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Top of the heap: Sarah Willen

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By Maria Cecilia Dedios and Ekaterina Anderson



For this installment of “Top of the heap,” we spoke to Sarah Willen, Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Human Rights Institute’s Research Program on Global Health and Human Rights at the University of Connecticut.

Sarah Willen

This summer I found myself puzzling deeply over the notion of dignity. In fields like political philosophy, bioethics, law, and human rights, interest in

dignity has grown like gangbusters, especially in the past half-decade. As debates have raged, anthropologists, for the most part, have been quiet. Some might find this anthropological silence strange. Doesn't our field presume an incipient link among all ???????? (*anthropoi*), whether wealthy or indigent, modal or transgressive, living or dead? If so, might something like dignity not name that link?

In working on this summer puzzle, I stumbled upon some exciting new work that does, in fact, engage dignity anthropologically, albeit at oblique angles and with varying degrees of depth and success. Among them is [Rahul Chandrashekar Oka's](#) work with Somali refugees in a Kenyan refugee camp. These refugees, Oka explains, pursue what economists would call "irrational" consumer practices (using scarce resources to buy – and, notably, to share – luxury consumables like tea, soft drinks, meals with fish or meat) in an effort to achieve some measure of "*sharaf*" (Somali) or "*heshima*" (KiSwahili), both of which Oka renders in English as "dignity." In [Antina von Schitzler's](#) study of sanitation, citizenship, and judicial claims-making in Soweto, dignity appears not as a "presocial and prepolitical value that universally grounds claims to human rights," but as a mutable concept whose "precise meaning ... is ultimately often produced in court." And [Clara Han's](#) ethnography of crushing debt, political violence, and social connectedness in Chile explores how the liberalization of the Chilean economy plunged poor families into debt – and how the new key to "*vivir con dignidad*" (living with dignity) in the post-Pinochet era is to save face by sustaining an outward appearance of solvency and material success. (Jarrett Zigon also has an interesting Heideggerian take on dignity up his sleeve.)

Dignity also figures explicitly in research on health and on the proper treatment of human bodies and their constituent parts. [Nora Jacobson](#), for instance, recently published a compelling (if rather overly schematized) study of how dignity and dignity violation are experienced in Canada. In a very different place and vein, [Sherine Hamdy's](#) ethnography of bioethics, Islam, and organ transplantation in Egypt explores the links among dignity, personhood, and the proper disposition of human bodies and their parts. Curiously, it is only in the final dotting of i's and crossing of t's that Hamdy comes to recognize the centrality of dignity to her analysis, which she characterizes in a retrospective epilogue as revolving around two distinct but related concepts: *karama* (the dignity of the living) and *hurma* (the dignity accorded the body after death).

Still, none of these works resolved the question that puzzled me most this summer: Does the notion of dignity – a concept so heavily weighted with intellectual and cultural baggage – really have a place in anthropology? Should it? [Michael Jackson's](#) existential-phenomenological approach long ago convinced me that it does, as my dog-eared, marked-up copy of

Existential Anthropology can attest. But this summer I wanted to dig deeper, not least because the book I'm writing – about the impact of illegalization on unauthorized migrants and their advocates in Tel Aviv — has lots to say about illegalization as a form of sociopolitical abjection: a form of abjection that's profoundly “dangerous to dignity” (as Jacobson puts it).

This summer's meandering quest for insight took me places both familiar and unexpected: to Sam Moyn's probing inquiry into the [uses, meanings, and misappropriations of dignity in discussions of human rights](#); Serena Parekh's fantastic book about the [phenomenology of human rights for Hannah Arendt](#); Avishai Margalit's [The Decent Society](#); Fanon's [Black Skin White Masks](#); Judith Butler's reflections on [“a livable life”](#); Martin Luther King Jr.'s [“Letters from a Birmingham Jail.”](#) Here's where I landed, at least for now:

It is not the ethnographer's task to hammer out a precise definition of dignity, nor would there be much value in seeking out conceptual correlates across languages and cultural settings. Reified or abstract conceptions of dignity, whatever their genealogy, would seem to hold little anthropological value, especially those ripped from the intersubjective matrix of human being-in-the-world. Instead, the notion of dignity becomes ethnographically visible, and anthropologically meaningful, only *in motion*: as dignity harmed, denied, violated, or stripped away – or, conversely, as dignity pursued, safeguarded, recuperated, reclaimed.

From this vantage point – which relinquishes any desire to define, schematize, or quantify – dignity is more *vector* than thing. We might think of it as a *lodestar* that guides the striving of individuals and groups within relational social fields that are gridded by constraint and fraught with indeterminacy. Like physicists' particles and waves, metaphors like these – vector, striving, lodestar – can help decompose abstractions like dignity and reassemble them in ways that bear new explanatory power. When explored ethnographically, such metaphors can help us untangle their meaning in complex human lifeworlds.

Thus understood, an ethnographic approach to dignity can enrich anthropological understanding of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and experience, including what some call [moral experience](#). At the same time, the flourishing scholarship on dignity in fields like philosophy, political theory, and human rights can be enriched by empirically grounded, anthropological engagement with the fundamentally relational and intersubjective ways in which both

violations of dignity as well as its *pursuit* figure in shared human struggles, including the struggle for what [Judith Butler](#) calls the “minimum conditions for a livable life.”

As for the book I'm most burning to read, one wins, hands down: [The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy](#), edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhri Gupta Singh. In this collection, some of the most provocative and inspiring anthropological voices of our time “explore the attraction and the distance that mark the relationship between anthropology and philosophy” (1) and consider how “the philosopher’s anthropology and the anthropologist’s philosophy may mutually illuminate” while insisting that “it is also the friction between them that allows us to walk on our respective paths” (3). No doubt this volume will prove illuminating as I keep swimming those murky waters in which philosophical and anthropological approaches to dignity might meet.

A final comment. I have the privilege of helping to select this year’s [Eileen Basker Memorial Prize](#), awarded annually by the Society for Medical Anthropology to celebrate “a significant contribution to scholarship on gender and health.” Although I can’t reveal this year’s list of nominees, I can tell you it’s a magnificent bunch, and that the winner will be announced during the SMA Business Meeting at this December’s AAA meetings in Washington, D.C.

[Sarah S. Willen](#) is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Human Rights Institute’s Research Program on Global Health and Human Rights at the University of Connecticut. She has guest edited or co-edited special issues of [Culture, Medicine, & Psychiatry](#), [Social Science & Medicine](#), [Ethos](#), and [International Migration](#) as well as three books: [Transnational Migration to Israel in Global Comparative Context](#) (Lexington, 2007); [A Reader in Medical Anthropology: Theoretical Trajectories, Emergent Realities](#) (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); and [Shattering Culture: How American Medicine Responds to Cultural Diversity](#) (Russell Sage, 2011). Her work has also appeared in [Medical Anthropology Quarterly](#), [International Migration](#), [the Journal of Human Rights](#), and [the Harvard Review of Psychiatry](#), among other scholarly publications. She is a founding member of the editorial collective for the blog [AccessDenied: A Conversation on Unauthorized Im/migration and Health](#).

Image: [Guy Laramée](#), “Book Carving.”

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