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Another review process is possible

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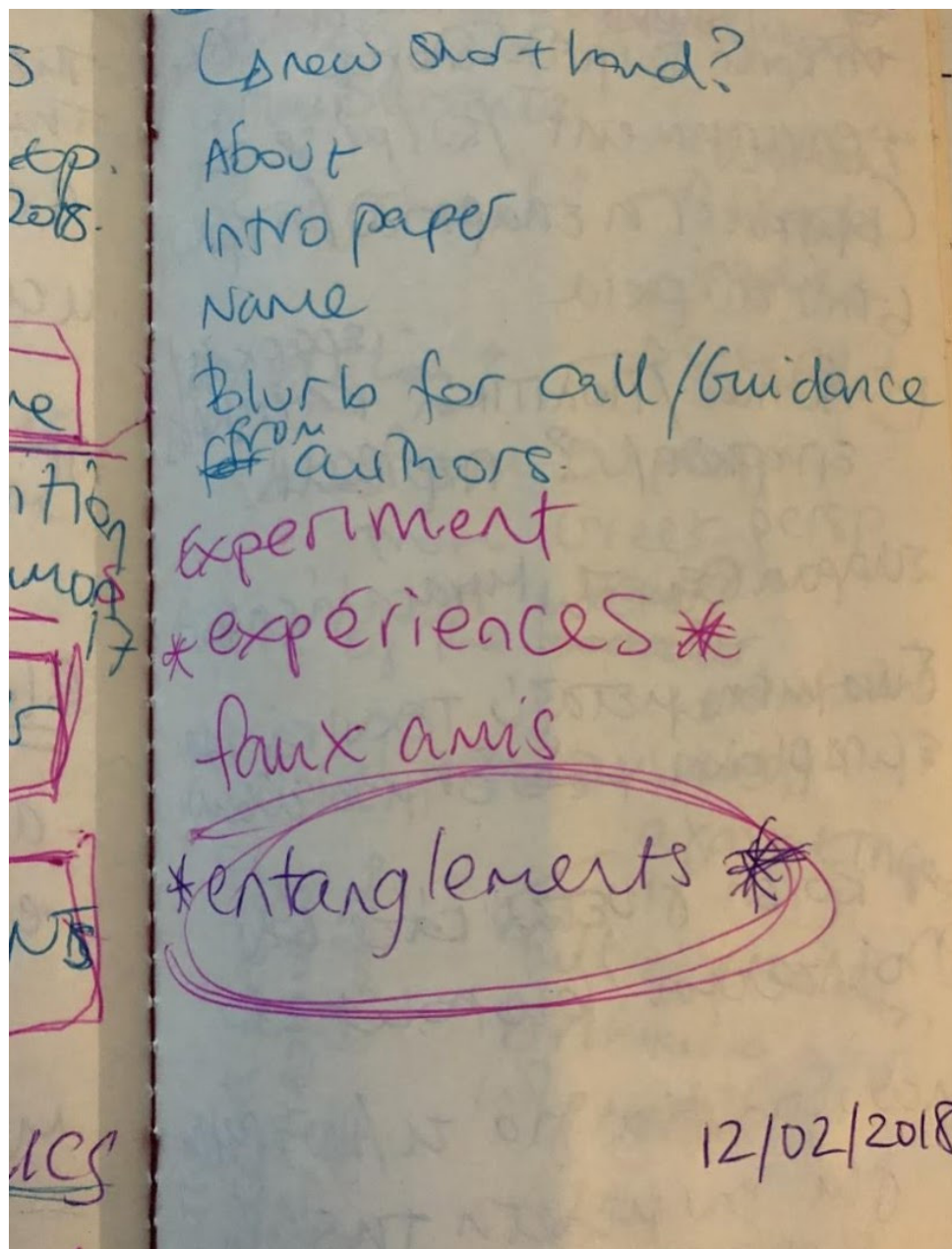
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Sevasti-Melissa Nolas and Christos Varvantakis





Wrapping up the first year of the *entanglements* journal, we're feeling glad and pretty entangled, amongst media, tropes, thoughts and wonderful people. A lot has happened since this time last year, when we were experimenting with setting up a new journal that would attempt, in its form and essence, to address issues of multimodal ethnography as part of an open and ongoing dialogue.

First of all, we realised that the issues we wanted to address are not of interest to just a few researchers and practitioners. We were in fact overwhelmed to see the interest that the journal has raised over the first year of its life among readers and writers, as this was reflected in the approximately 6,000 visitors and 14,000 views that the journal had in this period, and even more so, in the quality of the submissions that it attracted - several of which you will find in the issue 'at hand'.

Another significant and very pleasant change that happened during the last year is that we expanded the team of the people that we are working with to bring this journal together. We were very happy to welcome Sara Lynch (University of Bern), as our editorial production assistant, who is doing wonderful work in making sure that 'things' - words and media are best placed to communicate contributors' ideas.

Additionally, we have had the pleasure to invite and welcome the journal's inaugural editorial board. Caralyn Blaisdell (University of Strathclyde), Mihai Andrei Leaha (University of Sao Paulo), Rahul M (People's Archive of Rural India), Erin Sanders-McDonagh (University of Kent), Josh McNamara (University of Melbourne), Penelope Pappalias (University of Thessaly), Katerina Sergidou (Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences and the University of the Basque Country) and Mark Westmoreland (University of Leiden) have joined us, and we feel really fortunate to be among such wonderful company in editing the issue. The members of the editorial board have been working with us in nourishing, curating, and visualising along with the authors by providing feedback to the pieces of this issue.

But what do we mean by *feedback*? As this is a peer-feedback rather than a peer-review journal, this may be a good time to share our emerging thinking on what we mean by feedback, as we are exploring such processes of working *together*.

When we set up the journal, one of the things we needed to think about was what sort of interactions we wanted to have with contributors. In scholarly publishing, the main form of interaction between journal and author is the peer review process. Peer review subjects our research to the scrutiny of colleagues to improve its quality, to hone the arguments and interpretations we are making, and to uphold ethical standards. Peer review is, as such, an evaluative process and an important one at that.

Yet, the quality of peer review is already identified as inconsistent and currently the subject of [EU funded research](#). Our own experience over the last however many years that we have both been submitting our work to journals, resonates with this inconsistency in quality. We have had reviews of quality: some excellent, constructive, critical, encouraging and supportive which have helped us to develop our work.

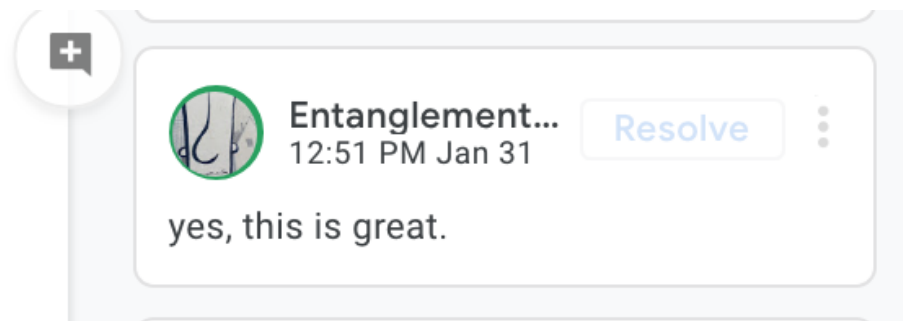


Other review experiences are best captured by the figure of '#reviewer2': petty, pedantic, critical, short, nasty, unhelpful and, occasionally, destructive. The figure of #reviewer2 does not haunt us alone. The '[Reviewer 2 must be stopped](#)' Facebook page has over 17,274 members, at time of writing, and parody Twitter accounts like [Grumpy Reviewer](#) provide examples of the sorts of comments attributed to #reviewer2 as well as exasperated author responses. It is perhaps not surprising that last Halloween 2018 dressing up as #reviewer2 became a [meme](#) amongst academics on Twitter.

While these parodies are themselves a form of resistance and a fun way of responding to an experience many of us feel we have little control over, we also know, informally in swapping stories with each other, that such negative experiences of peer review lead to manuscripts being abandoned and to self-confidence being shattered, a scarce commodity often painstakingly scaffolded at all career stages.

In setting up *entanglements*, we were sure that we did not want to reproduce such toxic dynamics, and knew from positive experiences of peer review that it could be done differently.

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At the end of the day peer review is about feedback, and feedback is a form of communication. It is a form of communication that is vital for learning and development. To go back to an older and seminal piece of writing on feedback, Gregory Bateson reminds us that 'whatever the system adaptive change depends on *feedback loops*... in all cases, then, there must be a process of *trial and error* and a mechanism of *comparison*' (Bateson, 1972, p. 278).

We might argue that contemporary knowledge systems have become very good at creating spaces in which the practice of comparison proliferates (think journal rankings, research audits, university rankings) to the detriment of spaces for trial and error, for experimentation, and failure. Or rather, spaces in which trial and error, for experimentation and for failure and subsequent learning from, can be safely practised as part of the process of developing research. And yet, experimentation and failure has a lot



to teach us, indeed research is as much about what works out as it is about what fails to transpire.

In the first two issues of *entanglements* we both carried out the peer feedback of contributions. In preparing this third issue, we noticed that many of our comments in the margins were appreciative in nature ('this is great!', 'I love this idea!'), as well as more critical ('what about...?', 'I'm not sure this works here'). We didn't consciously start off to practice this form of appreciative feedback but when confronted with contributions that were indeed beautiful in places, or could be recognised as gems in the making, our enthusiasm escaped to find refuge in the comment boxes of tracking changes.

Reflecting on our own practice further, we tried to think back to reviews we have received. Often a review might start with an appreciative comment followed by exhaustive (if one is lucky) comments about what is wrong with the article, what is missing, why it doesn't work. A deficit model of reviewing in other words. If we think about the review process as a form of communication and building of community, why not also point out and name what we think are the strengths and pleasures of a text or audiovisual composition?

In engaging colleagues in the inaugural editorial board we formulated a rough version of this practice as 'peer feedback' describing it as a work-in-progress. We described it as having a conversation with the authors and also being part of the process of helping authors/contributors to the journal bring ideas to fruition. Our aim is to build words, images and practices of and for multimodality, something which at this stage is entirely experimental and not normative. It might involve working more intensively with some authors to help them pull out issues, insights and comments in relation to multimodality. It might also mean we have to leave things more open than one might in a more conventional journal. We are not looking for the 'final word' on a topic. As we wrote in [a recent reflective piece](#) about setting up *entanglements*: the contributions to the journal are essays; they are tries.

In this sense, peer feedback is about nurturing collegiality, something which in the current academic moment often feels like a scarce resource, and therefore a political issue. To nurture, to care, to be concerned is also, like feminists have long argued, a distinctly political position, and one by which we are happy to stand firmly. Many of the toxic dynamics that come out of peer review, we believe, are part of a more structural violence practised in the neoliberal university. As Mark Fisher, an author we both admire, [put it](#) and we in turn borrowed his words to communicate the ethos of peer feedback to the editorial board: "We need to learn, or re-learn how to build comradeship and solidarity instead of doing capital's work for it by condemning and abusing each other".



References

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