

MAT *Medicine Anthropology Theory*

EDITORIAL NOTE

Medicine Anthropology Theory now Edinburgh *MAT* Editorial Collective

One morning early in summer 2019, a group of colleagues in the Edinburgh Centre for Medical Anthropology met to discuss the call for new editors issued by *Medicine Anthropology Theory*'s founding editors, Vinh-Kim Nguyen and Eileen Moyer. *MAT*'s status as the sole open-access journal in medical anthropology, its role as a forerunner of original and timely research, and its value as a venue in which many of us had published spurred our enthusiasm to bring the journal here to Edinburgh. We are honoured to have become *MAT*'s new home.

Underlying our motivation to get involved was a recognition of the fundamental worth of open-access publishing. For far too long, research has been inaccessible to both taxpayers, who provide public funding, and scholars based in low-income countries, where a significant amount of medical anthropology, medical, and public health research is carried out. In light of this disparity, we at *MAT* firmly believe in the dual imperatives to foreground research conducted by scholars from the Global South and to make research from around the world accessible to readerships in spaces unable to afford costly journal subscriptions. Attending to these commitments – to internationalize both authorship and readership – is vital to sustaining the field's political, ethical, and theoretical relevance in the years to come.

We are also, however, acutely aware of the potential ethical pitfalls of a business model that cannot rely on commercialised funding streams to pay for the necessary labour involved in producing a high-quality academic journal. At that 2019 meeting, we agreed that, were *MAT* to move to Edinburgh, we would need to devise a clear agenda for what open-access publishing means in a moment when feminist and decolonial perspectives encourage us to reflect upon academia's historical legacies and contemporary complicity with systemic inequalities.

Together, and in close consultation with the previous editors, we have written a collective ethos statement, [which can be read on the journal's website](#). It outlines a set of guiding principles for accessible, inclusive, fair, ethical, and sustainable publishing, with the aforementioned effort to internationalise being just one commitment made in the name of excellence in scholarship and ethical collaboration. A first step will be the establishment of a new International Advisory Board, with the full list of members to be announced on our website in the coming weeks.

On a practical level, our efforts to cultivate a distributed system of labour means that we will run the journal as an Editorial Collective, with no 'Editor at Large' figurehead. So as to eliminate unpaid and informal labour, we have instituted a requirement that all members of our Editorial Collective must have secure employment, in our cases, through the University of Edinburgh. The *MAT* Editorial Collective is immensely grateful for the outstanding (and volunteered) intellectual leadership of our Section Editors: Martha Lincoln and Tom Widge (Position Pieces), Rosie Sims (Field Notes), Liz Cartwright (Photo Essays), and Bridget Bradley (Reviews). You can read more about the sections that these editors helm [here](#). We are committed to ensuring that future Section Editors are formally employed so as to not rely upon or overextend a precarious workforce. Other journal staff, including our outstanding Assistant Editor, Cristina Moreno Lozano, and excellent Copy Editor, Leah Eades, are paid for their labour. We no longer accept volunteers and interns to support the journal's administrative and production work.

The above decisions are not without drawbacks, but we have made them in recognition of the many instances in which precariously employed (usually junior) scholars are called upon to complete uncompensated labour under the promise that it will be a good learning experience. A large and experienced editorial team will allow us to provide dedicated support to junior scholars in developing their academic authorship, arguably a more important area for advancing careers than voluntary administrative work. And we are actively developing ways to work with junior scholars and to provide insights into the editorial process without putting people in positions that could, however inadvertently, be compromised by unequal power dynamics.

The *MAT* ethos statement is a work in progress. We do not claim to have fulfilled all the goals it espouses and we have already discovered that it is often impossible to avoid moral compromises and small failures. But this document provides a cogent set of principles to help guide our decision-making and editorial judgement as we seek to develop a sustainable business model for the journal and safeguard its future.

The current moment

The Spring of 2020 is a strange time to be writing an editorial for our first issue of *MAT*. Seemingly overnight, the COVID-19 global pandemic has transformed our medical and social worlds in ways that we cannot yet comprehend. Each of us – Collective members, *MAT* authors, staff, and readers – have been impacted by the pandemic in different ways; no one has been untouched. We can probably speak for all our readers when we say that, over recent weeks, we have found it near impossible to think about or engage in anything else other than the outbreak and its social, medical, political, and professional ramifications, which are unfolding in our homes, our workplaces, and our virtual mediascapes as we write this.

The COVID-19 outbreak and the response to it by governments, companies, and publics around the world raises questions that have been at the heart of the concerns and interests of *MAT* since its inception. These include fundamental questions about health equity, and we are already seeing the reproduction and entrenching of old inequalities in the global scramble for essential medical supplies, which is potentially locking African governments out of the market for life-saving equipment. Fundamental questions about changing relationships between science and society, which regularly appear in these pages, are posed in new ways by the heightened prominence given to epidemiology in practices of governance, and by public funding for the rapid commercial development of new medical products. And, as the spatial arithmetic of social interaction is iteratively reconfigured by experts, governments, and families, questions about relationships between health, sociality, and kinship – all classic *MAT* concerns – have never been so important.

Past medical anthropology scholarship is one place to start in untangling these emerging questions. This journal has already published a substantial corpus of material on outbreaks, epidemics, and infectious diseases, and we recently featured [a ‘virtual’ special issue on the topic](#), put together by Cristina Moreno Lozano. Moreover, in this issue, to launch what will inevitably be years of conversation and debate, we feature a think piece by Barbara Gerke on what we can learn about experiences of COVID-19 from local epidemic imaginaries in a Tibetan exile community in North India. But the radical social changes that are being wrought in our encounters with COVID-19 are so far-reaching and potentially long-lasting that it would be foolhardy to suggest we have already anticipated all the problems and conceptual issues that will arise, much less offer answers. As medical anthropologists and fellow travellers, we feel both compelled and equipped to respond to the current situation. But it is important that our responses are informed, considered, and careful, and that we harness the slow methods, reflexive ethics, and theoretical agility that underpin our discipline and define our unique vantage on the current crisis. As such, we have deferred more substantial engagement for

subsequent issues, in which we hope to foreground a range of ethnographic and theoretical reflections on the global situation from a variety of scholars in the field.

This issue

The vast majority of the work of soliciting and reviewing the content included in the current issue took place under the previous editorial team. We are grateful for the outstanding work they did to pull together such an eclectic and fascinating group of papers. Research papers include Jong-min Jeong's article on ethnographic mapping and the affective qualities of repetitive bodily practices in the context of dementia, Bent Steenberg's article on the structural inequalities that shape immigrants' access to healthcare in the case of Mozambican migrants in Johannesburg, and John Nott's and Anna Harris's article on the material legacies of medical education in contemporary obstetrics teaching in Ghana and the Netherlands.

The issue also includes a Special Section, edited by Dominik Mattes, Bernhard Hadolt, and Brigit Obrist, on 'rethinking sociality and health through transfiguration'. Transfiguration – or the constant unfolding of social arrangements and their figurations – is especially pertinent in a moment when our social modalities are undergoing rapid transformation. The section traces the conceptual contours of transfiguration through articles on a controversy about the status of physical and juridical personhood in biotechnological innovation (Vilar), the transfiguration of disability in the context of ageing in Switzerland (Rickli), the social imaginary of ageing in Dar es Salaam's middle class (Kaiser-Grolimund), and a think piece on the underlying tensions between the different figurations of life entailed in assisted suicide in Switzerland (Neves).

In addition, the issue features three think pieces: on the re-conceptualization of autism as heritage from heritability (Belek), on the cultural ramifications of suicide in Namibia (Boulton), and the aforementioned piece on COVID-19 and Tibetan concepts of contagion in North India (Gerke). Two dissertating essays reflect on the impossibility of ever fully preparing for ethnographic fieldwork (Medeiros) and the role of grief in medical anthropology fieldwork (Panwar). Last, we are delighted to publish a book review by Kaveri Qureshi of Ben Kasstan's *Making Bodies Kosher: The Politics of Reproduction among Haredi Jews in England*. We wish to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the previous editorial team, including Vinh-Kim Nguyen, Eileen Moyer, Erin Matineau, Sarita Jarmack, and the many Section Editors who have devoted hours of time and effort to the journal over the past five years, for creating this extraordinary project and for trusting us with its care.

Edinburgh *MAT* Editorial Collective, April 2020

With thanks to *MAT* Editorial Team members 2014–2019

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