Ethical publishing as resistance
Reflections from *plaNext* and the politics of knowledge and space

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What does it mean to publish ethically in a world where knowledge production is shaped by human rights violations, social inequalities, colonial legacies, and systemic exclusions? This reflection draws on ten years of experience with *plaNext*, an open access journal created by the Young Academics Network of the Association of European Schools of Planning to support early career scholars. It explores how ethical publishing can act as a form of resistance to dominant academic norms, the marginalization of alternative epistemologies, and the politicization of knowledge. Through personal and collective experiences, the article examines *plaNext*'s commitment to academic freedom, equity, decolonisation, and inclusivity, expressed through practices such as voluntary management, half-blind peer review, and a justice-based ethical policy. It also addresses the challenges of sustaining these principles within the constraints of institutional expectations, the publishing industry, and global crises. Ethical publishing, it argues, is not about pretentious neutrality but about taking a principled stance in support of marginalized voices, critical scholarship, and transformative knowledge production. Whether this vision remains viable is an open question that *plaNext* and many other international journals must continue to examine.

Keywords: plaNext, ethical publishing, epistemic justice, resistance, academic freedom

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Introduction

The 2010 Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) Young Academics (YA) conference in Prague, themed "Space is Luxury," was more than a scholarly gathering. It marked a moment of intellectual and political awakening for me. It was there that I joined the inspiring YA network and presented a paper, titled "Conservation under Occupation in the Historic City of Nablus." In that work, I explored how cultural heritage in Palestine is not merely a matter of presentation, but a deeply politicized terrain shaped by both settler colonialism and acts of resistance. Cultural heritage, whether embodied in a historic building, landscape, tradition, or a language, is not a static relic of the past. Rather, it is a living medium through which communities orient themselves in space and time, assert identity, and contest erasure.

These early reflections on the politicization of the past and its entanglement with identity and memory would later inspire the theme of the 8th YA conference, "Cities that Talk," held in 2014 at the University of Gothenburg. The theme resonated with a global wave of urban unrest that challenged governments and planning systems across diverse contexts. These included the Arab Spring, which called for democratic reforms and an end to authoritarian regimes, the London Riots, which exposed racial injustice and economic marginalization, anti-austerity protests in Greece and Southern Europe, the Chilean student movement against inequality and privatization, Black Lives Matter's call for racial justice, Nigeria's #EndSARS protests against police brutality, and the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, which resisted the imposition of a singular heritage narrative, and defended the pluralistic memory embedded in Istanbul's urban fabric. These movements, though varied in their origins and demands, shared a common thread: they revealed how urban space is a site of contestation, where planning practices intersect with struggles for justice, recognition, and democratic participation. Many of these themes were explored during the conference and later formed the basis of the first volume of *plaNext[1],* published in 2015.

Now, ten years later, this editorial journey has accumulated a rich archive of experiences, challenges, and reflections. As the *plaNext* Editorial Board prepared for a transition, we recognised the importance of documenting this legacy. One outcome of that discussion is this special issue, and I am grateful to the current editors for curating this volume that both reflects on the past and looks towards the future of the journal.

This paper is not merely a retrospective on editorial practice. Drawing on my long-standing engagement with the politics of memory and identity in heritage discourse and planning research, it is also a meditation on how memory, both personal and collective, shapes the intellectual and ethical commitments that underpin scholarly publishing. In what follows, I reflect on the principles that guided *plaNext*, the dilemmas we encountered, and the evolving role of academic publishing in a world where neutrality is often neither possible nor desirable.

Scholarly activism

In 2015, together with the inspiring coordination team of YA's network, we founded the *plaNext journal—Next Generation Planning*. I was honoured to be elected as its first Editor-in-Chief (EiC). From the outset, we approached publication with a critical lens, comparing international journals in terms of their publication policies, audiences, and review mechanisms. Our goal was not simply to create another academic journal, but to transform knowledge production into a tool for equity and inclusion. This was shaped by both personal and collective experiences— particularly the challenges we faced as young scholars trying to access international journals. We were perhaps inspired by Paulo Freire's transformative pedagogy, as we sought to empower ourselves and our peers to gain confidence and find a voice in planning

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[1] https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/issue/view/1

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debates. Knowledge production should thus be concepved as a tool for liberation, not oppression (Freire, 2000). Over time, what began as a practical response to exclusion evolved into a form of scholarly activism. We became increasingly concerned not only with what was being published, but also with how, why, and for whom knowledge was being produced.

From the beginning, we committed to managing the journal on a voluntary basis, with no publication fees and a streamlined publication process. This was a deliberate challenge to the dominant academic publishing industry—not only to the commercial publishers who control most high-impact journals, but also to the profit-driven models that create barriers for both readers and authors. We also questioned the prevailing blind peer review system, which we saw as reinforcing exclusionary practices and hidden hierarchies. While we recognized the competitiveness of academic publishing and the experience gap between young and senior scholars, we were particularly concerned about how intimidating the blind review process could be for early-career academics.

To address this, we introduced a half-blind peer review system. In this model, authors' identities were disclosed to reviewers, while reviewers could choose to remain anonymous or not. Many reviewers opted to reveal their names, especially since *plaNext journal* maintained a strict communication policy: all exchanges between authors and reviewers were mediated by the Editorial Board. This approach fostered a more transparent and constructive review process. Publishing several articles through this model was a refreshing and empowering experience. At some stage, we felt that we were moving beyond the gatekeeping culture of prestige journals, which often rely on high rejection rates to maintain exclusivity. At other stages, we were challenged by the demands of the traditional education and university systems that value publications in indexed journals. We therefore initiated the plans to have *plaNext* indexed by several environments, including Scopus.

Back to the voluntary system of management. One of the challenges that we faced from the beginning of the journal is how to negotiate our unstructured project with the then AESOP's emerging digital platform, InPlanning. While the platform offered a promising environment and valuable support for the publication of *plaNext*, it was also highly structured, bureaucratic, and costly. These conditions conflicted with our core principle of informality and voluntary labour. As doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers, we were navigating intense workloads and uncertain career transitions. Our time was limited and unpredictable, and our communication methods were necessarily informal and adaptive. Eventually, AESOP transitioned away from InPlanning for unrelated reasons, and *plaNext journal* was integrated into the AESOP website. This shift and the continuous support we received from AESOP leadership gave us greater flexibility and space to operate according to our values. Despite the many challenges, the unwavering commitment of the Editorial Board made our voluntary model not only viable but deeply meaningful. It was a journey marked by both setbacks and successes—but above all, by a shared belief in the transformative power of ethical publishing.

Academic freedom and the ethics of engagement

As part of our broader commitment to scholarly activism, we came to understand that academic publishing is not merely a technical process. It is deeply ethical and inherently political. This realization shaped our vision for *plaNext*, which we articulated as follows: "*plaNext* provides prospective authors with an opportunity to engage their ideas in international planning debates, as well as to make their research available to the wider planning audience.[2]"

At the heart of this vision lies the principle of academic freedom. This refers not only to the right to speak, but also to the right to be heard (Bacevic, 2021). This is especially critical for

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[2] https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/index

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scholars whose work challenges dominant geopolitical narratives or emerges from contexts of marginalisation. In an era when universities face multiple crises, defending academic freedom has become more urgent than ever. Within the context of *plaNext*, we interpreted this freedom as the right of early-career scholars to participate meaningfully in international planning debates, particularly in a field where Northern paradigms often dominate and depoliticize local knowledge systems.

Although we may not have always framed it explicitly or interpreted uniformly, the Editorial Board viewed ethical publishing as a means of supporting politically engaged scholarship, even when such work was uncomfortable or controversial. We made conscious efforts to recognize the positionality of authors, the structural inequalities embedded in the publishing industry, and the colonial legacies that continue to shape planning and related disciplines. Scholars working under occupation, in authoritarian regimes, or within underfunded institutions often face censorship, surveillance, or institutional exclusion. Yet their perspectives are essential to understanding the very systems that marginalize them.

At the same time, we took a principled stance against publishing research that functioned as propaganda, particularly from institutions complicit in colonial practices or human rights violations (Allard-Tremblay, 2023). The challenge was always in determining a legitimate and consistent basis for assessing the ethical context of a manuscript. To navigate these complexities and ensure a rigorous foundation for our decisions, we developed an ethical policy grounded in academic freedom and human rights[3]. After many discussions and even external reviews, the policy document developed into a comprehensive framework that outlines the journal's core values and operational principles, emphasizing democracy, human rights, academic integrity, and inclusivity. It is structured around key areas such as editorial responsibilities, authorship, conflicts of interest, data sharing, and ethical oversight. The policy guides decisions on manuscript handling, reviewer selection, and community engagement, with a strong stance against discrimination, bias, and complicity in human rights violations. It also defines clear protocols for complaints, appeals, and post-publication corrections, while promoting transparency, accountability, and respect for intellectual property .

This experience also brought us face to face with a persistent paradox in academic publishing: the expectation that scientific journals remain apolitical, even when they engage with fields that are inherently political. Planning as a discipline is a politically loaded discourse and practice. It is deeply entangled with questions of power, land, governance, justice, and identity. To claim neutrality in such a context is not only misleading, but potentially complicit in reproducing dominant ideologies. Journals are often exposed to what might be called research propaganda, or a scholarship that presents itself as objective or technical while subtly or overtly legitimizing nationalism, settler colonialism, authoritarianism, or other forms of collective identities constructed through structural violence (e.g. Alam, 2024).

In such cases, the role of the Editorial Board becomes crucial. We are tasked with navigating the fine line between academic freedom and ethical responsibility. But this raises difficult questions. Which political views are acceptable in academic publishing? What competencies should editors have? Should all political positions be treated equally under the banner of free expression? How to distinguish between them and how should we, as editors, deal with work that undermines human rights, erases historical injustices, or perpetuates epistemic violence?

These are not abstract dilemmas. They go to the heart of what it means to uphold academic integrity. If academic freedom is to be meaningful, it must include the freedom to challenge dominant narratives, but it must also be grounded in a commitment to "truth," justice, and accountability. In this sense, neutrality is not the absence of politics but a political position in

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[3] https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/about

itself, often one that favors the status quo. As editors, we came to understand that ethical publishing does not mean avoiding politics but rather engaging with it critically and transparently. It means being willing to take a stand when scholarship is used to obscure oppression or legitimize harm, while also creating space for diverse and dissenting voices that are often excluded from mainstream academic discourse.

Certainly, implementing it was not, and it would never be, a straightforward task. Concepts like justice and human rights are usually interpreted differently across contexts. At the same time, we, the Editorial Board members, engaged in cases using different perspectives and positions. We often found ourselves in lengthy discussions about how to handle ethically problematic submissions. On the one hand, we wanted to support authors in publishing their work. On the other hand, we were committed to upholding our ethical policy. As Santos (2014) reminds us, publishing is embedded in power relations that determine whose knowledge is legitimized and whose is marginalized. Ethical publishing, therefore, must be attentive to what he calls the "politics of representation," especially when dealing with contested geographies and politically sensitive research. In this context, "representation" should not refer to any uncritical distribution of voices and values. It is, however, analytically important to reveal the silenced or even the violent voices.

The challenge was how to sustain these discussions when most of us were already overwhelmed by teaching, research, and the sheer volume of submissions. However, the friendly and respectful environment we cultivated within the *plaNext* Editorial Board was helpful. Not only in navigating difficult conversations, but also in supporting one another through the practical demands of editorial work. When the review process was delayed due to conflicting reviewer reports, lack of available reviewers, or other logistical issues, members of the Editorial Board often stepped in to complete reviews themselves. This collective commitment helped us keep the review process moving forward.

In the final years of my tenure, as we prepared to transition to a new editorial team, *plaNext* experienced several bottlenecks. Managing this transition was particularly difficult, given that all editorial work was done voluntarily, often by young academics navigating the demands of PhD studies or the instability of academic careers. During this period, I was also personally and professionally affected by the ongoing genocide in Gaza. While we continued to strive for ethical integrity in our published volumes, witnessing such atrocities unfold in real time made it increasingly difficult to make sense of many established debates on ethics, human rights, and democracy. Like many other international scholars, I felt powerless to intervene and disheartened by the absence of a meaningful response from the global academic and political communities. As a result, reconciling my editorial efforts with the realities of global injustice became increasingly fraught. At times, our work felt urgently necessary, not because it was apolitical, but because it aimed to challenge the illusion of neutrality and to center justice as a guiding principle. At other times, it felt painfully inadequate, a reminder of the limits of academic work in confronting systemic violance.

Engaging platform

Young academics often expressed a desire to continue the conversations initiated at YA conference. Presenters are often allocated generous time to engage in meaningful discussions not only with peers but also with senior academics. With an open and dialogic atmosphere, participants are encouraged to explore each other's work in depth and build intellectual connections. This has been helpful for many to leave YA conferences with inspiring networks and aspirations for additional discussions.

plaNext emerged as a response to this need. It offered a platform for conference participants to further develop and publish their papers, incorporating feedback received during the event.

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This process allowed young scholars to refine their arguments and solidify their contributions to the field of planning. It also ensured that valuable research is published after the conference, especially given the challenges many early-career academics face in navigating the publication landscape while managing demanding thesis work.

Each YA conference typically features around forty full paper presentations, organised into thematic sessions. Session chairs were invited to nominate the two strongest papers from each session for potential publication. While this form of recognition was appreciated by many, some experienced young scholars—particularly those under institutional pressure to publish in high-ranking journals—chose to decline the invitation. In such cases, the Editorial Board extended invitations to other promising papers from the same sessions. It was not uncommon for about half of the invited papers to drop out during the review process due to illness, doctoral workload, or personal circumstances. We often maintained close contact with authors, sending reminders and offering support to re-engage them in the process. This proactive approach helped several authors complete their revisions and successfully publish their work.

Looking back at the process, this also raises important questions about how to balance academic quality with *plaNext*'s commitment to inclusivity and mentorship. Selecting "best papers" may unintentionally reinforces hierarchies. Such a dynamic sits somewhat uneasily with *plaNext*'s broader ethos of supporting early-career scholars in a non-competitive, developmental environment. What alternative models of selection can be developed to protect *plaNext*'s values of inclusion, equity, care, and collective growth is an important question that the new Editorial Board might need to explore.

As part of its mission to foster dialogue between young and senior academics, *plaNext* also invited keynote speakers from the conference to co-lead the review process and co-author the editorial with members of the conference organizing committee. I had the pleasure of collaborating with Jeffery Hou from the University of Washington for the first volume (Hou & Hammami, 2025), and with Vanessa Watson and Chandrima Mukhopadhyay for volume eleven (Mukhopadhyay & Hammami, with Watson, 2021). It was a rewarding experience, both intellectually and personally, and a valuable opportunity to learn from important scholars in the field. Many other young academics have similarly benefited from *plaNext*, using it to engage in meaningful scholarly conversations and to build professional networks.

Feedback as empowerment

From the very beginning of *plaNext*, one of the core principles guiding the editorial work was the importance of constructive feedback. We recognized that traditional peer review often acts as a gatekeeping mechanism, reinforcing academic hierarchies and excluding non-mainstream scholarship. At *plaNext*, we reimagined peer review as a collaborative and educational process. Feedback was not only a tool for improving manuscripts; it was also a way to build confidence, encourage critical thinking, and support intellectual development. Providing meaningful feedback was not always straightforward. We often debated how much feedback we could realistically offer and how to synthesize reviewer comments into a coherent editorial response.

Over time, we embraced the principle that every submitted manuscript deserved a fair opportunity for review. Rejecting a submission without review, we believed, might contradict the ethical policy of *plaNext* journal. Rather than lowering standards, we sought to navigate the balance between academic rigor and developmental support. For example, we welcomed work that was politically engaged, methodologically innovative, or grounded in lived experience. At the same time, we remained committed to rejecting propaganda research or submissions that failed to meet basic scholarly integrity.

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That said, we also recognized the ethical dilemma posed by a no-rejection policy. In many academic contexts, it is both reasonable and necessary to protect the time and labor of peer reviewers by filtering out submissions that clearly fall outside a journal's scope or quality threshold. At *plaNext*, however, we experimented with a different model. In this, we tried to develop a different editorial engagement prior to peer review. This often involved providing feedback that focus on the potential of papers, specific revisions that advance quality, and encourage resubmission. While this approach was deeply supportive and aligned with our mission, we acknowledge that it may not be scalable or feasible in more conventional or high-volume publishing environments.

This commitment to ethical publishing was particularly important when dealing with politically sensitive or contested topics. We took this responsibility seriously and worked to ensure that our editorial decisions did not reinforce the very hierarchies we aimed to challenge. In this spirit, our pre-review engagement with authors was not only about improving manuscripts but about fostering a more just, dialogical, and inclusive academic culture.

But once again, our work is based on voluntary principles, and the review process was managed manually. Manuscripts were submitted via email, and the review process was coordinated manually by the Editorial Board. While this system allowed for flexibility and personal engagement, it became increasingly difficult to manage as the journal grew. The workload was shared among Board members, and we supported one another through periods of high pressure. When someone was overwhelmed by professional or personal responsibilities, others stepped in to help.

Despite our dedication, there were initiatives we hoped to implement but never fully realized. One of these was to involve the broader YA network more directly in supporting the journal's operations. As a volunteer-run initiative, it was essential to make effective use of the network's resources. For example, we needed to digitize our workflows, develop a communication strategy, create a consistent journal template, and improve language editing support. These goals could have been achieved through closer collaboration with YA members, but unfortunately, we did not manage to formalize that connection.

plaNext recently celebrated the development of a website-based submission system, which helped improve the effectiveness of editorial work and improved the communication between authors and the Editorial Board. It has taken us some time to familiarise ourselves with the system, and some of us took the responsibility of managing it. In all cases, we should certainly thank authors and reviewers for the patience and trust that *plaNext* Editorial Board received from them.

Equity, access, and the politics of visibility

As described earlier, *plaNext journal* was created to offer new opportunities for early-career scholars to engage in international planning debates. We also acknowledged that the global academic publishing industry is shaped by deep structural inequalities. These disparities are particularly visible in the marginalization of scholars from the Global South, who often face significant barriers to participation. In our special volume Planning Theories from the Global South[4] (Mukhopadhyay & Hammami, with Watson, 2021), we aimed to highlight these challenges and bring attention to the intellectual and pedagogical gaps in mainstream planning discourses.

These barriers include language constraints, limited funding, restricted access to scholarly networks, and the epistemic violence of having one's work judged by standards that do not reflect local realities or intellectual traditions. It is troubling to observe how Northern discourses

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[4] https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/issue/view/11

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frequently universalize Euro-American urban experiences, sidelining alternative planning epistemologies rooted in indigenous, postcolonial, or conflict-affected contexts. Drawing on Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of "situated knowledges," we envisioned *plaNext* as a space where diverse geographies, epistemologies, and lived experiences could be recognized and valued, particularly those emerging from the Global South and other marginalized communities.

In practice, our ability to realize this vision was limited. We made efforts to diversify our Editorial Board, reviewer pool, publication topics, and the positionalities of *plaNext* authors. However, these efforts were shaped by the reality that most members of the Editorial Board and the YA network were based in European universities, due to their affiliation with AESOP. Perhaps this is a question to be explored with AESOP leadership? But we, despite these constraints, remained committed to operating on a voluntary basis, waiving publication fees, and prioritizing accessibility over prestige. We also understood that achieving "equity" in publishing requires more than simply including underrepresented voices. It demands a transformation of the structures, languages, and values that define what is considered legitimate knowledge. As Santos (2014) argues, ethical publishing must involve a process of decolonization. This means going beyond representation to challenge the hierarchies embedded in the publishing system itself. It also requires rethinking peer review, editorial criteria, and even the aesthetics of academic writing.

This work was not without its difficulties. One of the persistent challenges we faced was the lack of institutional innovation in addressing academic exclusion and misconduct. Ethical transformation in academia requires more than enforcing rules. It calls for a fundamental rethinking of the structures that shape academic life. This is why, from its inception, *plaNext* sought to reimagine the publishing process as a space of inclusion, dialogue, and epistemic justice. From submission to review to publication, we aimed to create a platform that not only welcomed diverse voices but also questioned the systems that have historically silenced them.

Towards a justice-based ethics of publishing

Academic publishing can often feel isolating, especially for early-career scholars navigating unfamiliar institutional and intellectual terrain. Within the *plaNext* Editorial Board, one of the most meaningful conversations we had was about how to reimagine the review and publication process as a community of practice. We saw the half-blind review model not only as a technical alternative but as an opportunity to foster dialogue, collaboration, and mutual learning among authors, reviewers, and editors. This approach encouraged us to think of publishing as a form of "community work," where ethical engagement and collective responsibility guided our communication and decision-making.

Over time, however, external pressures began to shape our internal practices. The growing demand from authors for indexing and the requirement to join Scopus led us to adopt a double-blinded review process. While this shift was necessary for institutional recognition, it also marked a departure from the more dialogic and transparent model we had initially envisioned. In practice, this change might not appear drastic, but it symbolized a deeper tension. Our principles were continually challenged by the structured relations and hierarchial nature of the academic publishing industry.

The ethical dilemmas we encountered during our editorial work at *plaNext* ultimately led to the development of a formal ethical policy. In addition to the core principles of "good research practice," the policy was guided by a commitment to academic integrity, human rights, and the recognition of historical injustices. It was never an easy task to implement those principles and commitments. As EiC, I was responsible for the initial evaluation of submissions prior to peer review. Following the policy, manuscripts reporting on contexts with histories of settler

colonialism, colonialism, systematic human rights violations, or high levels of corruption were discussed with the Editorial Board before any initial decision was made.

Due to my personal and professional experiences with the Israeli settler colonial regime and the documented complicity of Israeli universities in the illegal occupation of Palestine (e.g. Wind, 2024), I recused myself from handling submissions by Israeli academics. I considered submissions that failed to acknowledge or critically engage with the historical and ongoing realities of settler colonialism in Palestine as unsuitable for publication. In line with the principles of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, which calls for nonviolent pressure on institutions' complicity in human rights violations, I chose to provide my opinion without participating in the publication of any volume that included such a contribution. I held the same critical perspective on manuscripts reporting findings from other contexts of settler colonialism, such as those in South Africa, Australia, Canada, China, and the USA. This editorial stance was grounded in the belief that scholarly work must be accountable to the histories and structures it engages with, particularly when those structures involve dispossession, occupation, or erasure.

These experiences made *plaNext* ethical policy a living document, shaped by the critical cases we encountered and the diverse perspectives within the Editorial Board. Sometimes, our work became complex and time-consuming. Reaching consensus was not always possible, as each Board member brought their own ethical commitments and lived experiences to the table. Voting among the Editorial Board was sometimes a solution. But we often returned to the authors with constructive suggestions. It is also worth mentioning here that the *plaNext* ethical policy was not consistently implemented, which is certainly not unique to *plaNext.* This can be explained by different reasons, ranging from being overwhelmed with other academic and family matters to the difficulty in finding consensus to the relative level of bias that Editorial Board members inevitably hold.

Eventually, ethical publishing, as I came to understand it, is a form of resistance. It is not in opposition to individual authors and institutions—though it might be sometimes so—but in service of more inclusive and accountable scholarly communities. Ethical publishing is also a form of resistance to any attempt that seeks the politicisation of knowledge production.

With the continued support of AESOP leadership, there is now an opportunity to further develop the ethical and justice-oriented principles of *plaNext* as a core part of its identity and publication process. It would be valuable to extend these conversations beyond *plaNext*, engaging the editorial boards of *Transactions*, *Booklet Series*, and other AESOP platforms. Together, these dialogues could help lay a stronger ethical foundation for AESOP's broader scholarly mission.

Looking back, I have gained wonderful relationships and experiences through *plaNext,* including collaboration with young and senior academics, organization of YA conferences and participation in Editorial Board meetings. All of these have been deeply meaningful. It has been a privilege to work alongside such committed and thoughtful colleagues. Following ten inspiring years, I want to warmly thank the entire *plaNext* community for the enriching discussions, the friendships, and the shared laughter. I also extend my best wishes to the new Editorial Board as they carry this work forward, with care, courage, and a continued commitment to justice.

Acknowledgment

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This article was written during a time of profound grief and injustice, as the genocide in Palestine continues to unfold. I write these words with a heavy heart, aware of the limits of academic work in the face of such violence, yet convinced that silence is not an option. I dedicate this contribution to all those who continue to resist erasure and silencing, and to the belief that publishing, too, can be a space for solidarity and justice.

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