

Top of the heap: Cheryl Mattingly

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By



For this installment of “Top of the heap” we spoke to [Cheryl Mattingly](#), Professor of Anthropology at the University of Southern California. Here’s her list of recent – and upcoming – readings:

Cheryl Mattingly

Lately my favorite reading topic has been in the “anthropology of morality.” While there are many reasons to object that this is not a new topic for anthropology — when haven’t anthropologists been concerned with societal moralities? — lots of fascinating arguments and claims have recently emerged under this new label. One thing I find intriguing about this still developing conversation is that it has sometimes put anthropologists in sharp debate with one another. I always find that provocative and clarifying. I am also compelled by the way it is prompting new avenues for thinking with philosophy and in some cases promoting on-going conversations between anthropologists and philosophers.

The readings I’m personally recommending are (annoyingly) not all out yet but if they aren’t, they will be appearing soon.

James Laidlaw, [The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom](#). (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Laidlaw's new book engages the Anglo-American philosophical tradition of virtue ethics (especially the work of Bernard Williams) with a carefully crafted interpretation of Foucault's ethics of care. I don't necessarily agree with all of Laidlaw's arguments — for example his reading of Alasdair MacIntyre — but this is a very rich book, theoretically. Along the way Laidlaw makes sharp and incisive critiques of some dominant anthropological traditions and voices (e.g. Bourdieu-style practice theory and actor network theory). He also offers a reading of Foucault's ethics that separates it from his earlier works on power and governmentality — and many might find this interesting.

Jason Throop and Jarrett Zigon (Eds), [Ethos](#), Special Issue on Moral Experience, 2014

A number of interesting essays by scholars, including some working between phenomenology and morality. (First 2014 issue, due out momentarily).

Thomas Wentzer, 'I have seen Königsberg burning': Philosophical anthropology and the responsiveness of historical experience. [Anthropological Theory](#), 2014(1).

Wentzer is a German phenomenological philosopher who is working closely with anthropologists. (He has a chapter coming out in a new book with Michael Jackson, for example). His work is in the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, and this paper concerns the relationship of narrative and experience. He represents a new kind of philosopher who is trying to think with thick (rather than thin) examples. This piece is beautifully written. He builds his analysis around a personal example from his own family's history. (This one is not available to view online yet, but also should be out momentarily).

Jonathan Lear, [Radical Hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation](#).
(Harvard University Press: 2006).

Another philosopher (American) writing about hope from a virtue ethics perspective and using an ethnographic example. While anthropologists will likely find his picture of culture too simple, this is a fascinating and easily read little book with very big ideas about hope, despair and cultural possibility. I read it after writing my own book about hope and I wish I'd gotten to it beforehand!

Michael Lambek, (Ed.) [Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, Action](#).
(Fordham University Press: 2010).

This is one of my favorite edited collections with essays by many well known anthropologists. My personal favorites are the introductory essay by Lambek, his own chapter and a chapter by Veena Das. (I particularly like their work especially because in their different ways, both are arguing for a complex understanding of ethical life embedded within the ordinary.)

Sune Liisberg, Esther Oluffa Pedersen and Anne Line Dalsgård (Eds.). [Anthropology & Philosophy: Dialogues on Trust and Hope](#).
(Berghahn Press: In press).

This won't be out until January 2015 but I'm including it here because it is a wonderful example of co-writing and thinking between philosophers and anthropologists. It is set up as a series of interdisciplinary dialogues. Most of the essays are directly concerned with moral dilemmas and issues as well.

Didier Fassin and Samuel Lézy, [Moral Anthropology: A Critical Reader](#).
(Routledge, 2014).

This is a huge collection (perhaps too big) but Fassin's very clearly written introduction — in fact, his introductions in the

sections throughout — are extremely helpful. I also appreciated the Kleinman essay on why bioethics needs ethnography.

Joel Robbins, [Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good](#). *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 19: 447-462. 2013

I love this essay! It's very provocative and I don't necessarily agree with it all, but it is so wonderfully clearly written. It challenges anthropologists to think beyond the "suffering subject" and therefore should be of interest to a broad range of anthropologists.

Upcoming Conference: [Moral Engines: Exploring the Moral Drives in Human Life \(June 2014\)](#)

Just a small announcement, in case anyone wants to attend. It will be held at the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark. It is co-organized by several philosophers and anthropologists and will include talks by some prominent philosophers and anthropologists working on issues of morality.

For more information, see:

<http://aias.au.dk/events/show/artikel/aias-conference-1/>

[Cheryl Mattingly](#) is a medical anthropologist. She is a Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology and the Division of Occupational Science and Therapy, University of Southern California. She is also currently a Dale T. Mortensen Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark. She is a frequent Visiting Professor of Anthropology and Philosophy at Aarhus University. She has also been the PI and Co-PI on multiple large-scale, federally funded ethnographic research studies. Her primary research and theoretical interests include narrative, moral reasoning and experience, phenomenology, the culture of biomedicine, chronic illness and disability, the ethics of care, and health disparities in the United States. She has published extensively on these topics, including numerous peer reviewed articles and book chapters. She has also written and co-edited six books

(including one currently in press). She received the Victor Turner Prize (Society for Humanistic Anthropology) for [Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots](#) (1998) and the Stirling Book Prize (Society for Psychological Anthropology) for [The Paradox of Hope: Journey Through a Clinical Borderland](#) (2010). Her forthcoming book is *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life* (Due out fall 2014).

Image: Matej Krén, "[Scanner](#)" (detail)

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