

Behind the Scenes at *MAT*

Labour at an open access journal

MAT Editorial Collective



Figure 1. An overflowing dustbin during Edinburgh waste workers' strike, 31 August 2022. Image by Kaveri Qureshi, reproduced with permission.

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For the last two years, our September editorials have taken stock of the accrual of labour on the journal. Here we are in September 2022 and, unbelievably, we've now been editing the journal for nearly three years. This year, however, as autumn descends in Edinburgh, we are thinking not only about labour past, but labour present. The fading light of late summer has been falling upon streets strewn with rubbish, since Scotland's waste workers—bin collectors and street cleaners—are in an unresolved industrial dispute over pay. At the pictured overflowing dustbin on a street overlooking the Firth of Forth at the end of August, a discarded, unopened packet of supermarket chicken drumsticks turned visibly putrid over the course of the strike days, until one evening a seagull managed to peck through the plastic cover and dig out one of the rotting hunks of meat. This attracted jealous attention from a flock of other seagulls and a vicious, screeching street fight ensued, the gull eventually failing to escape with its find. Although the presence of seagulls scavenging is increasingly visible in Edinburgh, they do not usually find such sheer abundance of food waste on the streets, as the 'material excess (i.e., waste) of contemporary capitalism' ordinarily gets tidied away from polite view in accordance with the racialised and globally unequal distributive processes whereby 'waste materials are made absent for some, just as they are made present for others' (Butt 2020, 235).

As the labour and livelihoods of waste workers are made visible, so is their health-maintaining necessity; many days into the strike action, Scotland's national public health agency urged councils to decontaminate areas where bins had overflowed, concerned that people could be at risk from the build-up of food, animal, and human waste, such as nappies (Turvill 2022). As earlier perceived during the COVID-19 lockdowns, and as social reproduction feminists have been saying for a while, 'life-making work' is the essential work of society: as noted by Bhattacharya, 'food, fuel, shelter, cleaning: these are the essential services' (Jaffe 2020, 2). The waste workers' strike is part of a wave of industrial action taking place across the country this summer connected to a cost-of-living crisis comprising stagnating wages and rising prices, tax increases, social security cuts, and energy price hikes (Patrick and Pybus 2022). Seeing that all politics is reproductive politics (Briggs 2018), these are struggles of maintaining life and replacing life across generations.

Relatedly, university staff in the UK are engaged in our own industrial action regarding pensions and pay, inequalities, casualisation, and workload. Whilst a large part of *MAT*'s community is based outside the UK, these conditions may still resonate with working conditions in our readers' universities and other places of work elsewhere. In the current phase of the industrial dispute, we are in action short of a strike, and the University and College Union (UCU) advises that union

members work to contract—abiding by the terms of our contracts but doing no more than that. At the *MAT* Editorial Collective we often wonder about the implications of working to contract for the life of a fully Open Access and not-for-profit journal that runs almost entirely on goodwill and what amounts to voluntary and hidden work. Sometimes we cast around for upwards of twelve, thirteen peer reviewers for the manuscripts we receive, in the hope that two or three will take the bite. We can see that our community of reviewers is tired and overextended.

Stepping out of the working conditions that define our sector, earlier in the summer some of us at the *MAT* Editorial Collective took part in a reading group called the ‘deep dive’, organised by our colleague Becky Hewer, to explore writings across the oeuvre of Judith Butler. At the end of the five sessions of collaborative reading and discussion, we reflected on the compression of reading time in our jobs, and how the racing pace of workloads leaves little time for reading for reading’s sake (Hewer 2022). As part of this conversation, we came upon Max Liboiron’s (2021, n.p.) searing critique of the instrumental, text-mining modes of reading which predominate in our line of work: ‘extractive economies like the one this kind of reading participate in are about taking value from peripheries (where people live) and relocating it to the center (where power lives), rather than reciprocating the value to its place of origin’. Against this colonial form of reading, Liboiron proposes to read with generosity, reciprocity, and accountability. Bioethicist Emma Tumilty (2020) connects this sentiment to the work of academic journals, when she writes of peer reviewing as a feminist practice and as critical solidarity. We sometimes wonder what makes people accept the invitation to take on a manuscript. In such times, can sheer interest in or commitment to a developing field still hold currency? Perhaps these lessons in reading differently can change how we think about what we’re doing when we carry out peer review and editorial work. Whatever it is that compels colleagues to click ‘accept invitation to review’, we remain hugely grateful to our community of writers, reviewers, and readers, and want to put it out there, again, that the journal doesn’t just happen by itself: it runs on collective labour.

This issue

This issue brings us an array of Research Articles, Position Pieces, Field Notes, and Review Essays reflecting new work by our community of contributors. Among the Research Articles, we begin with Paula Palanco Lopez and colleagues on the arrival of antibiotics in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Uganda, analysed at the intersection of colonial governance and humanitarianism. Then, through ethnographic analysis of a neuro-intensive care unit at a hospital in France, Laurence Tessier explores how organ donation protocols force doctors to clarify the dividing line between life and death. Sanghamitra Das analyses the response of haemoglobinopathy patient communities in India to the prescription of national

standards regarding 'benchmark disability' or disability percentage, and the citizenship contestations and anxieties catalysed by this requirement for certification. Mikayla Gordon Wexler and Christopher Dole explore how mothers of children with chronic illness use Instagram as a moral laboratory experimenting with potential futures for themselves, their children, and their relationships together. Helene Scott-Fordsmand explores the overlooked role and significance of the fat tissue which medical students find so omnipresent in human anatomy dissections.

Our two Position Pieces return us to notions of crisis, which we have been thinking about with some intensity for the last few years. Nasima Selim elaborates on the concept of breathing trouble to explore the choking politics of governments in India and Germany and perceive how these are entangled in producing inequalities in the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Susanna Trnka explores how the crisis imaginary enables the expansion of state power in responses to COVID-19 at the same time as these events are lived and experienced collectively as extraordinary times in which people are plunged into a different time and space that eludes narration. In the Field Notes section, Sreya Majumdar examines her position as a researcher in her relationships with birth professionals and couples in the context of developments propagating natural childbirth practices in India. Next, Sophie Mylan draws upon clinical and research experiences in the UK and Uganda to illuminate the contrasting ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic unravelled in each setting. Natalia Luxardo reflects frankly upon faux pas—mistakes, omissions, and blunders—committed during fieldwork with a 'vulnerable population' and links these to ethical avenues towards more collective decision making in service of social justice. Finally, we close with three Review Essays canvassing recent books and documentaries. Timely in its address to the recent tragic loss of medical anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer, Priscilla Medeiros and colleagues take stock of recent work reflecting his oeuvre. Kathryn Metcalf examines three new works in philosophy, history, and science and technology studies regarding complexity. Finally, Thandeka Cochrane examines three books speaking to colonial legacies in African biomedicine.

We hope you will enjoy reading these articles as much as we have enjoyed shepherding them.

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