

Urgent Priorities, Slow Scholarship

The *MAT* Editorial Collective

Welcome to the second issue of *MAT* (April) in 2022. Thanks to our wonderful authors and reviewers, you will again find a collection of vital contributions to challenge our thinking at the intersections of medicine, anthropology, and theory. However, the beginning of 2022 has not been easy. As we write this, we seem to emerge from two years of pandemic normality into yet another world, which might become a bit more post-pandemic. But what will this new normality look like? And importantly, for whom? This latter question is especially urgent in the context of vaccine apartheid: the stubborn reality of a global health system undergirded by racial capitalism (Harman et al. 2021). While we seek to map out how an end to restrictions might affect our own lives—and how it might restrict the lives of many—we are entering into another event of historical proportions. The invasion of Ukraine leaves us appalled, overwhelmed again by inordinate knowledge of the horrors of which humans are capable (Das 2021). News from Ukraine affects us in its singularity (Singh 2022) even as we register its kinship with violent conflicts devastating other corners of the world. Given the extent to which humanitarian concern for Ukraine has eclipsed that directed to ongoing emergencies in Ethiopia, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Syria, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus rightly critiques the unequal attention the world gives to Black and White lives (Associated Press 2022).

These public discussions throw us back to 2020, when worldwide protests in the name of Black Lives Matter made us consider how we, as a journal, would be sure to provide space to work exploring racial injustice, health, and medicine, even as we questioned how certain causes gain global prominence where others may not (Harriet Tubman Collective 2017; India Civil Watch 2020). Relatedly, back in 2020 we were also, of course, engaged in conversations about how we would provide space to the COVID-19 pandemic within the journal. For us in the *MAT* Editorial Collective, reflecting now on what we have done in the journal in the last two years feels timely and necessary. As laid out in our April 2020 editorial, we made a conscious decision not to bracket and hem in work on the urgent priorities of our time, by, for example, soliciting dedicated special issues. Rather, we decided to defer our substantive engagement and wait for ethnographic submissions to materialise—submissions that we hoped would draw upon the long-term, considered, and careful observation that constitutes the distinctive vantage point of anthropology (Pigg 2013). As we elaborated in our September 2020 editorial, thinking laterally offers a way of inhabiting our current times anthropologically, a way of moving within the moment rather than trying to move past it.

Two years on, we feel incredibly fortunate to have been able to provide a platform for ethnographically-argued work like Mullard's (2021) challenge to the medical anthropological study of race and racism, provoked by the disproportionalities in COVID-19 mortality in the UK; or Hodge's (2021) piece on social distancing, from the vantage point of her ongoing fieldwork on contraceptive use in the American Midwest, as racialised population management entwined with larger family planning histories of 'de-densification'. These are just two examples from amongst the great many Research Articles, Position Pieces, Field Notes, and Photo Essays we have been able to publish in the last two years which offer important anthropological encounters with urgent priorities of our times. This April 2022 issue adds several other articles to this list, which we will describe below.

Before we look at the contributions to this issue in detail, it's important to add another reason for consciously deciding to defer and wait: to practise a stance of supporting slow scholarship as a feminist politics of resistance to the neoliberal university (Mountz et al. 2015). On this precise point, it would be remiss not to mention another reason why the beginning of 2022 has not been easy for us at the *MAT* Editorial Collective. We write these lines coming out of yet another period of strike action in the higher education sector in the UK. *MAT*'s readership is international, and we don't of course expect everybody to follow industrial relations in the UK (!). However, we must point out the low morale of staff in the sector, given the ever-increasing reliance on precarious employment, low pay, race, gender, and disability pay gaps, and excess workloads, not to mention the outlook on an impoverished retirement. We are acutely aware of the current limited

capacity to uphold the goodwill with which universities—and journals—are run. In the spirit of our ethos statement, and indeed all our other editorials, which attempt to lay bare the machinery of *MAT*, we want to pause to reflect on these material conditions. We offer a huge thanks to everyone involved in making *MAT* tick, especially in these challenging times—backstage, in encouraging submissions, and writing, reviewing, and copyediting, as well as our authors and readers, who receive the frontstage and make it all worthwhile. To turn to the reasons for which we all undertake the labour associated with this journal, we are pleased to bring to you in this issue these further contributions.

This issue

Kristensen, Brodersen, and Jønsson invite the reader to follow them into their fieldwork in general practices and to consider the ‘tyranny of numbers’ of e-health records. Probing the impact of epidemics, Prado asks how the risk of congenital diseases posed by Zika in Brazil has influenced decision making in assisted reproduction, and Jullien and Jeffery search for shifts in the experience and performance of motherhood in COVID-19 Europe. Urapeepathanapong, de Lima Hutchison and Chuengsatiansup shift our attention towards plant diseases to reconceptualise the framework of antibiotic use in Thailand, while Cosby Sams, Grant, Desclaux, and Sow explore the meaning and distribution of the concept of ‘Disease X’ and its entanglement with projections of Africa. Menzfeld adds an insightful Field Note on the silences in the discourse on dying among terminally ill people in China, and MacDonald and Foley’s Position Piece challenges the ‘innovation imperative’ in global health.

We would also like to draw attention to the special section on ‘COVID Crowds’, guest edited by Vaibhav Saria and Pooja Satyogi, which brings together vital new work on density in the context of the pandemic. Earl draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork on mass transit in Ho Chi Minh City to ask how the pandemic has transformed consciousness about crowds and their regulation. Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo bring attention to framing of the ‘essential crowd’, asking how the designation of essential worker has also implicated social death in the pandemic. Finally, Islam, Mookherjee and Khan look at the overlap of crises when considering the impact of COVID-19 on crowded Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. The times may not be happy, but we wish you happy reading.

References

- Associated Press. 2022. 'WHO chief blames racism for greater focus on Ukraine than Ethiopia'. *The Guardian*, April 14, 2022.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/13/who-chief-tedros-ukraine-ethiopia-tigray>.
- Das, Veena. 2021. *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Harman, S., P. Erfani, T. Goronga, J. Hickel, M. Morse, and E. T. Richardson. 2021. 'Global vaccine equity demands reparative justice—not charity'. *BMJ Global Health* 6 (6), e006504. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-006504>.
- Harriet Tubman Collective. 2017. 'Disability Solidarity: Completing the "Vision for Black Lives"'. *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy* 69–72.
- Hodge, C. 2021. 'Density and Danger: Social Distancing as Racialised Population Management'. *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 8 (1): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.17157/mat.8.1.5258>.
- India Civil Watch. 2020. 'Dalit Lives Matter! A Cry to Rage Against the Horrifying Violence of Saffron Terror in India'. *Antipode Online*, October 30, 2020.
<https://antipodeonline.org/2020/10/30/dalit-lives-matter/>.
- Mountz, A., A. Bonds, B. Mansfield, J. Loyd, J. Hyndman, M. Walton-Roberts, and W. Curran. 2015. 'For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance Through Collective Action In The Neoliberal University'. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 14 (4): 1235–59.
<https://www.acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1058>.
- Mullard, J. C. R. 2021. 'Race, Racism and Anthropology: Decolonising Health Inequality in a Time of COVID-19'. *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 8 (1): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.17157/mat.8.1.5112>.
- Pigg, S. L. 2013. 'On Sitting and Doing: Ethnography as Action in Global Health'. *Social Science & Medicine* 99: 127–34.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.07.018>.
- Singh, B. 2022. 'What is an Ethnographic Interview? Thoughts at the Intersection of Anthropology and Psychiatry'. Edinburgh Centre for Medical Anthropology 2022 Annual Lecture, March 11, 2022.