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## Top of the Heap: Anna Waldstein

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By Hannah Gibson

*[For this installment of the Top of the Heap series, I spoke with Anna Waldstein, who is an ecological anthropologist and lecturer in medical anthropology and ethnobotany at Kent University, UK.]*



In response to discussions with my colleagues about ways to encourage our students to read more ethnographies, I designed a new assignment for “Anthropology of Health, Illness and Medicine,” the last time I taught it. Students were asked to read an ethnographic study with a medical anthropology theme (i.e. a “medical ethnography”) and to present a synopsis to their seminar group. My ulterior motive was to encourage

students to read some of the medical ethnographies at the top of my heap, so that I could at least learn more about them, if I could not get around to reading them myself. In this respect, the assignment was only partially successful. The books at the top of my list were either not selected by any of the students, or were read by students in the seminar groups led by my colleague. However, several books that were (originally) much closer to the bottom of the heap (and some not even on the list of recommended ethnographies) generated memorable class discussions and have piqued my interest.

As I am getting ready to send my publisher the final version of my own forthcoming book on the “Hispanic health paradox” and “health sovereignty” in the United States, Gálvez’s (2011) [Patient Citizens, Immigrant Mothers: Mexican Women, Public Prenatal Care, and the Birth-weight Paradox](#) is at the top of the heap of books that I need to finish reading. The book explores reasons why Mexican migrants living in the United States might have better maternal health outcomes than do American women, using ethnographic data on experiences of prenatal care in rural Mexico and New York City.

I actually wasn’t too surprised that no one selected Annemarie Mol’s (2003) [The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice](#) for the assignment. Although I have read various sections, I am intimidated enough by the two-texts-in-one format to have put off reading the book in its entirety. Nevertheless it is relevant to some of the recent thinking I have been doing about embodiment and I know that I will need to give it a proper read soon. MacPhee’s 2003 paper [Medicine for the Heart: The Embodiment of Faith in Morocco](#), introduces a concept of the spiritual body that has been particularly relevant to my own recent work on the embodiment of Rastafari spirituality. I am especially looking forward to reading her 2012 book [Vulnerability and the Art of Protection: Embodiment and Health Care in Moroccan Households](#).

While I didn’t see any presentations of MacPhee’s book, one of the students in my postgraduate seminar did present Sylvia Wing Önder’s 2007 [We Have No Microbes Here: Healing Practices in a Turkish Black Sea Village](#), another medical ethnography on Islamic women. Many of the things the women of this patient-centered ethnography do for their families (provide home remedies and first-aid, pursue health care from outside the family when needed) sound similar to the things I have seen women do in my own work with Mexican migrants in the United States (and are no doubt similar to such things done by women all over the world). Since the student gifted me his copy of the book I really have no excuse not to read it.

For some reason fasting came up as a recurring theme in several

meetings of the postgraduate seminar. So when one of the students presented Warin's (2009) [Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia](#) the discussion that followed was set within this context. This book sounds like a refreshing new approach to understanding anorexia as a disorder of embodiment and social relations, more than an obsession with beauty, self-control and autonomy. Using an ethnographic approach it explores the "pro-ana" phenomenon, among other issues. One aspect of the book that particularly interests me is the use of bodily experience as a research method; apparently Warin's pregnancy during the fieldwork enabled her to gain some sort of empathetic understanding of the embodied experience of anorectics.

One book that I will have to add to the list of recommended ethnographies (and my own personal heap) next year is João Biehl's (2005) [Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment](#), which was presented by another postgraduate student. I am as intrigued to learn more about the book's apparently innovative methodological approach and ethnographic presentation as I am anxious to know more about its subject matter of what happens to the homeless and mentally ill in Brazil. Finally, although it's not exactly a *medical* ethnography and therefore not on the list of recommendations I give my students, there is one more book that I would really like to read: Pedersen's (2011) [Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia](#). This book is about what happens to uncontrolled shamanic powers when state forces attempt to eradicate shamanism, and appeals to my interests in both spirituality and the effects of political forces on well-being.

[Anna Waldstein](#) is an ecological anthropologist with research and teaching interests in medical anthropology and ethnobotany. She is a lecturer and deputy Director for Taught Programmes, Anthropology; Programme Convenor for MA, MSc Environmental Anthropology; Programme Convenor for MA Social Anthropology at Kent University, UK. Her doctoral research focused on women's popular medical knowledge and self-care practices in both indigenous and mestizo communities in Mexico and among Mexican migrants in the Southeastern United States. Recently, she has begun looking more closely at political dimensions of medicinal plant use and the historical relationship between medicine and social control. Her interest in popular medicine, herbal remedies, diaspora and biological citizenship have led her to the study of Rastafari livity (a Rasta word that refers to lifestyle and spirituality) and healing.

Image: [Book Pile](#)

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