



Volume 5, Issue 1/2

Last but not least

Melissa Nolas, Christos Varvantakis, Robyn Long, Ellie Walton, and Bethany Logan

Keywords: multimodal ethnography

Recommended Citation:

Nolas, M., Varvantakis, C., Long, R., Walton, E., and Logan, B. (2022). Last but not least, *entanglements*, 5(1): 1-7



Licensing

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Last but not least

Melissa Nolas, Christos Varvantakis, Robyn Long, Ellie Walton, and Bethany Logan



Warner Bros., Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

“the problem for the intellectual is to try to deal with the impingements of modern professionalization as I have been discussing them, not by pretending that they are not there, or denying their influence, but by representing a different set of values and prerogatives. These I shall collect under the name of *amateurism*, literally, an activity that is fueled by care and affection rather than by profit and selfish, narrow specialization.”

([Edward Said, 1993](#))

This is the final issue of the online, open access journal *entanglements: experiments in multimodal ethnography*.

entanglements was set up in Spring 2018 by Christos, Melissa and Robyn, later to be joined by Beth and Ellie, and with the contribution of Sarah Lynch in between. We were also joined by an awesome [editorial board](#) of like minded colleagues who have supported this experiment through their dedication and work, as well as by more than a hundred authors who have entrusted their work and their thoughts with us.

The idea for setting up *entanglements* came from [our own experience of carrying out multimodal ethnography](#) over a four year period. We came to multimodal ethnography in 2013 before a language for those practices had emerged and exploded into a more mainstream academic discourse.

At the time there were a handful of publications on the topic of multimodality as a research practice- the work of sociologists Bella Dicks and colleagues (2006) being a seminal article for many including us. In anthropology, where the term and its associated practices now occupy a much more central position, it appeared in a flagship anthropology journal in 2017 with the renaming of that journal's section from 'visual anthropology' to 'multimodal anthropology' (although, as many have pointed out anthropology has always to one degree or another been multimodal). In [education studies and linguistics](#), concerns with the multimodality of human communication itself has a much longer trajectory. In 2021, Sage launched a journal on multimodality and society that the publisher catalogues as cutting across the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, and visual communication. And of course, there are overlaps with thinking and practice in media and performance arts, visual culture, and feminist media and cultural studies.

As we carried out [our research](#) and looked for suitable journals in which to publish our own work, journals that may allow us to present and discuss our fieldwork across the different modes and media we were using and from which knowledge on the topic was being generated, we came up across various publishing constraints. Words were always welcome so long as they did not exceed stated journal limits, a familiar challenge to those of us working with ethnographic and qualitative methods. Images would be tolerated only in black and white, and had to be traded for words: an individual image typically worth 200 words. Sound and moving images would need to be rendered into notation or still images. Much of this has, of course, to do with where print meets digital publishing on the one hand, and the technological capabilities of existing publishing platforms, as well as, of course, large publishers profit making imperatives. Print journals have a designated number of pages allotted to each issue and are costed accordingly. The restrictions on words and image fulfil an economic logic, not an epistemological one. Embedding stills, sound, and

moving images requires a technological capability that many mainstream journals do not support.

Under conditions of creative flow, [of following desire lines](#), of riffing off each others' ideas, and of enacting a maxim that if something doesn't exist you create it, all in part afforded by the time and space that can come with a large grant and 100% buy-outs for research, we set off to create a publishing possibility for multimodal ethnographic research. A possibility that had little to do with economic logic and everything to do with a desire to create something and somewhere in which to explore the epistemological questions that excited us, which we would summarise as follows: what knowledge can we generate through multimodal [entanglements that matter?](#)

entanglements, came about with a first issue featuring some of our own early experiments as a way of prototyping how we envisaged the journal. It was organised into three sections:

(1) *récits*, for short research stories or anecdotes; inspired from the work of Michel de Certeau and his treatment of stories in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, *récits* tended to be decisive or incisive moments, blunders, the sort of material that would in traditional writing and publishing find itself of the proverbial cutting room floor but from which stories could still be told.

(2) *expériences*, for longer writing through which theory might be developed; the section was a play on the meanings of experience and experiment in French and English, of trying things out, of practising multimodality, of trialling, of testing and of tasting.

(3) *re-views*, a section intended for short texts re-viewing a range of cultural artefacts (books, films, exhibitions, events, academic or otherwise) that may have something to say and to offer our thinking in experiments with multimodality.

Over the last five years [we have approached multimodality epistemologically](#) pushing ourselves and contributors to the journal to think about what knowledge can come out of [thinking, doing, and feeling with words \(however configured\), images and sound together](#). This involves imagining these modes and their media existing in vertical relationships to one another, approaching each through its affordances, and resisting the urge to flatten one onto the other. It is a tall order for many of us in the social sciences trained in the art of writing primarily, and working in systems in which words are valued and rewarded much more than other modes of knowledge creation. Imagining modes and their media existing in vertical relationships to one another requires thinking outside and across our disciplinary

languages and practices. The last nine issues, including this one, are full of beautiful experiments rising up to this challenge. And while multimodality is a valuable tool for dissemination and can reach broader audiences (one of the benefits or imperatives of multimodal ethnography in some of its incarnations), it is the epistemological value of practising social science in multimodal ways that the journal always sought to champion.

Of course, the journal was not only an epistemological endeavour. It was also, in many ways, a political one. Whether that was through [peer feedback instead of peer review](#), through maintaining an openness to experimentation, through publishing in open access and engaging in initiatives for the promotion of ethical and unconditional open-access to knowledge, through publicly speaking to support victims of injustice, through, essentially, taking sides, we have always consciously chosen to remain politically engaged. Not least because we have little patience or respect for scholarly initiatives that seek to disentangle their scientific endeavours from the happenings in the actual contemporary worlds around them. We'd like to think that we took care of all the authors who contributed to *entanglements* through working with them to bring out the best in their contributions *as we found those*. This requires a good deal of time, and willingness to step into the writer's shoes and to imagine what it is they are trying to articulate. This is not easy.

Writing is such an intimate thing, and this demands attention in ways that are open and care-full and kind. I (Ellie) often think about what it means to edit ethically, about how much responsibility we hold when we are entrusted to rearrange the words of others. I often think about that pang of understanding that comes when you see the weaving and unfolding of ideas happen on a page, when the process of start-to-finish is made visible and when you can see the moment an author becomes comfortable with their words. In this sense, copyediting is a process of witnessing: of tracing, of following, of connection. It is a constant give-and-take, a back and forth motion oscillating between the lifeworlds of copyeditor and author respectively. Editorial work is, ultimately and at its very core, about getting into the words and worlds of another. The question of how best to clarify meaning without doing a disservice to the original words and process is rarely an easy one to answer but the best attempts at doing so are imbued with the spirit of generosity and care: let us see deletions and strikethroughs not as a rejection of what is but as an invitation to what could be. The task is to uphold aspirations to messiness and dialogue, and in this we have to reckon with our own limitations too: is this difficult in and of itself, or is it just difficult to me? Are the problems I'm coming up against a consequence of tricky style or phrasing, or am I being pushed beyond the bounds of my own extant knowledge? When we work in these ways, and when we edit with an ethic of compassion, we forge connections and deeper engagements, nurturing trust and allowing alternative landscapes of academic research and publishing to spawn. This is all to say: editing can be beautiful and generative and collaborative if only we let it. "Letting it" within the parameters of *entanglements* has been a joy and a privilege, the fruits of a labour of love.

Care also took other, unexpected forms. Our attempts to render multimodal experiences into HTML and to keep the media as close to the authors' storytelling as possible was at times very challenging. From basic efforts to render file types usable and compatible, to hacking the CSS code to find ways to display media as the authors wanted them experienced, from video loops to skeuomorphic attempts at comics. Some of this DIY tussling with technology felt empowering, it felt explorative. Learning as we produced, we found new appreciations for the multimodality and the experiential quality of the works we supported. But this wasn't always a journey of creative exploration. There were aspects of the production that we had wanted to pursue, but felt unable to make any meaningful progress with, particularly around accessibility: alt text, subtitles for video files, audio commentary. These may change the nature of the multimodal experience for all, but they also open up multimodal works to broader audiences, and with that help all our thinking about what it means to experience something in different modes and media. Sadly, the limited time and resources for our voluntary project proved too challenging to overcome. While we would be lying that working under technological and financial constraints wasn't also frustrating, it is also fair to say that the many contributors and contributions that really engaged with the journal's spirit of playfulness and experimentation outweighed these frustrations, for the most part.



Since launching six years ago, the digital and open access publishing landscape has changed considerably. The open access movement, which seeks to make scholarly work freely available to all, has driven innovation within the publishing landscape. Journals, hosting platforms and preservation solutions abound, and commercial actors play a growing role in this space, increasing the opportunities for open publishing developments, but also moving the goal posts for independent journals like ours. Grassroots open access journals seek to challenge the old (and new) for-profit publishing models. They are vital for driving a cultural shift away from outdated and problematic modes of research evaluation, such as impact factors and more broadly the use of citation counts as a measure of value, however, it is increasingly difficult for such projects to survive independently. Many 'diamond open access' titles now have institutional backing, and while this model is undoubtedly a positive departure from commercial approaches, support from a university or a library masks the hidden costs of keeping an open access journal in press, such as costs for platform access, costs, digital preservation solutions, and IT support. We learnt this the hard way, but that is not to say that there isn't hope for others who wish to go it alone. The open access support community is rich and thriving, and there are many dedicated people (paid and unpaid) working to change things for the better.

Open access is not the only change. Over the last six years, we have started to witness a change, or desire to change peer review cultures, with a number of journals practising more collegiate, and less antagonistic, reviewing. This is a really welcome shift as is the number of other journals that have sprung up to celebrate and practise [multimodal storytelling](#). Researchers and practitioners today have an array of choices for the publication of multimodal ethnographic works, and this is indeed a delightful development.

At the same time, and in parallel to these changes, we also find ourselves observing, not without ambivalence, a somewhat strange phenomenon that we can only describe as the chasing of an origin story for multimodal ethnography, a tracing of genealogies, especially in anthropology. This rush to tell the story of multimodal ethnography, to stake a claim and to define, feels really premature; it forecloses, it feels to us, experimentation which is at the heart of multimodality. We are minded here of what feminists and anthropologist warn us about the politics of storytelling (Hemmings, 2011; Jackson, 2013; Haraway, 2016). Juliette Singh, for instance, warns against 'definitional foreclosure', a foreclosure that we are all too well trained in and which our academic structures reward; definitional foreclosure and its 'practice(s) of masterful exclusion' (Singh, 2018, p. 43) are practices we feel comfortable with, or feel we can support. We maintain that a multimodal social science is an emerging and transdisciplinary field of scholarship, the codes and conventions of which, for making sense of various media and modalities, are still [in the making](#). We think, judging from the multitude of things we have seen as editors of this journal, that multimodal ethnographies provide a multitude of ways of looking at the world, without necessarily trying to disentangle it and reduce it to mere 'conclusions' - which social science is otherwise so keen on doing. Multimodal ethnography might provide ways to 'stay with the trouble', in Donna Haraway's beautifully poetic and now almost banal articulation for the messiness of life,

and to get entangled in it, as we encounter it. Not just another set of tools to bring order into chaos, but a safe place in which to explore our own wanderings within this mess.

In many ways the conditions under which *entanglements* came about were atypical. Projects such as the one we all met on and worked on for five years are rare; they can be, or at least where for us, little oases orbiting the ebbs and flows of daily academic life, ebbs and flows that are becoming increasingly more constrained, financially and ideologically difficult for many to bear. With projects and buyouts at an end, with changes in contracts, with the need to step out of the academy for some of us, with ambivalence about stepping back into or staying in the academy in different roles for many of us, and with burnout a looming threat on the horizon, running a project such as *entanglements*, and maintaining its open, experimental, playful, and caring ethos to the standards that we and you have become accustomed to, has just become too hard. The journal has been run on an actual shoestring not a proverbial one, out of pocket, without the funding to be able to remunerate the labour put in, and without institutional support despite best efforts, making it exceedingly hard to sustain. Even [labours of love](#) have their limits.

In the meantime, the task at hand is one of digital preservation. We are conscious of our responsibility to past authors and future readers to maintain the work submitted to *entanglements* accessible in perpetuity (or as much as that is possible given the perishability of digital objects). We are working behind the scenes to ensure that all published material will be archived in a way that will be openly accessible and as close as possible to the original publication format, for generations to come.

So this is the last issue. We have not taken this decision lightly but downing tools at this point in time also feels right for us. We have been extremely lucky to meet and to converse with brilliant researchers and scholars over the last five years, and we are grateful that this little desire line of a journal found a fecund audience for a while. We hadn't expected that. As for us, we will continue our work with and for openness, playfulness, experimentation, joy, equity, and justice in our varied roles; we don't believe these things to be mutually exclusive or incompatible. And we are pretty confident that in this path, we will meet again. But, from here, for now, [we are afraid we have to beat it.](#)