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Special Issue! "Diverse Bodies"

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By Anna Zogas

In case you missed it, here's a special issue that may be of interest: In [Anthropology & Medicine](#), [Diverse Bodies: The Challenge of New Theoretical Approaches to Medical Anthropology](#). Below, you'll find the abstracts. Enjoy!

[Diverse bodies: the challenge of new theoretical approaches to medical anthropology](#) (excerpt) (*open access*)
Simon Cohn & Rebecca Lynch

In recent years, medical anthropology has benefitted a great deal from debates in science studies, and in particular, the focus on knowledge practices (Pickering 1995) and epistemic cultures (Knorr Cetina 1999). At the same time, within anthropology, work exploring post-human orientations – for example, the focus on materiality and the role of objects, human–animal relations and environmental approaches – have invigorated debate not only about how central people should be in our ethnographic accounts, but also from what, or who's, perspective (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Core to all these areas of study has been an increasingly commonplace reference to the word 'ontology'. Although important differences exist in the use of the term, as a starting point let us say the word concerns not only the status of what is known, but also the status of that which knowledge is based on. This so-called 'ontological turn' in anthropology over the last decade is consequently both a theoretical and methodological set of arguments that seeks to provide new insights to old problems (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

But surprisingly, these debates have only tentatively been drawn on directly in medical anthropology to explore the relationships between culture, biology, health and medicine. We say surprisingly because the subfield has always had to confront such things as the viability of universal illness categories, how to evaluate the efficacy of local treatments, or the problem of representing the experience of others, especially when they are suffering or in distress. So, by engaging with some of the work from STS and mainstream social anthropology, this Special Issue presents a range of contrasting papers that explore the extent to which such work not only might offer genuinely new analytic approaches to think through established concerns we, as medical anthropologists, have to confront, but

also potentially generate new areas for enquiry. But given the imperative of medical anthropology – to engage with illness and suffering with a view to helping alleviate them – this issue of Anthropology and Medicine also extends the arguments to also ask what pragmatic and ethical contributions they might make. Finally, a key matter that the overall collection raises is the extent to which the stale opposition between applied and more theoretical anthropology might be discarded once and for all through arguments that emphasise the cultural basis of even the most fundamental concepts we draw on, including any distinction between knowledge and practice.

[Counting bodies? On future engagements with science studies in medical anthropology](#) (*open access*)

Emily Yates-Doerr

Thirty years ago, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock outlined a strategy for ‘future work in medical anthropology’ that focused on three bodies. Their article – a zeitgeist for the field – sought to intervene into the Cartesian dualisms characterizing ethnomedical anthropology at the time. Taking a descriptive and diagnostic approach, they defined ‘the mindful body’ as a domain of future anthropological inquiry and mapped three analytic concepts that could be used to study it: the individual/phenomenological body, the social body, and the body politic. Three decades later, this paper returns to the ‘three bodies’. It analyses ethnographic fieldwork on chronic illness, using a rescriptive, practice-oriented approach to bodies developed by science studies scholars that was not part of the initial three bodies framework. It illustrates how embodiment was a technical achievement in some practices, while in others bodies did not figure as relevant. This leads to the suggestion that an anthropology of health need not be organized around numerable bodies. The paper concludes by suggesting that future work in medical anthropology might embrace translational competency, which does not have the goal of better definitions (better health, better bodies, etc.) but the goal of better engaging with exchanges between medical and non-medical practices. That health professionals are themselves moving away from bodies to embrace ‘planetary health’ makes a practice-focused orientation especially crucial for medical anthropology today.

[Hungers that Need Feeding: On the Normativity of Mindful Nourishment](#) (*open access*)

Else Vogel

Drawing on participant observation in a ‘mindful weight loss’ course offered in the Netherlands, this paper explores the normative register through which mindfulness techniques cast people in relation to concerns

with overeating and body weight. The women seeking out mindfulness use eating to cope with troubles in their lives and are hindered by a preoccupation with the size of their bodies. Mindfulness coaches aim to help them let go of this 'struggle with eating' by posing as the central question: 'what do I really hunger after?' The self's hungers include 'belly hunger' but also stem from mouths, hearts, heads, noses and eyes. They cannot all be fed by food. The techniques detailed in this paper focus on recognizing and disentangling one's hungers; developing self-knowledge of and a sensitivity to what 'feeds' one's life; and the way one positions oneself in relation to oneself and the world. While introducing new norms, the course configures 'goods' and 'bads' in different ways altogether, shaping the worlds people come to inhabit through engaging in self-care. In particular, the hungering body is foregrounded as the medium through which life is lived. Taking a material semiotic approach, this paper makes an intervention by articulating the normative register of nourishment in contrast to normalization. Thus, it highlights anthropologists' potential strengthening of different ways of doing normativity.

[Entangled local biologies: genetic risk, bodies and inequities in Brazilian cancer genetics](#) (*open access*)

Sahra Gibbon

Engaging recent social science work examining the truth making claims of science and biomedicine, this paper explores how biology is being localised in Brazilian cancer genetics. It draws from ethnographic fieldwork in urban regions of southern Brazil working with and alongside patients, families and practitioners in cancer genetic clinics. It examines how different sorts of 'local biologies' are articulated in the context of research, clinical practice and among implicated patient communities and the way these can 'recursively' move across different spheres and scales of social action to extend and transform the meaning of the biological. It shows how the mattering of the biological in Brazilian cancer genetics is fundamentally informed by questions of inequity and care, even while multiple local biologies may obscure rather than reveal the biopolitics of cancer. In an era of epigenetics this raises new opportunities and challenges for anthropological analysis as intervention.

[Birds, meat, and babies: the multiple realities of fetuses in Qatar](#) (*open access*)

Susie Kilshaw

This paper explores miscarriage in a variety of Qatari contexts to reveal the multiple realities of the unborn. During 18 months of ethnographic research, a range of settings in which fetuses emerged were explored. The unborn are represented and imagined differently, particularly in

relation to the ways they are located, with multiple beings emerging according to the context and position of the stakeholder. This paper considers fetuses produced within these contexts and considers how they can be different beings simultaneously. The paper reveals how categories meant to define these beings are in flux and are constantly negotiated; it reflects moments of ambiguity. The paper serves as an illustration of the way in which value-afforded pregnancy materials affects the contexts in which they emerge; this then loops back as context dictates the significance of the material, hence multiple realities of these beings.

[The ontological turn meets the certainty of death](#)

Maryon McDonald

The 'ontological turn' involves some anthropological points of long standing but the approaches recently coordinated into this turn have been presented as a 'call to arms', as shaking up 'mono-realist singularities' and as inherently political. This fighting talk has no doubt made important contributions to anthropology and insights from the ontological turn can help in anthropological understandings of medical practices. However, this paper contends that this helpfulness is also limited and that a call to arms may be inappropriate. This point is made through an ethnographic understanding of medical concern about the diagnosis of death.

[Working with a fractional object: enactments of appetite in interdisciplinary work in anthropology and biomedicine](#)

Bodil Just Christensen, Line Hillersdal & Lotte Holm

This paper explores the productive tensions occurring in an interdisciplinary research project on weight loss after obesity surgery. The study was a bio-medical/anthropological collaboration investigating to what extent eating patterns, the subjective experience of hunger and physiological mechanisms are involved in appetite regulation that might determine good or poor response to the surgery. Linking biomedical and anthropological categories and definitions of central concepts about the body turned out to be a major challenge in the collaborative analysis. Notably, the conception of what constitutes 'appetite' was a key concern, as each discipline has its particular definition and operationalization of the term. In response, a material-semiotic approach was chosen which allowed for a reconceptualization of appetite as a 'fractional object', engaged in multiple relations and enacted differently in each instance. This perspective produced creative contrasts and offered alternative explorations of both scientific knowledge production and anthropological practices. The paper thereby explores the interfaces between anthropology and medical science by attending to the challenges and

opportunities that result from destabilising an assumed fixed and well-defined concept associated with the body.

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