of organisation and resonance that enable articulations of power that are less hierarchical and more solidaristic, even while they can never be without conflict (Chatterton, 2006).

In a different example of what happens when people are thrown together, we might consider the inventive potential identified in Pratt’s (1992) much cited notion of the ‘contact zone’, which was originally used to examine the complex processes of meaning-making that happened on the imperial frontiers of Europe. For Pratt (1992:7), the contact zone was ‘an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporary copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures’. Pratt deliberately placed the interactive and improvisational nature of encounters at the heart of analysis to emphasise how the coloniser and colonised were co-constituted through relational events (Stoler, 2006; Sundberg, 2006). Pratt’s use of the contact zone honed in on the transformative potential of encounter as a site of ‘new wisdom’ and contested power (Pratt 1992:39), which is most notable in her seminal text on the ‘arts of the contact zone’ in which she describes the literary arts that continue to emerge out of spaces of encounter – ‘autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue [and] vernacular expression’ (1991:37). In short,

whilst fraught with ambiguity and tension, the contact zone is full of creative possibility.

Whilst these accounts are certainly not free from contestation and demonstrate how encounters fold in inequalities, violence and contested forms of power (Ahmed, 2000), there have been notable concerns about the danger of romanticising the potentials of encounter (Valentine, 2008). Further still, there have been demands for more clarity on how and under what conditions encounters might produce the familiarity, respect or vitality that they are often said to promote. For instance, some writers have returned to Gordon Allport's (1979[1954]) *contact hypothesis* to demand a more explicit focus on the role that contact plays in tackling prejudice, arguing that forms of fleeting encounter rarely change attitudes at any meaningful level (Matejskova and Leitner, 2011; Valentine 2008).

Importantly, whilst arguments for encounter are well trodden, what is less addressed is why *encounter*, as a particular form of contact, has gained such currency. What separates some of the above examples from the rich body of work on the contact hypothesis in psychology is their explicit use of 'encounter' rather than the generic 'contact'. Whilst it is rarely questioned, the ubiquitous use of 'encounter' to describe cross-cultural contact does considerable work. As Berlant argues, 'any encounter (with the world, with another, or even oneself) discloses a nest of differences that [have been] called "the surprise of otherness"' (in Berlant and Edelman 2013:). What is key here is the emphasis on surprise and otherness. I have argued elsewhere that the etymology of encounter is important (Wilson, 2016a). Arising from the late Latin *contrāre* it is a meeting that is historically coded as one that occurs between

adversaries or opposing forces, making it akin to a ‘duel’ or a ‘skirmish’ (2). We see this coming together of opposites most vividly in colonial narratives and Pratt’s ‘contact zone’, which identifies a space of co-presence that is characterised by conditions of inequality, coercion and ‘intractable conflict’ (1992:6). Furthermore, such a meeting of opposites can be seen in the grammars of difference that are regularly deployed in descriptions of cultural encounter, which have a tendency to draw on ‘border imaginaries’ that set up oppositional logics of ‘us versus them’ that distinguish friend from foe, inside from outside (Rovisco 2010: 1015; see also Ahmed, 2000). Encounters are therefore particular genres of contact that imply a set of characteristics even if these characteristics are not explicitly named. For this reason they say a lot about conflict and difference, and can shape our thinking about the lived experience of power and how it registers in momentary and fragmentary ways (Wilson, 2016a).

Of significance to the argument in this paper is how the encounter – as a relational event – allows us to approach the question of difference. Whilst descriptions of cultural encounters are replete with border imaginaries that reference categories of social identity, colonial taxonomies, and species classifications, encounters are not simply about the meeting of differences that are already defined (Ahmed, 2000). Encounters also *make difference*; we are *constituted* in and by our encounters with others (Haraway, 2008). Throughout descriptions of encounter it is possible to trace a shared terminology. Encounters are about disturbances (Stewart, 2007): about ‘rupture’, ‘surprise’, and ‘shock’ (see for example Ahmed, 2000; Lapworth, 2015). The implicit understanding that encounters are experienced as relational events that disturb us, is central to their framing as sites of transformation for it evokes instances

in which something is ‘unexpectedly broken open’ or destabilised (Wilson 2016a:6). Shock, when experienced as discontinuity or the disruption of expectations, can be ‘radically traumatising’ (Edelman in Berlant and Edelman, 2013:8) but it can also be experienced as no more than a ‘barely recognised fluctuation’ (Anderson, 2016: 9; Stewart, 2007). However experienced, such a ‘breaking open’ is central to the troubling of authority and power, to rethinking bodily thresholds and capacities, and to rendering encounters inherently unpredictable. It is for this reason that a sense of rupture has long been central to discussions of proximity and ethical relations (see Barnett, 2005 on Levinas and Derrida; Harrison, 2008; Todd, 2003).

The transformational capacities of encounter, whilst filled with promise, should not necessarily be read as positive. If encounters have the capacity to destabilise then they also come with risk and vulnerability; they can be as violent as they can be nurturing. If we take these points seriously, and hold onto the unpredictable nature of encounter, it is pertinent to consider the implications for programmes that seek to ‘organise’ encounter in some way. In the next section I begin by overviewing some examples of such attempts to organise.

3. Organised encounter

Perhaps the most obvious or urgent forms of organised encounter are those that explicitly focus on the transformative potentials of encounter in the context of conflict, segregation, or mistrust (Wilson 2013; 2014; Askins and Pain, 2011; Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs 2015; Matejskova and Leitner, 2011). Sports activities, dialogue exercises, and arts practice are variously deployed with different

tactics for bringing people together (Amin, 2002), and often require careful facilitation and management by trained social workers and facilitators who are attentive to the differences involved (Janzen et al. 2015; Mayblin et al. 2015; Sarkissian and Bunjamin-Mau, 2009). For instance, Askins and Pain (2011) draw on Pratt's 'contact zone' as a way of approaching the transformative spaces of a community art project that facilitated encounters between young people of African and British heritage in the context of segregation in the North East of England. Encounters between the young people were facilitated through the pragmatic negotiation of art objects and the communication that it required, demonstrating the value of the 'epistemological deployment of materials' (804) as conversations emerged whilst sticky tape was negotiated and pens and paints were shared. In another example, Wise (2016) has outlined the value of addressing community tensions through planned programmes that are built around notions of 'welcome'. Discussing the case of Ashfield in Sydney, Wise details how encounters were 'staged' between Chinese shopkeepers and local residents through a council-funded open day. This saw interpreters facilitate conversations between shopkeepers and residents, Chinese restaurants put on lunch events for non-Chinese senior citizens, and booklets and exhibitions that showcased the life histories of a variety of local residents, all in a bid to facilitate encounters in a community shaped by distrust, language barriers, and white nostalgia for a homogenous past. In contrast to such large-scale programmes, we might also consider forms of conflict management where encounters are micro-managed as an example of organization that focuses on the minutiae of contact. My own work with an anti-violence charity in the US has detailed the careful facilitation that is required to bring people together in 'encounter workshops' so as to address controversial topics or difficult issues such as racism and homophobia (see Wilson,

X). These encounter workshops take many forms. They might involve the bringing together of people with opposing views on gay marriage or they might respond to particular moments of crisis such as a sharp spike in Islamophobia. In the latter case, this would involve the organisation of an encounter workshop between Muslims and non-Muslims where there are opportunities to ask questions about Islam, discuss belief, and explore fears, prejudices, and structural inequalities through carefully facilitated exercises, periods of silence, and reflection.

It is not always the case that organised encounters are about conflict. Plenty of examples focus on developing new connections between people, opening up questions, and facilitating new ways of thinking, but not in a situation where encounters are presented as a solution to an urgent problem or conflict. Whilst new forms of connection are desired, the outcomes are often more open. This might include a variety of art projects that have been designed to question processes of place-making and/or how we live with others (Lapworth, 2015; McNally, 2017; O’Kelly, 2016). Pikner (2016) for example, documents the encounters that were facilitated in Tallinn’s Freedom Square by an artwork installed as part of the city’s year as European Capital of Culture. A glass cupola located in the centre of the square and inhabited by a participant for one hour at a time was designed to facilitate novel encounters between the participant, the surrounding square, and passers-by through destabilising the usual, often passive ways in which people engage with public space and the others they encounter. This example connects with work that has focused on forms of relational art that are designed to open up ‘alternative spaces of encounter’ as part of their aesthetic (McNally 2017). For instance, McNally considers the example of a touring sculpture that was hosted in residential homes in Tower

Hamlets, London, and outlines the encounters – of various meanings and depth – that occurred between residents as the sculpture was exchanged between hosts that had never previously met.

In the examples outlined to this point, it is often the case that the people involved – on both sides – enter into encounters with others knowingly and for the most part willingly, which gives the *impression* that some form of equality exists between the people that are brought together. On both sides of the encounter people are open to transformation. By contrast, the third form of organised encounter that I want to focus on is rather more concerned with the pursuit of self-transformation and thus tends to be one-sided, involving the instrumentalisation of one group or individual for the transformation of another (Pierce and Sweet, 2014). For example, Pedwell's (2012: 166) work on 'immersion programmes' undertaken by those working in international development details how they aim to facilitate the 'empathetic self-transformation' of development professionals through one-on-one encounters with those in poverty (ibid). The expectation of these organised programmes is that the exposure of development workers to the realities of life in poverty, and those who endure it, will lead to a critical self-reflection and a recognition of privilege, which in turn will develop empathy and improve work on poverty reduction. As Pedwell (2012: 165) has argued, not only are the experiences of encounter ignored for those in poverty, which has the effect of fixing them as objects of empathy, but such an example of organised encounter can be linked to a wider compassion economy in which 'empathetic self-transformation' has become a commodity.

Such a pursuit of encounter and forms of ‘unsettling’ experience can also be seen in forms of tourism that involve engagements with places and people that are in some way considered ‘other’ (Wilson, 2016b; Crouch and Desforges, 2003:8; Ince, 2015; Pezzullo, 2009). For the purpose of this paper the expanding business of ‘disaster’, ‘slum’ or ‘poverty’ tours’, offer particularly good examples of organised encounter (Dürr 2012b). Whether ‘slum tours’ in urban Mexico or post-Katrina disaster tours in New Orleans, these new forms of orchestrated encounter between the Global North and Global South, or between those with and without economic privilege, see people pay for encounters that transgress social boundaries so as to gain awareness about how others live, to undergo self-transformation and to secure ‘unique’ affective experiences (Dovey and King, 2012). These forms of encounter are thus pursued for a complex set of motives that combine education, adventure, and humanitarianism (Dürr 2012a), leading to a variety of conflicting debates, from concerns about the voyeuristic consumption of ‘the Other’ (Dürr, 2012b), and issues of consent (Whyte et al., 2011), to the new possibilities for effecting social awareness, empathy, and economic change (Pezzullo, 2009).

The forms of organisation witnessed across the examples in this section are radically different, have different potentials and intensions, very different geographies and forms of organisation, and a variety of temporalities. Some organised encounters might have a lasting effect, whilst others might barely register as worthy of note. Yet whilst the examples are very different I have drawn out what unites them, which is the primacy of encounter to narratives of transformation, and the shared emphasis on difference, otherness, and forms of unsettling experience. With these examples and

characteristics of encounter in mind, I turn now to some of the paradoxes of organised encounter.

4. Encounter, the (im)possibility of design, and the trouble with risk

If the event of encounter is defined by surprise and unknowable potential, what implications does this have for thinking about *organised* cultural encounter? Can there be such a thing and if so, what are its limits? These questions are important because they invite close scrutiny of where the transformative potential of encounter lies and under what conditions it might emerge. To organise is to give structure, to form, to order and to engineer. It is a process by which we systemise and choreograph. On the surface then an ‘organised encounter’ is somewhat of a paradox.

In his work on the ‘meeting place’, Carter (2013) asks some difficult questions when it comes to the value of organised – or ‘designed’ – encounter. First he questions the very valorisation of contact as a social good and necessity for change and asks the provocative question – what happens when two parties hold fundamentally different views about the value and purpose of contact? This, of course, is a question that must be put to any project set on organised encounter, particularly given that so many of these projects have an investment in bringing differences together. More importantly, when different perspectives exist, who is it that benefits most from organised encounter and are the benefits always shared or equal?

Carter’s (2013) second concern relates to the desire for certainty. Many of the examples in the previous section are designed with named outcomes in mind. For

instance, that encounters between development workers and families in poverty will produce empathy (Pedwell, 2012), or that encounter workshops will lead to ‘positive’ shifts in thinking that will see people fundamentally question their views on Islam. As such, Carter (2013) argues that whilst spaces of organised encounter are often considered to be emancipatory, it might be more appropriate to say that they only masquerade as such for they often meet the demand that ‘nothing unpredictable happen’ (Carter 2013:42). For Berlant, the desire to know a relation removes what ‘makes it living and relational in the first place: its opening onto differences we neither comprehend or control’ (Berlant in Berlant and Edelman, 2013:18). As an example, we might consider the volunteer tourist who sets out on ‘a quest for appreciation’ through her encounters with poverty (Crossley 2012: 245). As Crossley argues, tourists from the West envisage their encounters with the poor as an opportunity to reflect on and develop gratitude for their own lifestyles, but this does no more than ensure that appreciation is the ‘end in itself’ (ibid). Indeed, whilst encounters might encourage individuals to reflect on their own favourable circumstances, they often fail to address the structural mechanisms that continue to generate disparities between rich and poor (Dürr, 2012a). Any potential for radical transformation and the emergence of something unforeseen is limited.

If we take the unknowability of encounter seriously, for encounters to happen something has to be left open. Therefore, in line with Carter (2013), any attempt to design out uncertainty and risk, whether successful or not, is at once a move to eradicate the very possibility of encounter (and in line with Levinasian ethics, the very possibility for an ethical relation). The encounter ‘puts the dark side back into meeting’ (Carter, 2013: 10); it is contingent and haunted by potential and exposure.

Whilst it is the unknowable potential of encounter that makes it so attractive this potential can be explosive: as violent as it can be nurturing (Hou, 2016; Todd, 2003). It is this ‘dark side’, as Carter calls it, the riskiness of encounter, that is frequently the target of design in organised projects. But in seeking to design out risk and the potential for anything other than what is desired, we have lost the very essence of encounter – the surprising and the unforeseen; difference in all its fullness. This is why Carter suggests that there is a difference between institutionalised *meeting places*, where some prior form of common ground has already been established, and ‘transgressive sites of encounter’ (115) where no such prior ground exists. Such a distinction once again underlines why it is important to approach encounters as very specific ‘genres’ of contact, and perhaps accounts for why Allport’s much cited work on the nature of prejudice, which was very clear on establishing the conditions of contact, rarely used ‘encounter’ when talking about programmes and spaces that bring people together.

If we are to take these arguments forward – that the valorisation of contact is culturally specific and that encounters can never be fully predicted – there are a number of ways that we might proceed. Primarily, to take Carter’s (2013) own suggestion, we might drop our focus on the intended outcomes of encounter and instead ‘submit’ to the process (104) – the messiness, the negotiations, the visceral becomings, and the ongoing risk. However, whilst this might be an attractive project, it has two problems. First, submitting to the process is unsatisfactory when a particular outcome is desired, and second, if we are to embrace risk as a necessary part of encounter we need to ask: who or what is it that is at risk? Or rather, for whom

does risk have the most repercussions? These are not insignificant questions and here I address them both in turn.

First, in response to the desired outcome, a number of the examples of organised encounter that I have drawn on are social projects organised or funded by charitable organisations, which respond to the need for change in a particular context. This need might be urgent, perhaps responding to inter-ethnic conflict on a college campus, or a national spike in hate crime. In addition, they are often borne out of long and difficult applications for funding that demand a promise to deliver and often require evidence of past success (Wilson, 2017). They demand knowability and furthermore, they often demand spectacular outcomes, for claims to small and incremental changes rarely catch the eye of funders. There is a need then, to rethink how the capacity to ‘organise’ encounter is idealised and by whom, to recognise that organised programs are likely to be fraught with failure, unknowability, and unwanted transgressions; indeed they might not be about encounter at all but a very different form of relation. The demand for knowability is not a demand made only by policy-makers or funders, but can also be seen in recent academic discussions on the geographies of encounter. For example, it has been argued that the ambiguous findings of recent work have been disappointing. There is little evidence to suggest that encounters across difference necessarily have a positive impact on how people think and behave, and there is certainly no real guidance on how such research might be used to inform other organised programmes or policy. Indeed, Matejskova and Leitner (2011) underlined the problem of ‘scaling up’, noting that whilst their research on encounters between Russian Aussiedler and local German residents in Berlin community centres had highlighted a change in how the residents had responded to individual immigrants,

their response to immigrants more broadly remained the same. Such examples underline the problem of ‘singularity’, which has shaped much of the research in this area (Wilson 2016a:) and feed into long-held debates on whether concern for those in close proximity can ever transform relations with more distant others (see for example Barnett, 2005).

Perhaps more important is the question of risk. Carter’s (2013) concern explicitly focuses on examples of contact where the *risk* and discomfort of encounter has become the target for design in an effort to remove inequality, violence, and hierarchy. As such, he argues that whilst such spaces of encounter are heralded as spaces that facilitate the throwing together of all manner of difference, the conviviality that they are said to promote can only ever be superficial, perhaps ‘no more than a deceit’ (42). Of course, the argument for retaining the risk of encounter ignores the case that encounters with others might be actively avoided for valuable reasons, and that the risk of encounters is rarely borne equally. ‘Safe spaces’, which minimise the potential for encounter, have proven necessary for many purposes whether to evade physical violence or cultural annihilation, or whether to offer an important site of respite and self-definition for marginalised groups (Collins, 2015). Rather than denying the need for careful organisation and spaces of safety, I suggest that the point about design and the eradication of risk is useful for it demands that we keep the paradox of ‘organised encounter’ in sight and in so doing, hold on to the characteristics that distinguish different forms of contact.

It is not the case, of course, that all forms of organised or designed encounter are about removing the risk of difference. Indeed, some interventions are explicitly intent

on exposing people to others; to bring people to their very limits in the hope that a rendering vulnerable might reorganise seemingly stable orders, relations, and ideas (Lapworth, 2015). For instance, Lapworth's work on bioart-encounters, which focuses on staged encounters with 'semi-living' sculptures in a gallery space, examines how subjects are reconfigured through relational events that reconnect subjects with 'nonhuman forces and technical agencies' (133). Experienced as a shock, these encounters throw the very notion of what it means to be human into question, thus putting ideas of human exceptionalism at risk. But the risks involved in organised encounter can never be taken for granted. In posing an ontological risk (Wilson, 2013; Stengers in Zournazi 2002), encounters may result in a minor shift in how people perceive themselves or it may lead to their entire undoing. For those in a position of power, a willingness to put ideas at risk may undoubtedly lead to a desirable reflection on normativities, status, and privilege. But in focusing on those in a position of power, there is a danger of romanticising risk. Encounters are never equal and for some the possibilities of encounter can be less convincing and far more risky.

5. Cultivating openness?

The question of risk and vulnerability demands that the different contexts of organised encounter are closely scrutinised. For instance, a staged encounter with homelessness in a classroom with the aid of a film or a guest speaker (Todd, 2003), is very different to the kinds of face-to-face encounters with poverty that are organised for wealthy tourists in the Global South. In wanting to push the question of risk and vulnerability further it is worth considering it in light of approaches that have

emphasised the importance of embracing the affective force and discomforting effects of encounter.

For Bennett (2001), it is possible for people to cultivate themselves so as to shape how they respond to the ‘surprise’ of relational events. Rather than engineering a predictable outcome or trying to manage the setting in which encounters take place, such cultivation is about keeping the possibilities of encounter open by allowing encounters to disturb you. It is about shaping how people enter into encounter. In particular, Bennett (2001) underlines the ethical potential of the ‘mood’ of enchantment. To be enchanted is to participate in a momentarily ‘immobilising encounter’ (p.5): to be unsettled by an event that has the capacity to linger and transform us over time. The feeling of enchantment is thus not always a positive experience but is instead disquieting in its potential to disorientate and perplex (ibid). For Bennett then, encounters produce moments of enchantment, the affective force of which might be ‘deployed to propel ethical generosity’ (3).

Put simply, Bennett’s thesis on enchantment is not only about embracing the risk of encounter, but about deliberately honing ‘sensory receptivity’ to its unsettling affects. In this vein, to encounter differently it is necessary to embrace the self-transformations that encounters might effect and to be ‘less defensive’ in the face of challenges to the ‘norms’ one embodies (29). In this account of enchantment, and the sense of self and normativities that it disrupts, the risk of encounter is ontological.

Whilst Bennett’s ‘mood of enchantment’ concerns encounters with all manner of subjects – human, non-human, natural, and artificial – the idea that encounters both

highlight and unsettle norms is one shared across narratives of organised encounter, whether bioart encounters and their ability to challenge what it means to be human (Lapworth, 2015), encounters with poverty that draw attention to economic advantage, or encounter workshops that bring the privilege of whiteness into view (Wilson, 2017). But the unsettling of norms can produce defensive responses – a desire to reinstate one’s position or a denial of the experience altogether – and it is this defensiveness that prevents people from becoming ‘more responsive to the injustices that haunt both cross-cultural and cross-species relations’ (Bennett, 2001:29). It is this line of argument that leads Bennett to suggest that deliberate strategies are required to cultivate openness to the ‘surprise’ or difference of others, thus offering an alternative way of approaching the idea of organised encounter. Bennett’s interest in fostering enchantment weaves together an ‘uneasy combination of artifice and spontaneity’ (2001:10) – it is about *learning* to be open to the unknown and that which can never be known; about *learning* to be affected by the surprise of encounters with others (see also Ahmed, 2004).

What Bennett’s (2001) account does is shift our site of focus and offer up the possibility of approaching organised contact in a way that seeks to hold onto unknowability and its destabilising effects. However, what ‘strategies’ for cultivation look like and how these strategies might work in different settings is less addressed, and there are two further points that are worth noting. First, is the focus on challenging ‘norms’ and the need to be more ‘responsive to injustice’. To embody norms and be in a position where one might *choose* to better notice, and *learn* to be more responsive to injustice, is to occupy a space of privilege (Ahmed, 2012), as can be seen so clearly in some of the accounts of ‘disaster’ or ‘poverty’ tours. Keeping

this privilege in sight is crucial, especially when the differential risks of encounter are taken into consideration. The second issue is that the risk identified in Bennett's account is at the level of ontology. It is about having one's view of the world thrown into question by an event that shocks. However, as noted in the previous section, risks come in various forms and are not always equally borne.

If encounters are actively sought out for the purpose of learning or as part of an ethical project of self-transformation and enchantment, questions should be asked about the implications for the other that is encountered (Pedwell, 2012). Yet in examples where others are encountered and thus instrumentalised for the transformation of another, it has been frequently acknowledged that narratives of encounter tend to overlook the experiences of the other involved and thus downplay or neglect questions of power, privilege, and, risk. As hooks (1992) underlines, a desire for contact with the other, even if it is a desire to be changed by the other, does not eradicate the politics of domination. In a pertinent example taken from animal studies, Collard (2012) has raised questions about the value of encounter for enacting forms of environmental citizenship. Whilst the affective force of enchantment has been noted and encounters might even put human exceptionalism at risk, Collard maintains that through rendering animals encounterable people are placing them at physical risk. When an encounter with a 'wild' animal goes wrong, it is often the animal that pays the price. Whilst these points are reflecting on different examples and can't account for the more complex and momentary enactments of power that shape encounters between diverse subjects, they focus attention on issues that are regularly overlooked, whether in encounter workshops where some form of equality is assumed, or whether in relation to encounter programmes that instrumentalise

encounters for the transformation of only some. In short, they demonstrate the need to acknowledge complicity in the power inequalities that shape the encounters they describe (Pedwell, 2012), and the need to acknowledge the difference between allowing oneself to be transformed by unexpected encounters, and *seeking out* encounters for the purpose of self-transformation. Bennett's strategy of cultivation might be deployed in both contexts, but the latter might actively generate risk and power differentials that can work to undermine the ethical generosity desired. The challenge remains: how can forms of responsiveness to the unforeseeable be learned or 'cultivated' at the same time as we recognise the impossibility of ever fully being able to prepare for the unknown, or eradicate the possibility to do harm (Todd, 2003)?

5. Conclusion

At the centre of this paper lies a paradox. In addressing the (im)possibilities of organised encounter, I have drawn attention to a question that frequently casts a shadow over many forms of intervention. How do you organise something that is fundamentally unpredictable? In drawing attention to the characteristics of encounter that mark it out as a specific genre of contact, I have highlighted that an embrace of encounter as a core site of political and pedagogical possibility is necessarily an embrace of surprise, otherness, and ambiguity (Janzen et al. 2015). As I have argued, investment in encounters is rooted in their inventive potential – their capacity to produce novel relations, to destabilise boundaries, and form new knowledges or affective experiences. If the inventive potential of encounter is both unpredictable and risky, it is vital to ask what happens when attempts are made to organise it – to ask whether it is possible to engineer such potential in pursuit of outcomes that are

already named. Whilst there are no assured answers, such questioning allows a closer scrutiny of the assumptions that lie at the heart of organised contact, and brings questions of power, privilege, and risk into view.

In underlining the unmanageable nature of encounter, the paper has not intended to discredit social and political projects where encounters are key. As is clear, organised, managed, and ‘staged’ encounters are crucial to projects across a broad spectrum of issues, many of which have social justice as a core concern, whether that be forms of place-making, the reduction of prejudice, or new forms of social pedagogy. Rather, in drawing out the paradoxes of ‘organised encounter’ this paper has been intentionally provocative. Organised cultural encounters come in many forms and it is paramount to acknowledge how different intentions, power relations, and meanings, shape the outcome of organisation and the possibilities for change, in different ways for different people.

To conclude, I want to return to the paper’s focus on vulnerability and risk. In drawing attention to the forms of exposure that are inherent to any form of encounter, the paper does not make a plea for forms of organised encounter that overcome the vulnerability or risk that comes with it and neither does it suggest that such a thing might be possible. As Harrison (2008: 424) notes, ‘vulnerability describes a thoroughly social body’ and it is therefore inherent to existence (and thus, bodily encounter) as a form of passive exposure. It thus follows that without vulnerability there can be no relation in the first place. Rather, my focus on risk and vulnerability has been concerned with bringing the power inequalities of organised encounter into sharp focus, to question what or who is made vulnerable. This demands attention to

the different forms of vulnerability and risk that are made present in very different forms of organised encounter, and attention to multiple perspectives and not just to those in positions of power. A reflection on these elements and the distinctive qualities of encounter is vital to any project that invests in encounter as a site of ethical generosity.

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