

# **Encounters Room 108**

Edited by Amita Murray  
In collaboration with Tariq Jazeel

Illustrations by students of Addey and Stanhope  
Sixth Form

## **Authors**

Nazneen Ahmed  
Caroline Bressey  
Claire Dwyer  
Linda Fuller  
Tariq Jazeel  
Charlotte Jones  
Ruth Cheung Judge  
Regan Koch  
Sarah Kunz  
Laura Marshall  
Tula Maxted  
Amita Murray  
Dara Rigal  
Joe Thorogood  
Will Wright

## **Illustrators**

Nora Bouchtat  
Amanzhol Kellet  
Le-Mon Pang

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## Foreword

Room 108 in 26 Bedford Way was where we met for the first time as a group; a creative writing group under Amita Murray's tutelage. Amita joined the Department of Geography at UCL for 10 months in 2015 as a Leverhulme Trust funded Artist-in-Residence. She came to work on her own writing, a collection of short stories entitled *Marmite and Mango Chutney* that we look forward to reading. But Amita's Residency was a broader experiment in exploring the intersections between creative writing and place. Room 108 was where these experiments took shape for us, an eclectic bunch of academics, artists, postgraduate students and administrative and technical staff bounded by our connection to the department in which we all work or study.

Through the course of a term, we collectively wrote. We collectively read each other's words, we listened, we were moved, we laughed, we learnt. We learnt about writing places, about voice, about witnessing, of writing's ability to enable encounters. For some of us these exercises had some utility for the research projects we are engaged in as academics. After all, a huge part of an academic job is to write, yet the paradox is that many of us receive little by way of formal training in how to write. For all of us, these exercises were fun and challenging. They stretched the creative and artistic sides that some of us (I speak for myself now) rarely allow to surface.

But something else also happened in Room 108. Through our collective journey in creative writing, we encountered one another in new ways. That is to say, we learnt about each other. In a large department such as ours, which employs close to 85 people and has many more postgraduate research students, not everybody gets to know each other. Any academic department is also an institution, and institutions as we know are laced with hierarchies, which means that those we do get to know, we know in ways allowed by the accepted distribution of relations within the institution.

Part of the value of art is its ability to rearrange hierarchies and stultified social relations, to redistribute taken-for-granted patterns in everyday life. Sometimes this occurs not just through the aesthetic qualities of the art object itself, but also through what art enables, what it dislodges and unmoors as it is produced and consumed. As a bunch of students, administrative and technical staff, and academics, many of us would not claim to be artists, nor even creative writers (again, perhaps I speak for myself!). But our creative writing group brought us together in the service of a task of artistic production in which there were few extant hierarchies. In other words, we were able to encounter one another as we hadn't before. As much as this is a book of creative writing, therefore, it is also a small testimony to the value of art in relation to social. This was part of what Amita's presence as a Leverhulme funded Artist-in-Residence enabled. This was what happened in Room 108.

Tariq Jazeel

## Preface

In 2015, I collaborated with Tariq Jazeel in the Department of Human Geography, at University College London, to creatively think through and produce the contact, the relationship, and the tension between writing and place. As part of this grant, over the course of a grey and wintry term, I had the pleasure of leading a series of fortnightly writing workshops for staff and students at UCL.

As the group grew in trust and talents became obvious, we explored the cultural politics of space, the place of the “I” in explorations of space and time, and the ability to turn the eye inwards and see themselves from the outside. We delved into history and spaces and places – real and imagined – around the world. We told our stories and other people’s. We experienced loss, and remembered joy, and moved each other deeply.

These are some stories and fragments that came out of these rich conversations. They travel from São Paulo to Richmond Park, from New Zealand to India, to London, New York, Sri Lanka, the Amazon, and beyond. Enjoy the ride.

Amita Murray





## **Place**

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## PLACE

Places are strange things. They are created in every encounter that takes place in them, as people pass through, cross paths, come up against each other. They are made and remade in our mind and memory. In our first explorations, the group delved into how we inhabit spaces, how we create cities in our imagination.

“I visited many places, some of them quite exotic and far away, but I always returned to myself.” – Dejan Stojanović

“I’ve crossed some kind of invisible line. I feel as if I’ve come to a place I never thought I’d have to come to. And I don’t know how I got here. It’s a strange place. It’s a place where a little harmless dreaming and then some sleepy, early-morning talk has led me into considerations of death and annihilation.” – Raymond Carver

“A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.” – Joan Didion

“Regular maps have few surprises: their contour lines reveal where the Andes are, and are reasonably clear on the location of Australia, and the Outer Hebrides. Such maps abound. More precious, though, are the unpublished maps we make ourselves, of our city, our place, our daily world, our life...” – Alexander McCall Smith



## Richmond Park – Caroline Bressey

She walks slowly through the ferns, pushing them aside from the overgrown path. She pauses to watch the plane passing overhead, turns to count those stacking up behind, 1, 2, 3. She pushes on, her hands trailing behind, as she pulls at the fern leaves crushing them between her fingers, but they do not crumble and she lifts them to her face breathing them in before wrapping them around her hand. As the ferns open out, she is able to walk more quickly towards the ponds, her fingers brushing along the top of the blankets of soft grasses, golden in the light that dances on the water. At the edge of the pond, she stops. A dog barks, but it's a distant sound and she does not turn around. She kneels and chooses a stone, rubbing her thumb over its smooth surface before flicking it across the water. It skims once, twice. She tries again. The third time she simply pulls back her arm and throws the stone up high, towards the centre of the pond. It sinks with ripples, and she smiles. She looks back up the path the way she has come, but then turns on her heel towards the setting sun and the shadow of the oak trees.

## Morning Murmurs – Will Wright

It's dark. There is no sense that the morning sun is moments away, and with it a place bursting into life. Along with the light, the morning also awaits the sun to bring its warmth, and there is a chill in the air despite the equatorial location. It is calm and quiet. The crows and *ricksshaw* motors that normally dominate the soundscape have not yet awoken, leaving the airwaves open for subtle sounds. The buzzing of a solitary insect. The rustle of palm leaves in the gentle breeze. The Indian Ocean lapping onto the shore.

Within this calm on the beachfront, by their boats, the murmuring of men softly rises into the night. The murmurs of men who are not fully awake. The murmurs of men perhaps lamenting that arrack session the evening before. The murmurs of men who have been doing this for years and know they will be doing this for years to come. The calm of these moments before dawn, and the scent of incense wafting into the air. Prayers are recited around the boats. A sense of hope, trepidation and inevitability.

Fisher gear is checked one last time and boats are dragged down to the water. The Indian Ocean, lapping onto the keels, around ankles.



Suddenly, the calm of the night is broken. The first kerosene engine splutters loudly to life. Angry. Aggressive. The voices are raised. Murmuring men are now shouting to get the boats into the water. Urgency. All around, engines are revved. Boats accelerate out to sea. On the horizon, the first rays of the sun appear, a soft glow, but quickly it gets brighter. And with it, warmth and colour. A monochrome coast becomes filled with a vibrant palate. A dog barks. A crow caws. A radio starts playing. The new day is here. And with it, the Indian Ocean, lapping onto the sand.

## Kicking off in São Paulo – Tariq Jazeel

The hum of a multitude, the sound of thousands of people. Helicopters overhead, São Paulo's signature sound amplified, the burst of a police siren close by, but not within sight. There are people everywhere. With banners, anonymous masks incongruously balancing atop their heads, groups of three or four, people like me, by myself, some laughing, all in high spirits. All heading in one direction. To the square. To Praça da Sé. It's the perfect place for public demonstrations, its wide open spaces and grubby street furniture, rusty benches, wrought iron railings, and overflowing dustbins, all offset the turn-of-the-century neo-gothic cathedral, occupying one whole side. As I round the corner, as my eyes set sight on the Praça, there's an eruption of singing, chanting, a chorus of a thousand voices, rising, then fading, then a new chant, like a well orchestrated football crowd, only more urgent somehow, more vital. "*Hey FIFA, pagar a tarifa.*" There's a buzz of electricity enveloping the square, and there are people, people everywhere. Thousands of them, clustered, but the clusters have merged, and there's just a swathe of bodies covering what seems like the whole of the square, punctuated by banners, banners written in Portuguese, only some of which I can read, Brazilian flags, some cheekily annotated, waving, fluttering above this seething mass of politically charged bodies. I'm on the outskirts, mouth open, stunned, scared, excited, energized, confused. What next?

## **Carpet Room 108 – Charlotte Jones**

The dirty tired stained carpet  
wept from ill-abuse in the dystopic  
room it was meant to protect.

Longing to glow, he could not,  
He simply wept tears  
of fading colour/indignation.

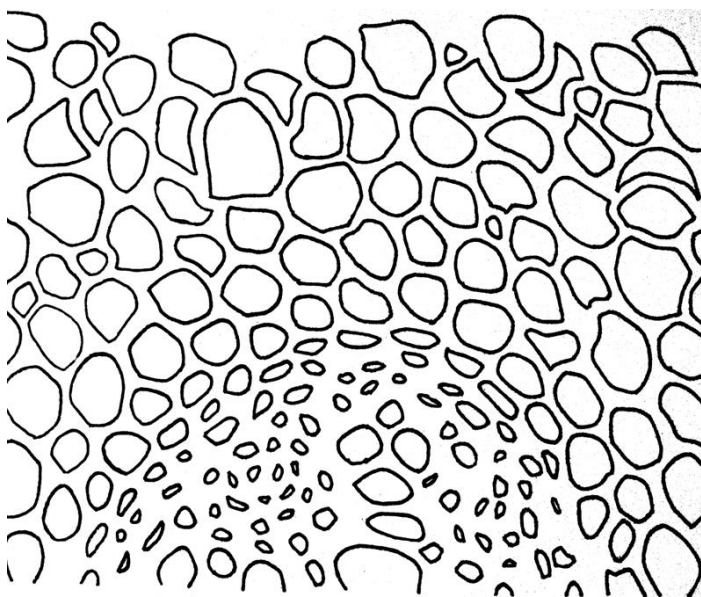
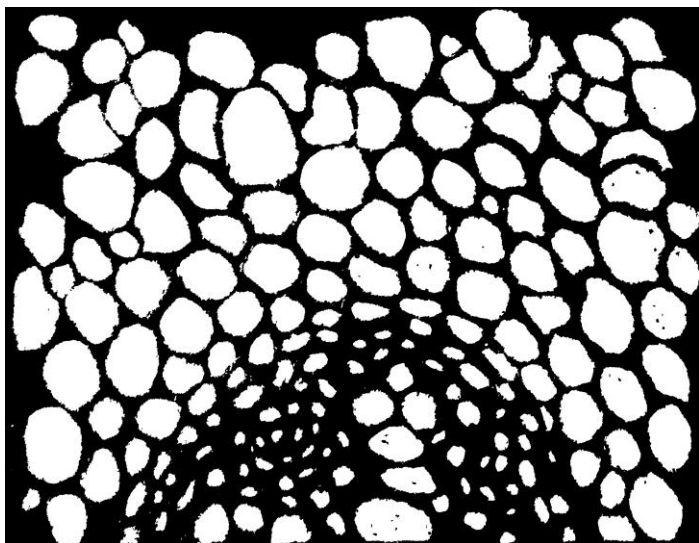
## Frictions/Pace – Ruth Cheung Judge

I was late. Checking and re-checking the time as I disembarked the train, then nervously scanning the street names as the bus pattered down the road, pausing for an age at each of the traffic lights. Then I hopped off, staring down at my Smartphone as I walked. On the corner there was a Ladbrokes with a couple of middle-aged blokes outside. Next door, a jumble of mismatched furniture and a bargain bin sat on the pavement outside a charity shop. The sight of the glaring green and yellow of Subway competed with the guilty pleasure of the smell of sausage rolls wafting out from Greggs. An older lady shuffled along the pavement and I stepped out into the road to pass her. As I walked along, the blocks seemed to loom taller on each side, grey and tall and faceless. I really was late now. I was marching down the pavement in a power walk when I saw the blockage ahead. A lady pushing a pram loaded with shopping bags, and two policemen strolling with that slow, confident gait a few yards ahead of her. There was a railing to her right, and so I took a few jogging steps, squeezing past to the left, bumping her slightly with my handbag as I passed. “Oi! Fuckin’ well look where you’re GOIN!” I jumped. The policemen rounded and barked out a deep voiced “Alright, now.” Red faced, I continued along without looking back.

## **Beaming Shaggy Man – Joe Thorogood**

He frowned. Neil Smith appears to be the only one who got a look in, or looked at. The journal with the beaming shaggy man portrayed on the front was the only one with a dog-eared tip. The rest stood stoic on the shelf, indifferent to the indifference they themselves are subject to. He sat drumming the table top in a manner not too loud, lest the chatty undergrads collected around a laptop in the corner were department informants, sent to do reconnaissance on him before the formal interrogation. Perhaps he should, too, give Neil a quick once over, to show just how academic and fit for this job he was. His reverie ended. No, he chided himself, they're here for me, not you, Neill!









## TELLING THE TRUTH/MAKING STORIES

Many moving stories and fragments of real lives came up in these conversations, many that made us laugh, and more that made us cry. We looked at how many moments in real life are an act of witnessing, and how we turn these into stories in our memory.

“If you tell the truth, you don’t have to remember anything.”  
– Mark Twain

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” – Oscar Wilde

“I believe in everything until it’s disproved. So I believe in fairies, the myths, dragons. It all exists, even if it’s in your mind. Who’s to say that dreams and nightmares aren’t as real as the here and now?” – John Lennon

“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.” – Rudyard Kipling

“A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.” – Graham Greene

“In autobiographical narrative performances, the performer often speaks about acts of social transgression. In doing so, the telling of the story itself becomes a transgressive act – a revealing of what has been kept hidden, a speaking of what has been silenced...” – Linda Park-Fuller



## Witness – Laura Marshall

During moments of quiet contemplation that followed my mother's death, the word 'witnessing' has circled in my mind. It's not uncommon to hear people speak of witnessing death, though I'd never given it a second thought. I had no reason to. But having been with mum during her final moments, something about the idea of witnessing jarred with me. Witnessing. It felt so formal, so inadequate. For me, witnessing implied presence with a kind of distance, a detached observer watching from afar, rather than the intimacy, the gentle intensity that I felt between my family and I, at mum's bedside.

Framed pictures, dimmed lighting and a colourful walled garden softened the otherwise stark and sterile hospital room. Seven of us, my sisters, father, nieces, nephew and I sat, circling mum, each with one arm outstretched and touching her skin with our hands. No longer being monitored by machines, it was now us monitoring her body, as a way of knowing and anticipating what was to come. Or at least trying to. Our eyes followed the rise and fall of her chest as her breathing became less strained, shallower, quieter. Touching her arm, I wanted her to feel my touch in return, to know I was there. That we were there. That she wasn't alone. That though she wasn't at home, as she had hoped, home had come to her.

It was a last chance to feel mum's lived presence through her body, and I sensed her life slipping away as her skin became paler, colder, clammier, less sensitive to our touch. For a moment we all seemed to share a sense of knowing that she had gone, but hesitating, holding our breath, and needing a sign before the grief suspended within our bodies could be released. We turned to my sister, a doctor, for affirmation. 'She's gone', she whispered, piercing our suspense.

## The Arrest – Caroline Bressey

Caroline looked at the table as Philips recorded the items in his packet book: “One pipe, one pouch of tobacco, one handkerchief – blue, one Bible.” He looked up at Downing. “No watch, nothing else of value.” It was an observation, not a question. Caroline lifted her chin, meeting the policeman’s scrutiny, as she folded her hands into her pocket.

“Wait here.”

Caroline leant back against the cold bricks of the wall and closed her eyes at the slam of the door, breathing in and out deeply as Philips’s steps echoed away. She reached out, fumbling for the handkerchief, and used it to wipe the salt water from her cheeks. She kept her eyes closed.

When she opened her eyes, she looked at the objects lined up on the table. The man seemed convinced they were all she had to declare, and he didn’t seem that interested in getting her to reveal any more of herself. She’d heard stories, but it was late and maybe Philips just wanted to head home, maybe getting into an argument with a six-foot black man wasn’t something he cared to do. Maybe the cape would still be enough. She tipped the white felt brim further down her forehead. As the door opened, she rolled her back off the wall.

“Well, Mr. Downing, nothing here to keep you.”

She smiled with relief at the floor, but her brow knitted as she noticed the second pair of black-laced boots. She looked up and met his eyes. These eyes were more suspicious than Philips's.

“This is Dr Stern, he's one of the doctors at Bow Infirmary – you ever been there?”

Caroline shook her head slowly.

“Well, given ...” Philips paused, trying to find the most appropriate word, “given the incident, it's been decided that the infirmary rather than the cells would be a better place for you, and...”

“As you're not feeling well,” Stern interrupted “better to be somewhere with medical professionals where we can take care of you.”

Caroline felt bile rising at the back of her throat and she focused once again on the breath in and the breath out.

**The Root Ball – Amita Murray**  
**(excerpt from short story)**

*Thwack! Shwump. Thwack! Shwump.*

The hole is getting bigger. The root ball of the cabbage tree sits in a kink in the corner of the compound, waiting to be transplanted. But her husband is digging away, and her mother is watching, hands on hips, looking grim. Again and again the spade splices the loam. Again and again the soil spatters on the expanding mound of leftovers. Sweat streams down Ahiri's face, and there are pools developing around her hip bones.

"I guess it's my turn," she says.

"I can finish it," Jesse says.

"I'll do it," she says firmly. "Does it have to be bigger?"

"Twice the size of the root ball," her mother says.

It takes another fifteen minutes of digging before her mother is satisfied.

"There," says Ahiri, kneading her lower back. "Surely it's done now."

Her mother gently unfolds the wet tarp that is protecting the taproot. She brushes off the hummus. Then she glances over at Jesse. Jesse lifts the tree, newly dug out from outside the compound, pruned last year in preparation for this move. He lugs it over and places it at the edge of the hole, but whatever he is planning to do with it is cut short as the tree crashes in. Her mother cries out. “The new roots!”

It’s okay, Mum, it’s just a tree, Ahiri wants to say, but her mother is delicate around her plants, minding their feelings and tending their wounds, skills she has never developed for her daughter. Ahiri and Jesse squat, trying to make it right. The leaves are long and prickly, the bark tough and leathery like cork. It is impossible to reach down and right the tree, without getting stung in the face. They try to nudge the tree into the centre. When Ahiri’s mother is satisfied, she starts to throw the earth back into the hole. Ahiri and Jesse join in, cushioning, padding, kneading out the air pockets, till the hole is filled. Her mother places mulch all around the tree, and then irrigates it again.

“It needs a name,” Ahiri says suddenly.

“It’s a tree,” her mother says. “Not a hamster.”

“Seed. Seeder. Seedling. Seeder. Let’s call it Seeder.”



Ahiri runs into the house, searches frantically for a piece of cardboard. Finding nothing other than the pencil she is writing with, to make a post, she comes back out, cardboard impaled on the pencil, the name Seeder written in small dark letters, and a date. She sticks it in the soil, but then anxiety fills her. "It will grow, won't it? They're sturdy old things, cabbage trees, aren't they? It won't die?"

"Of course, it will grow," her mother says. She picks out the pencil that Ahiri has planted, and moves it two inches. "Further from the root is better."

Ahiri stands now, looking at the tree. "It has to grow."

"You've done the date wrong." Her mother has a hand on her chin.

And now that lump is back in Ahiri's throat. The lump that is never far. The lump that keeps threatening to rise and burst. Her mother is right. Ahiri has the day right, but the month is wrong. It is last month. It is exactly a month ago.

Jesse is standing next to her now. "Are you sure you want to name it?"

She nods. And just to affirm it, a pain deep down in her belly hits her. A pain where something had lived for a few weeks, and then where it had died. Before it had a name. "Yes," she whispers. "Yes, I am sure."

## A New Life in London – Tariq Jazeel

She's staring at the reflection of herself in the large glass panes. This sleek, postmodern architectural edifice, the fittingly imposing headquarters of Fraser & Partners here in the middle of Battersea, a building she worked in for so many years. She can see herself, now so different from who she was then.

It was *all* so different when she rocked up to their offices on Great Portland Street back in 1991, straight off the plane, jet-lagged, weary, but so eager to start her new life here in London. You could shower straight off the plane back then, those showers at Heathrow airport offering the promise of fresh new starts for countless new arrivals. She had checked her luggage at Victoria station, carefully removing her pristine A4-sized portfolio, her ticket, she hoped, to a career in architecture in London.

Standing here now, staring at her reflection in those glass panes, she caught a glimpse of herself approaching the sliding glass doors of the old Great Portland Street office 24 years ago. Fraser Associates, as it was back then. She was naïve, innocent, but she somehow had a firm belief, a conviction, that landing up at the Fraser Associates studio, clutching the one existing hard copy of her architect's portfolio would be her ticket to a new life.

She remembers vividly, even today, that split second just before the glass doors opened, when she saw herself reflected. Exuberant, hopeful enthusiasm tinted by a concealed tiredness faintly visible to only those who knew her. But no one here did. The glass doors opened. Her new life began.

## **Eclipse: An Unexpected Conversation – Tula Maxted**

I sat on a yoga mat, making a barrier against the red-hot sand. A camper-van nearby had stalled in a deep rut, leaning over a little to the left and forward. There were thousands of people here at this featureless spot in the Libyan Sahara. Europeans with cameras, telescopes, and baggage, Libyans and Egyptians crammed into rickety vehicles. There had been many falling by the wayside, broken down, engulfed by sand, all along the route from Benghazi. People collected by other, already overfilled coaches, cars, even motorbikes, and wheeled carts. Here we all were now, though, waiting for the eclipse totality.

The boys from inside the van had gone off to make their midday prayers. The two girls, no longer confined to waving at us foreigners from inside the van, now crept outside. They huddled together, nodding silently to each other. Then made their way over to me. They stood smiling, one of them carrying a small book, held tightly in her hand.

“Hello,” I said, pointing to myself. I added, “My name is Tula.” I stood up and pressed their hands in turn.

The older girl spoke, “Fatima,” she said, indicating herself. Then she made a gesture towards the younger girl, “Lula.”

Lula grinned widely, “Same like you – Lula, Tula.”

## Closer – Linda Fuller

“We’ll try up Bracks first,” he says, as they pull out of the yard, dawn breaking across the frosted earth, the sky wide streaks of pink and violet, like a child gone crazy with the crayons. He leans over slightly to see past his daughter and across the mere.

“Magga saw a whole family down there a few mornings ago, down near Hundred Foot,” he says, sweeping his arm out in front of her. He looks over at her, her long hair obscuring her face, and wonders if she’s bored. It was easier when she was a child, running around the farm in her red wellies, sitting on his lap in the tractor, pointing out the cows, the trees, the birds, pointing at everything. The glee of it she felt. He felt.

He let his eyes return to the fields, the familiar. A map of crops and hedgerows he could draw with his eyes shut. Black fen peat that will soon turn emerald and gold as winter recedes. He lives this land, he’s made of it, every bone, every ache. He scans the horizon, searching, every so often slowing down, where he’d seen some recently.

“Look, rabbits!” she shouts.

He smiles as they watch two rabbits bounce along the grass verge, before disappearing into the ditch in a flurry of white. He takes a left off the main road and down a dirt drove.

“There!” he says, breaking hard and pointing to his right.  
“Do you see them?”

“No, where?”

“Three of them! Do you see, look, you see the gate in the far corner of that field, look a bit to the left, the other side of the ditch.”

“Oh yeah! I see them! I see two.”

“The other one’s just gone behind those brambles, look you can see his head, hang on I’ll get us closer.”

They bump across the field, and he stops as near as he dares.

“Look Dad, they are looking right at us,” she whispers, eyes fixed ahead.

They sit and watch in silence. The doe bends her head, pulling at the long grass, then raises it and starts to lick the fawn’s back. The younger deer nuzzles against its mother. The stag emerges and takes a few steps towards their vehicle, then stops, looming large against the endless flat of the land.

After a while, the stag turns and leads his family away. Long thin legs, slow and graceful, they follow the ditch in single file before disappearing into a thicket.

“I can’t believe how close we got!” she says, grinning, turning towards him.

“We’ll have a look at Hundred Foot before home, we might see some more,” he says, switching the engine back to life.

Much later, long after she has returned to London, he thinks about that morning they shared with the deer, and he feels like something had shifted. That something lost had been, for a moment, restored. Though he could never have explained this to his wife or daughter, or even to himself.









## MEETING POINTS

An on-going exploration in the group was this idea of places as spaces where people meet. Chance encounters, glances exchanged, assumptions made, and conversations had or avoided – this is the stuff that makes places. Not only do these encounters bring to light the socio-politics of a place, but also make us aware of who we are and who we pretend to be.

“Conceiving of space as a static slice through time, as representation, as a closed system and so forth are all ways of taming it.” – Doreen Massey

“That’s the ideal meeting...once upon a time, only one, unexpectedly, then never again.” – Helen Oyeyemi

“Journeys end in lovers meeting.” – William Shakespeare

“How the miracle of our meeting shone there and sang. I didn’t want to return from there to anywhere.” – Anna Akhmatova

“To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, to be other and to move toward the other...” – Michel de Certeau



## Dad – Dara Rigal

It can only be seen under a microscope, errant cells multiplying, unseating the healthy ones. Something you can not touch, invisibly taking life away.

I repair microscopes, help people to see. I guess I am a catalyst, in that sense. I don't really examine things myself, but I can facilitate others' thinking and seeing. I just fix glass lenses, the clear walls between the analyst and the object.

No one really expected it, my back hurt, they took my blood, magnified it and found that I had Myeloma eating away at the bones in my spine. They admitted me to hospital and I started chemo.

My boys and wife took care of me, an old man. They dressed me, undressed me and yes, of course, took me to the toilet.

After the first treatment, while I was still in hospital, Zeke walked me down the ten metres of corridor to the loo. I slowly dragged the Zimmer frame behind him. He undid my pyjamas and lowered me onto the toilet. I did what needed to be done and then he helped me up – an awkward role reversal between father and son.

Half way down the corridor, on the way back, the drawstring came undone and my trousers fell, exposing me to the world as I hadn't ever been before. Zeke and I laughed. We had never been closer.

## **Michelle – Sarah Kunz**

Let me introduce myself. I am called Michelle. I am rather beautiful, a rather big cat, a male cat, although my owners hadn't realized that yet when they named me Michelle. Humans...

I love to stroll around the neighbourhood, enjoy the sun and pick up a bit of chit chat on the way. And I hear all sorts of things, sitting on our neighbour's windowsill, watching all those petty and not so petty scenes going on in these peoples' homes. And all those poor humans think I don't understand any of what is going on. Little do they know. It's amazing really, much better than that reality TV that my people watch at home. And sometimes I'm even fed some tuna sitting on those window sills. Those are lucky days.

The other day, I observed this scene while enjoying the first spring sunshine. I was just doing a bit of stretching and relaxing on the windowsill of our neighbour's kitchen, and let me tell you, I felt rather sorry for this poor chap, Ben. Actually, I have been watching those people for some time now. It used to be such fun, such a happy home, always someone in the kitchen, chatting and laughing. Oh, I really picked up some juicy gossip on that windowsill. But lately, none of that. Some of the people must have moved out, I never see them anymore...Ah, things really have changed.

The only one that's left of the old crew is this poor fellow Ben. He is always such an enthusiastic guy, smiling, friendly chap, gives me a bite of tuna sometimes. Generous man, really. Though lately he is always alone in that kitchen, no more smiling and chatting....and no more tuna, if I think about it.

And that day, this new girl, she always looks so moody, rarely a word, just flitting in and out of the kitchen, never any tuna, never any stroking of my lovely grey fur. And oh, I could see my friend Ben got annoyed that day. When I arrived, they were chatting. I was surprised; it seemed to be going well, almost like one of those friendly chats like there used to be, but then... Ben turned around, stirring the stew he was preparing, telling what I thought was a rather funny anecdote of the class he had taught that day, but then.... he turned around in mid-sentence and could see what I had seen all along. Michelle had taken a phone call in the middle of their conversation (I didn't want to tell you but, yes, she is called Michelle, just like me) and by now, she was absent-mindedly discussing with her mum what they should have for tea. No "sorry, let me just answer that phone call" or "excuse me, but I need to answer this." Oh, I could see poor Ben, irked, annoyed, in shock, really. Locked in an internal battle, I could see it all on his face, the battle between empathy ("this poor girl is new in London, lonely and really misses her mum") and offence ("what rude behavior!")

I felt sad, really. I don't think I'll go back and relax on that windowsill anytime soon. Too depressing, all of it.

## The Falls – Regan Koch

A tap on the shoulder. ‘Please, do you mind?’ A young woman, eighteen, maybe nineteen, in a radiant blue dress, gestures with her camera. The water roars beside us, kicking up foam on the wooden planks. The falls are impressive; easily worth the ten-minute walk from the main road. But maybe not worth the 8,000 won. The whole place feels more theme park than nature preserve, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they were somehow fake. This place is weird like that.

“I’d be happy to, I reply, reaching for her camera.

“No, *with* you,” she replies.

Her smile is sheepish. She is embarrassed and I am confused. I then realise there are three of her. Okay, not three of her, but they all look alike to me. Long brown hair, hoops and heels. Except one’s dress is pink, another’s is green. They look like they’ve dressed up to shoot a pop-video, or maybe go to the prom.

“What, me with you, in front of the falls?” I want to laugh, but I don’t. I can tell she’s serious, and I don’t want to offend.

Avoid doing anything that might cause offense. That’s the one rule I remember from the guidebook.



## 7.14 – Tariq Jazeel

It's the 7.14 to Ely, via Cambridge. Filling up steadily, with work weary folk, tired, hungry, smelly, eager to get home. There aren't that many seats left, but there's still a full seven minutes before the train leaves.

There he is, I've seen him before on this train. Sitting in a bay of four seats, avoiding eye contact with anyone, but looking quite expansive. Well, his slightly tatty, misshapen blue workbag is placed on the seat beside him, scarf and gloves balancing on top of them. His legs crossed, and the points of weird green shoes nearly touching the seat in front of him. How is it possible for this bloke to effectively take three seats all to himself? Every bloody evening. He's pretending to be engrossed in that poxy work thing he's reading, must be an academic, this train's full of 'em.

But I know he's seen me, I know he's doing everything in his power to avoid acknowledging me right now, to avoid having to move his bag for me to sit down, or to uncross his legs, pull them in, create some space for others. Come on, dude, look at me, I want you to move. I could, I suppose, sit elsewhere. But no, I want this selfish fucker to move for me. I bet he doesn't even use this train every day, during rush hour, like the rest of us. Like all those work-shy academics, I bet he works at home when he bloody wants to. There! I knew if I stood here long enough, he'd have to acknowledge me. Yes, I do want to sit there mate. Haha, unfold your legs and move your bag, sucker.

## One Burgandy, Two Plum – Nazneen Ahmed

She walks up and down Whitechapel High Street, going from stall to stall with her list. She settles on one. The scarf seller eyes her with the predatory interest that he saves for brand new, lost-looking customers. But her stiffness, her concentration upon her list, don't make her seem lost. He continues to observe her, biding his time to intervene with the "sell", but curious too. She's different.

She pulls out scarves, one by one, inspecting the colours and patterns. She carefully pushes them back, not satisfied, sometimes glancing back down at the list. She pulls out a couple more, and he decides it's time. "Six for ten, sister, six for ten," he encourages. She nods dismissively, going back to inspecting the scarves.

He wonders briefly if he should try some Sylheti on her, on the offchance it might bring down that wall and he could begin what he did best, selling those things no one really needs, but buys and wonders about afterwards. But maybe not Sylheti... Somali? Should he whip out some Arabic? She's hard to place. Facially, there's something different about her that he can't identify. Her scarf is different to his regular Bangladeshi customers' hijabs. She wears it high, two layers, with a thick braid to one side, like *hair*. How strange, to cover hair with something that looks like hair.

She begins to collect scarves that meet her approval, checking them against her list. One, burgundy. Two, plum. A couple of patterned ones. She pauses between a deep blue and a greener shade, opting for the greener one. A final one, black with a multi-coloured pattern. She looks up and speaks in a stumbling posh Bangle, clipped with British edges, as she hands over a crisp £10 note, folded into three.

Yeah, not from here. He turns to put her scarves in a bag, feeling strangely vindicated.

## Sweet Home Ayapua – Tula Maxted

All my ambitions, aspirations, finally drawn together here. Everything complete. Standing on the shore, stepping from the shore – over the gangway, onto this incredible boat, on the most iconic river in the world. The dark turbid Amazon water rolled past – never ending. The boat Ayapua, Peace, restored with love, care, borrowed and cobbled parts. A resurrection of the spirit of those Rubber Boom days way back.

I would live here for the next few weeks with all the gentle creaks and shifts as the full slow water ran beneath. The hum of the engines, the smell of mud, plants and all the scent of the forest mingled here alongside the background of damp dust and moist air inside the cabin. My cabin, tiny, oddly shaped, home. Looking out over the rail, I saw pink river dolphins playing, and playing to the crowd. Cavorting and diving. Their smiling jaws hoping for fish waste thrown out from the galley. I looked back inside the room. The captain's desk, small trunk, and the walls...the walls! I realised with a quick jerk from reverie, the walls were papered, not with paper, but with very old lace. Obvious really, silk lace, far more lasting in the tropics. Paper would just be reduced to a smear of mould in a few days. I could see then that the Amazon and all its component life forms were not the only important things I would be learning. The Ayapua also had a history, and a mystery. All its contact-polished wood, black ironwork and burnished brass, all ready to explore.





## VOICE

An exploration of the writing voice in fiction and research led to the group delving and diving into questions of how we see others, and how we are seen in turn. Many of the pieces that came out of these workshops turned the eye on to the writer or narrator, and brought questions of the “I” in writing to the forefront.

“I don not care what comes after; I have seen the dragons on the wind of morning.” – Ursula K. Le Guin

“Perhaps the process had started the moment I set foot in the place; but I still remember, perfectly clearly, the day when I first became aware of the way it was working on me...The moment the sun slipped below the mountain-tops, a low dark curtain descended upon the stage of the day. Because the hilly terrain shut out the last light of the sun, twilight was of short duration here. Toying with the idea of going for a ride, I had half-risen from my chair when I heard a footstep on the steps behind me. I turned to look: there was no one there.” – Rabindranath Tagore (translated from Bengali by Amitava Ghosh)

“We should write as we dream...because it’s the only place where we never lie.” – Hélène Cixous

“If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.” – George Eliot





## Matthias's Bliss – Will Wright

This morning I wake up and I'm like, "Whoa, Matthias, what am I gonna do today?" I could hear the sea from my bed, and I'm like, "Yes Mattie, I'm gonna hit the Point." I love this. It's not like "Can I surf today?" but the question is always "Shall I surf today?" So, I'm like, "Yes, I wake up to paradise, I live in paradise." I leave my place, and walk into the morning sun, hitting my face, hitting my face, oh man. So good man! And I'm walking to the beach, onto the beach.

And I'm like:

Beautiful sun.

Beautiful flower.

Beautiful sea.

Beautiful place.

I remember to give thanks for this.

## **Rucksacks and Awkward Bodies – Nazneen Ahmed**

The lobby is a faded olive green with chilled terracotta linoleum on the floor. Stacks of shoes – including my DMs – line the shelves on the walls and lie scattered about. Some pairs look like they're about to make off in different directions, where they've been knocked or kicked around. I'm the last one into the main hall, because, as usual, I'm fumbling with my laces. I really don't know why Velcro is seen as an unacceptable footwear fastening choice for adults.

I catch up with the others, overtaking families and spindly elderly women, careful not to step on the hems of the flower-bright saris. Entering the main hall, I'm hit by a heavy, almost-familiar scent of Indian food. Not the sharp, onion-heavy cooking of the North, but a softer, rounder smell. Steam from huge vats wafts across the doorway. A long queue waits patiently, very British-like, as food is served on bendy paper plates by men and women standing in a military line behind tables.

We're here to find Mr. Samaddar. Apparently he's here... somewhere. I don't even know what he looks like, but I find myself searching nevertheless. Maybe he'll have something specifically Samaddar-y about him that'll single him out from all the other South Indian elderly menfolk here, dressed in their thick woolly jumpers and chinos and sports socks.

It's us who really stick out here, in our sombre academic tones of blue and black and grey, with our rucksacks and awkward bodies. My feet, benumbed from walking around cold stone churches all morning, begin to tingle back to life, because this place has the miracle of underfloor heating. I reflect that churches could learn a thing or two about design from *mandirs*. We make a space on the floor and sit down, creaking, our legs crossed, and await the appearance of Mr. Samaddar.

## Letchworth – Claire Dwyer

“Do you want to see my kittens?” he asked. “I’ve got kittens at home, you can come and see them.” In retrospect, he looked laughably like the stereotypical paedophile, scruffy rain coat, dirty trousers, badly cut hair. But at the time it just seemed weird. I didn’t really like cats, and why would I go to the house of a stranger?

“No thanks,” said my sister politely.

We walked on through the narrow alley, “the gap,” which connected Broadwater Avenue and the town centre, clutching our library books. Our hearts were racing a little, out of fear or excitement, I’m not sure which. But we never mentioned the encounter – neither to each other or to our parents.

## Dating, at My Age – Regan Koch

I've been going on lots of dates lately. It's time consuming, but it's also been quite nice really. An attorney. An artist. And an accountant. He's really sweet, the accountant; spontaneous, which is fun, but he can also be spontaneously uptight. You know what I mean? I'm not sure why we keep texting, but we do. And a software designer. And there's the straight guy from up the street. He still comes over every now and then, but only very late at night.

It's not easy, you know. Here, in Los Angeles. At my age. A lot of guys I meet are fine, but not someone you want to spend the rest of your life with. A lot of them are just like, "Let's go to yours." And not to just have sex, necessarily. I think they just want to see where you live. You know? It's like, they see me and think, "Okay, Jack, you're in your mid-40s and you're a filmmaker, that's cool." But I can also feel them thinking "they're not very well known films and you use public transport." So, it's like they want to see what I *do* have. You know what I mean? The whole thing is really time-consuming.

## New Year's Eve – Caroline Bressey

New Year's Eve is always pretty shit. The nightmare of finding somewhere half decent to go, navigating the transport options, finding a taxi home, even if you can't afford it. And after six years in London, it doesn't get any easier. Laura can hold her own, drink with the best of them, but there comes a point when not taking recreational drugs becomes a serious problem on a night out. People love you, but they can't have a conversation with you – even wasted, it's nice to know you can still talk to someone. New Year's Eve is always shit, but this one is more painful than most.

Laura can hear kids from the estate shouting at each other in the street below, friendly taunts roaring into cheers as their fireworks light up the sky above them all. Laura turns up the bottle of red into the stew, it mixes with the smokiness of the chorizo as she pours what's left of the bottle into her glass. She stirs and watches the chicken turn an intoxicated ruby under the yellow glow of the cooker light.

The bell rings. "I'll get it" and Laura can hear Carrie tripping in the hall, "Fuck!", and then the catch lifting on the door, "Hi!" The girls chatter in the hall, as Emma takes off her coat, and then she appears in the doorway, another bottle of prosecco in hand. Laura smiles and takes it before being wrapped in Emma's arms.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

## **At the Traffic Light – Ruth Cheung Judge**

It's a lovely sunny day, crisp air and blue skies. Not much traffic either. There's a faint rattle in the distance, getting louder, and louder still, then screechy brakes, and then the noise stops. She is breathing hard, but perhaps trying to hide it a little from the guy next to her, who has a fixed wheel, a beard, and wears a beanie hat rather than a helmet. Her own helmet is a garish fluorescent yellow number. She drags the right pedal upwards with her scruffy trainer and steps her foot down onto it with a determined little clunk. She stares straight ahead at the lights, jaw set, steely-eyed. Though just for a fraction of a second her eyes dart to the woman in front, clad in head to toe lycra, and her eyes narrow just a tiny bit. There's that strange quiet now, silent but full, where people have kept their bodies still all at once, poised on the edge of movement, for just a bit too long.





## Authors

**Nazneen Ahmed** is something of a disciplinary migrant. She is a Research Associate at UCL in the School of Geography, working on the AHRC project “Making Suburban Faith.”

**Caroline Bressey** is a Lecturer in human geography at UCL. She studies the Black Presence in Victorian Britain, and has founded the Equiano Centre. In 2009, she was awarded a Philip Leverhulme Prize.

**Claire Dwyer** is a Reader in the Department of Geography at UCL. She is interested in faith and migration, and is currently researching the diverse religious geographies of “Making Suburban Faith” in Ealing.

**Tariq Jazeel** teaches Human Geography at University College London. His research and publications span postcolonial theory, social and cultural geography, and South Asian Studies. Though he is deeply interested in literature and culture, he has never before attempted to write creatively.

**Ruth Cheung Judge** is finishing her PhD at the Department of Geography at UCL. After 14 months of ethnographic research with young people, following them from London estates to voluntary projects in Kenya and Zimbabwe, she has notebooks full of wild tales of fights, jokes and epiphanies. Unfortunately, she's not allowed to

submit her PhD as a novel, and so was grateful that the group provided an outlet for creative writing.

**Linda Fuller** loves stories, reading them, and when brave enough, writing them, absorbing herself in a character, a place, somewhere other than herself. When she writes it's like she's swimming deep underwater, and when the story stops she comes up for air, blinking in the bright sunshine.

**Charlotte Jones** was always destined to work with carpets. Her career adviser clearly had some intuition. However she peaked too soon, only ever writing about carpets and getting burnt.

**Regan Koch** is a lecturer in urban and cultural geography at Queen Mary, University of London. His research is focused on public space and collective life in contemporary cities, with a focus on London and the USA. He is co-editor (with Alan Latham of UCL) of the forthcoming SAGE volume *Key Thinkers on Cities*.

**Sarah Kunz** is a PhD student at UCL's Geography Department, where her research aims to “open up” the category “expatriate” in order to explore its inherent tensions and ambiguities, its socio-political functions and the relations of power and inequality that shape it. Before pursuing her PhD, Sarah completed an MSc in Sociology at the LSE and worked for NatCen for Social Research in London.

**Laura Marshall** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Geography at University College London. Her research interests coalesce around questions of gender, sexuality and space, with her current research involving the exploration of the verbal, written and visual narratives of trans people living in the UK.

**Tula Maxted** is a hungry traveler. Having been to the Peruvian Amazon, the Libyan Sahara, and more, has just left her craving more adventure. She sings, dances, paints, walks and draws. She loves things that teach her something about the world, or about herself.

**Amita Murray** is a writer and dance academic. Having lived in and around London, Delhi and California all her life, she likes to think of herself as something of a cultural abyss. She often writes about the comedy and tragedy of cultural encounters. Her writing can be found in various literary magazines and anthologies.

**Dara Rigal** is currently working as an Artist-in-Residence for the Optical Networks Group, in the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering at UCL, on their UNLOC project. She is translating the group's work "Communicating with Light" to "Drawing with Light." Her background as an Architect and Maker contributes to a practice based on experimentation with materials and processes.

**Joe Thorogood** is a PhD student at UCL. He works with the Royal Geography Society, and is an active RGS-IBG Geography Ambassador. He is on an ESRC fellowship as a visiting scholar at the Kluge Centre at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

**Will Wright** is a human geographer interested in the legacies of disasters, the politics of knowledge production and socio-cultural interactions with the sea. He recently completed his PhD at the University of Sheffield. This explored the ongoing legacies of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, focusing explicitly on communities in South East Sri Lanka.







