

Spring Editorial

MAT Editorial Collective

You have before you a colossus of an issue of *Medicine Anthropology Theory*. Six Research Articles, two Field Notes, two Position Pieces, a Photo Essay, two Review Essays—and that’s before we even get to the five pieces collected in our Special Section, ‘Beyond Voice,’ guest edited by Kelly Fagan Robinson and Rosie Jones McVey. It may be an odd choice for a Collective of (largely and broadly) qualitative researchers to announce these quantifiers at the outset, not to mention that tried-but-true adage about ‘quality over quantity’. However, we’re calling attention to the size of this issue because of what it indexes, both achievements and challenges. Insofar as this Editorial Collective has tended to give a bit of a peek behind the scenes of the journal in our editorials, the number of pieces collected here reveals something about the journal’s operating conditions.

As many of you may have noticed, the submission pipeline for MAT has been paused since autumn, as the journal has weathered institutional uncertainty amidst sector-wide turbulence within British higher education. And, as many of you know, and as we have written about before, while open-access publishing is done basically on a shoestring compared to the costs and profits associated with organising publication through a major publisher, open access requires labour, which means that it requires a budget. As British universities, even wealthy ones like the University of Edinburgh, have had to reduce their expenditures, our budget was not renewed. We came to the decision that it was no longer ethical to receive manuscripts that we could not guarantee we would have enough lead-time to publish. Hence the closure of our pipeline—which was as disappointing as it was necessary. Under these pressures, however, a remarkable collaborative effort emerged to bring pieces that were already in our pipeline to quick review, revision, production, and publication. This issue is the incredibly successful result of that rush of activity.

We have exciting news to share in the very near future about the next chapter of the journal. To keep in the loop for that announcement, please sign up for our

newsletter here. But for now, please keep your enthusiasm trained on the scholarship collected here, in our Spring Issue, whose breadth and depth bring the best of what MAT has to offer to the page.

Over the five years that the University of Edinburgh has published MAT, it has not been only our sector of work but the world itself that has undergone unforeseeable change. Readers would be right to point to the longstanding colonial and structural inequities that give long roots to the challenges we face today. And yet none of us, at the time of taking on the journal, would have imagined that we would publish our first issues from lockdown. During the pandemic and its variegated isolations, we published dispatches from the times, as our expert readership and authorship sought to make sense of what was happening around the world, to all of us. Five years on: we can see the traces that period has left on our scholarship. Some of this work, like Shani Tra's article in this issue, gives new vantage to an empirical phenomenon that was hard to grasp at the time, however much we tried, due to its unrelenting ubiquity. Only now, with the benefit of time, can we develop the comparative vantage through which ethnographic work apprehends its objects. Working in Vietnam, Tra details the mediated stories of Patient 17 and Patient 19, exposing differences in news coverage and, relatedly, differences in public sympathy for these patients along the lines of gender, race, and citizenship status.

Equally, beyond reports from a new wave of scholarship attending to the pandemic and its aftermath, our field has been marked by concerns heightened, if not inaugurated, by the pandemic. This issue brings together several pieces across disparate sites that reflect and analyse questions of vulnerability and permeability, at once located in the body and in the social. Anita Hardon and colleagues share their findings from research on cumulative toxicities through urban pollution and its chemical, social, and ecological entanglements. Elena Sobrino's Review Essay on the anthropology of toxicity provides readers helpful synthesis across extant anthropological perspectives from phenomenological, activist, and heritage management standpoints. Both contributions begin with the classic anthropological premise that we, as bodies, are not separable from our environments, for better or for worse; living is always living with.

Extending these insights, Simone Grytter and Adam Bencard analyse how patients make sense of part-loss of bodily functionality in a Danish orthopaedic unit. Their work gives a different shade to the permeability of the (social) body that feels so risky under precarious conditions; here, the openness of the body gives patients resources to reckon with the indeterminacy of their own bodies, often working against the anxiety that might otherwise accompany an ableist presumption of bodies' stable functionality. Similarly, in her Field Note from Guatemala, Jillian

Moore shares how the fluidity of illness builds community, rather than only serving as a stand in for fears of contagion. In a context where people rely on community to withstand various ills, such as economic austerity and state abandonment, the permeability of kinship networks to the transience of illness produces collective action, resistance, and belonging. The forms of belonging and solidarity that Moore describes move to more-than-human spaces in Anna Hänni's article on forest therapy in a Swiss in-patient psychiatric setting. There, the porousness of bodies and minds avails sensory worlds where more-than-human actors, like trees, can participate in the amelioration of patients' distress.

The pieces collected in this issue that engage questions of permeability and exposure, then, demonstrate the open-endedness of subjective experience, experience that would be impossible but for being in relation to the surrounding world. However, biomedical and humanitarian infrastructures and epistemologies often elide this immanent indeterminacy. Instead, experts tend to construct knowledge as mastered and hermetic, apart from and therefore at odds with the worldly data it purports to organise, too often with disadvantageous effects for the communities at the receiving end of this expertise. The gap between practitioner knowledge and the knowledge wielded by patients and their kin is felt acutely by the Beninese and Togolese families with whom Carla Naomi Vaucher worked in Switzerland, awaiting congenital heart defect operations for their children. For these parents, the notion of chronicity itself split between biomedical and social understandings. In his article, our MAT-Medicine Anthropology Europe Early Career Researcher Prize winner Joshua Parker Allen expands the aperture of precarity vis-à-vis knowledge production, demonstrating through field research at two biomedical research institutes in Uganda how experts themselves are in vulnerable positions, at the whims of funding allocation. In other words, epistemic distance from local communities doesn't come from nowhere; it is related to researchers' need to secure funding amidst ever-shrinking resources. In a different context, that of precision medicine in the Global North, Mette Svendsen and Olivia Spalletta display the effects of biomedical experts' self-understanding of which 'local' community to which they believe themselves to be beholden. Even in the cash-rich context of cutting-edge precision medicine, precision medicine practitioners and advocates focus their energies on elongating patient lives – a display of what Svendsen and Spalletta call 'non-imagination', as it occludes the ecological consequences of privileging of a patient's life over 'earth-life'.

Purbasha Mazumdar's Field Note illuminates the stakes of these different orientations towards knowledge production, however motivated, for the anthropologist, who is required to translate her concerns through various idioms in order to secure access to a field site. As Mazumdar shows through her reflections on her work at a corporate tertiary care hospital in Southern India, how the

anthropologist articulates these translations leaves residues on her research—as, of course, these initial locutions affect how she is perceived by her interlocutors. And Roanne van Voorst, in a Position Piece discussing premature menopause, pushes us to consider unexpected alignments in patient and practitioner perspectives. Based on her own autoethnographic experience, van Voorst shows how the anthropologist-patient, who may arrive in the clinic feeling critical of biomedicine’s epistemic blinders, may well leave feeling seen and resourced by that very gaze. Situated dialogically, even narrow knowledges become, themselves, porous and open to interpretation. Jean Hunleth and Sienna Ruiz ask us to lean into this hermeneutic openness in their Photo Essay documenting the role of image-based research methods for the understanding of health. Based on their own images of others using images in health research and education, they argue that transformation comes from radical openness and, in arguing against positivism, they issue an injunction of their own: for us all to play.

We would like to end with this injunction—to play and play more!—but would be remiss to close without mentioning two extra-collective efforts that we publish here: a fantastic book forum that gathers readers of Emma Kowal’s *Haunting Biology: Science and Indigeneity* (2023) and the excellent Special Section, ‘Beyond Voice’. Our Special Section guest editors, Kelly Fagan Robinson and Rosie Jones McVey, introduce the collection that they have gathered themselves and in more detail. In their work, McVey and Fagan approach voice as a social phenomenon unlimited to medium; indeed, ‘voice’ accrues particular political salience in light of questions of representation. These stakes are explored comparatively across geographic sites, with contributions by Iza Kavedžija, more from Rosie Jones McVey, Julia Modern, and Christina Woolner. We end, then, in the spirit that has defined this chapter of MAT’s existence: of collaboration as a form of intellectual play and—beyond the significance of its resulting scholarship—the joy it brings.

Thank you for reading. We hope you enjoy the issue.

The Medicine Anthropology Theory Editorial Collective, June 2025