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# A 'love song and lament': walking the pandemic city with a spray can

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# A 'love song and lament': walking the pandemic city with a spray can

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During these last two winter lockdowns, one of us took to pounding the London pavements. Walking the city with a camera in hand is something of a long personal habit of mine (Melissa) that took on a new meaning during lockdown. It became a way to create space beyond a small home/flat, shrunk further by the pandemic. During these walks, sometime in early winter, I started to notice love-graffiti in various parts of my neighbourhood and adjacent areas: on steps, on sidewalks, on phone booths, on garage doors in the city and by the water. In early winter, it was fresh, it was bright red, and it was vibrant. This piece of graffiti has an air of slap-dash about it. It is messy and, while perhaps not as thoughtless as slap-dash implies, it is certainly arbitrary and most definitely mundane. It is not especially beautiful compared to much of London's street art, and it certainly does not pop up in any online search for 'London love graffiti'. Iconic it is probably not. It is a scribble of the sort once made in the margins of school books. Yet, perhaps its messiness and marginality also make it arresting, worthy enough of a click and post.



Fig. 1 December 2020, somewhere in central London. Photo by Melissa Nolas.

The pandemic has given rise to many affects: anger, distance, grief, hurt, fear, longing, and rage—and yes, why not love, too, together with hope and ‘reinvention’ ([Errázuriz and Greene, 2020](#)). Necessity invites invention and, for multimodal ethnographers, the pandemic has also foregrounded and accelerated the play and experimentation ([Herbert, 2020](#); [Martinez, Berglund and Estalella, 2020](#)) that lies at the heart of multimodality-ness. Indeed, it is this willingness to experiment that succeeds in capturing the current moment. For example, and in this issue, Francisco Martínez and colleagues engage in what they call ‘a many hands ethnography’, a sort of ‘call-and-response’ fieldnote that weaves together themes and images of proximity and distance, of many hands and many voices, the here with the there, the before with the now and the after. The result is a polyvocal ‘récit’ that captures something of the pandemic’s braided affects.

This is exactly the sort of experimentation that *entanglements* was set up to foster and to create space for, and the current issue is a particularly rich one. Multivocal reviews of sonic ethnographies, récits engaging with poetry, photography, film, archives, and expériences of the visual and of hypermedia: all pieces testing the boundaries of visually and acoustically mediated dialogues and collaborations. Our ‘mushrooms at the end of the issue’ include two wonderful and inspiring projects. The first, the ‘Making Data-Stories’, a section edited by Penelope Papailias and produced by Constantinos Diamantis, a fantastic collection emerging from the exciting and innovative Making Data-Stories confestival in Volos, Greece that took place in May 2019. The second, the second and third installments of the equally inspiring ‘Anthropology of/in/at home’, edited by Francisco Martínez, Eeva Berglund and Adolfo Estalella (the first issue of which was featured in issue 3.2), a testament to the ever-inventiveness and creativity of ethnographic practice.

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Revisiting *entanglements* three years on, we realised that we never actually articulated what ‘experimental’ means to us. It has been the opportunity to present the journal and its story so far, to a number of different audiences over the last couple of months (you can hear this story [here](#) and [here](#)), that has prompted us to do some of this meta-thinking and to articulate our theories-in-practice. In brief here, much of what has happened to create this online publishing space we call *entanglements* has emerged in *the many staged acts of doing* publishing. This is not unlike artistic practice where knowledge emerges in and through practice (Fisher and Fortnum, 2013). The journal’s ‘origin story’, as it were, is one of following ‘[desire lines](#)’ (Nolas and Varvantakis, 2019). Taking inspiration from our own struggles with what it might mean, epistemologically and methodologically, to do multimodal research (and building on that perspiration) we made the journey from researchers to organisers, of [workshops](#) for thinking through what multimodal analysis might do and look like, to founders and editors of a journal that continues those conversations started in the field and taken to the workshops. Neither of us had made such a journey before; much of what has happened and what we invite in the journal pages is experimental, by which, looking back on our own editorials and practice, we



mean: trying things out (*essai*), failing and trying again, being open, working together with uncertainty and not knowing, and importantly, playing with all these things along the way.



Fig 2. January 2021, somewhere on the Thames. Photo by Melissa Nolas.

All of this has involved collaboration with a plural and ever-expanding 'each other'. Over the last three years, we have, in conversation with our editorial board and amongst ourselves as a team, introduced and tried out ideas such as the peer-feedback, the polyvocal reviews, the collaborative 'mushrooms at the end of the journal', and most recently, setting up of the [EASA network for multimodal ethnography](#). We envisage a network that continues these conversations in a playful manner as we all weave our way through a multimodality that is simultaneously old/new, analogue/digital, low tech/high tech, in person/at a distance, and which, while embedded in an anthropological association, embraces transdisciplinarity. We know that a considerable amount of multimodal practice takes place outside the academy and we have a lot to learn from colleagues in practice, whatever their disciplinary background. We would like to

thank everyone who has supported this endeavour to date: those who have taken the time to write, who have joined, who are there to support and be part of the beautiful and open and plural thing that multimodal ethnography is.

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In practice, all of this is a bit like clothes shopping on the contemporary high-street; it involves trying a lot of things on for size, at many different outlets, until there is a 'fit', or if there isn't one 'hacking' to fit. Running *entanglements*, from the conceptual to the organisational and the technical, involves a certain amount of 'hacking'<sup>1</sup>: of budgets to begin with, of no budgets to go on with, of the technical affordances of Wordpress (all kudos to Robyn Long, our production manager, and her code writing!), of time, of language, of images and videos, and of working together as a distributed team of editors, editorial board advisers, production manager, and editorial and production assistants, and of course, authors. This is a hacking of the media ecologies we are using, as Penelope Papailias puts it in this issue (Papailias, 2021). But it is also a 'hacking' of the taken-for-granted ways of doing and relating within social science research and its infrastructures (Loveless, 2019). From action research to ethnomethodology and 'experimental collaborations' (Estalella and Criado, 2018), there is a long tradition in the social sciences of 'hacking' the social, the organisational, and institutional, of upending certainties, and working with [emergence](#) (Otto, 2018). These traditions of experimentation are about understanding the world and changing it in equal measure. For us to experiment is to be attuned to, and push, the *epistemological* possibilities in fieldwork, in communication, in representation, and in analysis. But it is also to push the *relational* possibilities of working together, not just with our interlocutors, important though that is (Estalella and Criado, 2018) but also with each other. The point is, and what we're trying to capture, is that experimentation invites the (vulner)ability to sit with the discomforts and joys of the imperfect and unfinished and of wandering and wondering.

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Anna Lisa Ramella for pointing this out to us.



Fig 3. September 2020, somewhere on the Regent's Canal. Photo by Melissa Nolas.

In this sense, the journal (as a practice, as a space, as an infrastructure) shares something with the current pandemic. It is 'infected' (Urry, 2000) by the figure of the nomad and nomadic thought (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980): it is 'an opening rather than a closing' (Law, 2004, p. 2) and a space of nomadic thought in so far as that might be understood as a replacement of 'the closed equation of representation,  $x = x = \text{not } y$  ( $I = I = \text{not you}$ ) with an open equation:  $\dots + y + z + a + \dots$  ( $\dots + \text{arm} + \text{brick} + \text{window} + \dots$ )' (Massumi, 2004, p. 16). Above all, it is a space that is populated with 'vulnerable readings [that] resist disciplinary enclosure', readings that refuse 'to restrict in advance in how and where one might wander through textual engagement' (Singh, 2018, p. 22), including a resistance to defining, too early, multimodal ethnography itself. *entanglements* is a space in which to practise becoming 'capable of response' to 'mixed up times' (Haraway, 2016, p. 1) and mixed up modes and media, a response we hope offers another way of doing writing, reading, viewing, hearing, and conversation amongst each other. We try out *things* to see if and how they work, what resonance they may or may not have; this is a practice that is largely missing from our increasingly Taylorised places of work. And we try to maintain



an informality to all of this: an informality that makes it possible to hack and to tinker, to play with the unknown. It is a space in which we learn to do things together, a space in which not knowing is a benefit and a value to be embraced.

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While the [EASA network for multimodal ethnography](#) will belong to and be shaped by its members, on a more personal level the news that our application had been successful felt like a breath of fresh air in a year that otherwise has been pretty grim. This issue has come about despite periods of primary school and nursery closures in both our countries (and their knock-on effects on family life and on the working day) and despite working in a university-site in the throes of restructuring—and all the additional anxiety, grief and emotional and organising labour that creates. While the journal is not affiliated or supported by an institution, we are. This is not insignificant.



Fig 4. May 2021, the same somewhere from earlier in central London. Photo by Melissa Nolas.

Walking past the same garage door in central London five months later, the words ‘Love is All’ have been scribbled out; not by the spray-can wielding wanderer, we imagine, but by the management company of the leasehold block of flats above the garage door. If the original

scribble was somewhat banal, its erasure is downright ugly. And so with ill-conceived restructuring that follows market logics of commodification, and dehumanises the relationships of knowledge generation. It is a market logic that risks the erasure of the marginal and the messy, of the unsure and the tentative, of openness and not knowing: the very conditions for experimentation and the risk-taking that requires. Under such conditions, the question we find ourselves going back to is this: how do we keep doing what we love?



Fig 5. May 2021, the same somewhere from earlier on the Thames. Photo by Melissa Nolas.

If to speak of love in relation to teaching is taboo (hooks, 2003, p. 127), then to speak of it in research is forbidden—though it shouldn't be. We do not have an answer to the question, though we feel compelled to keep asking it. We close this 'love song and lament' (Loveless, 2019) of an editorial with a scattered thought, a song lyric on a loop, about 'love as politics' (Hardt 2011; Zigon, 2013; see also [Michael Hardt's](#) talk at the European Graduate School, June 2007), that echoes to us as a possible response. And like 'love is all', we leave it sprayed painted on your screen: '[put love in the music man](#)' (and the images, and the words, and the drawings, and the fieldnotes, and the analysis...).



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