Document généré le 3 mai 2024 13:13

**Anthropologica**

Anthropologica

# Introduction to Theme Issue
## Dignity, Conviviality, and Moral Contests of Belonging

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Volume 64, numéro 2, 2022

Dignity, Conviviality, Moral Contests of Belonging
Dignité, convivialité et contestations morales d’appartenance

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109707ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica64220222613

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (imprimé)
2292-3586 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

Taha, M. C. (2022). Introduction to Theme Issue: Dignity, Conviviality, and Moral Contests of Belonging. *Anthropologica*, *64*(2), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica64220222613

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# Introduction to Theme Issue

## Dignity, Conviviality, and Moral Contests of Belonging

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### Difference in Post-Multiculture

This special issue comes to publication at an opportune moment for reflecting on Dignity, Conviviality, and Moral Contests of Belonging. If Paul Gilroy's (2004) seminal *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture*? registered critical hope for multiculturalism amidst the war on terror, then the studies gathered here explore difference in a post-multicultural time, attendant to how material and political polarization forces questions of identity onto moral ground. This is to say that we also write about conviviality in the wake of Steven Vertovec's (2007) influential formulation of "super-diversity," finding in that well-merited complexification an opportunity to understand diversity as both proliferating (exceeding categories of race, ethnicity, or gender) and interwoven with deliberations about good or right action. We examine sites of ideological and not merely demographic flux, drawing out participants' own negotiations of the—variably salient—contours of value-laden everyday life.

By placing dignity and belonging alongside conviviality at the center of inquiry, this special theme fleshes out underspecified terms in contexts of shifting evaluations of difference. The following questions have inspired our work: When getting along means dealing with colliding scales of social value and worth, what does dignity look or sound like? How do dignity-claiming repertoires intersect with performances of identity, subjectivity, or citizenship and belonging? How do everyday practices related to conviviality subsume or elevate dignity threats or belonging claims? How might dignity claims signal morally adaptive strategies when formal rights or institutional recognitions shut down?

Analyses in response to these questions press urgently at the present moment, when retrenchment of ideological antagonism so often turns others into enemies. In what Fukuyama (2018) has called a "politics of resentment," competition for moral legitimacy overshadows deliberations over systemic inequality. With moral judgments about self and other at the forefront of contemporary life, face-to-face encounters and iterative enactments of living in the company of others become opportunities for defending, challenging, or advancing claims about how the world should be. The *shoulds* that motivate discourse and interaction among experientially diverse players highlight, in turn, the linguistic and embodied dimensions of dignity claims as part of negotiations over social connection and acceptance. These deontic struggles highlight the importance of participants' interactional stances (Kockelman 2004; Ochs and Schieffelin 1989); affective strategies and emotional investments (Ahmed 2015); and gendered, racialized, or religiously imbued positions within communities where de facto and imagined boundaries are changing.

## Com + Vivere

"To live with/together," as conviviality's Latin roots (*com + vivere*) suggest, entails modes of relating that may invoke but not satisfy ideals of interpersonal equality and respect (Radice 2016). In the expanding literature pursuing this line of reasoning, conviviality has provided an alluring analytic, typically used to trace the interpersonal and spatial dynamics of copresence among clearly defined groups of city denizens. However, Joanna Overing and Alan Passes' (2000) paradigmatic examination of Amazonian conviviality, *The Anthropology of Love and Anger*, makes clear that conviviality need not be circumscribed to urban multicultural settings. Conviviality is not a strict corollary of super-diversity but can illuminate more amply dynamics in which humans define lines of familiarity and strangerhood to constitute knowing and being (together) in a complex world. A number of related touchstones—civility, cosmopolitanism, community, and commensality (Bowman 2012; Bryant 2016; Radice 2019)—speak also to the moral substrate of conviviality. At root, conviviality raises questions about what constitutes a "good" society when that society is diverse: one in which people actively pursue friendship, or one in which they merely tolerate each other as strangers? What of spaces actively construed, but not quite realized, as shared (Amin 2012, Erickson 2011)?

Such queries have motivated research exploring the intricate ordinariness of convivial culture via sociological and ethnomethodological approaches.

Examinations of conviviality-as-habitus (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014; Valluvan 2016; Wise and Velayutham 2014) have revealed dispositions of interactional distance and circumspection (Heil 2015) as well as warmth and common interest (Neal et al. 2019). Taking the matter of "living together" down to the level of face-to-face encounters, a special issue of *Multilingual Matters* has addressed phatic communication—"apparently inconsequential pieces of language" (Rampton 2015, 83) such as small talk—as convivial means and ends. Erving Goffman's (1959, 1967[1955]) observations about the emergent dynamics of social performance and alignment have played a decidedly important role here, as work in sociolinguistic, linguistic anthropological, and conversation analytic realms finds rich evidence for interactants' unfolding stances and subject positions in communicative microanalysis. Goffman's influence has been evident, too, in studies that seek to understand how diverse interactants navigate everyday public spaces, such as parks (Wessendorf 2014) and city streets (Heil 2019). Martha Radice (2016), whose commentary culminates this special issue, has shown that even "fleeting encounters," such as service interactions, can augment individuals' ease and engagement across lines of linguistic or cultural difference.

Of course, those of us who write about conviviality have been well warned not to treat it in its positive sense alone. Living in the company of others does not always mean "getting along." Systemic inequities persist (Gilroy 2004; Illich 1973). Kantian (1996) logic, meanwhile, declares dignity a given, although a great deal of work goes into seeking, validating, and defending dignity to assert personal worth and social belonging. (Consider, too, the implications of Kant's denial of personhood to African and Afrodescendant people [Gilroy 2004, 9], a move that contradicts his premise and makes interpersonal recognition a condition of humanity.) Dignity is at least as conditioned by effort and interaction as it is by disposition (Nader 2013, 32–34). It is subject to others' evaluations, which—as Brendan O'Connor (this issue) argues—iteratively typify a range of culturally constrained moral personae. Those moral personae are the true agents of convivial negotiation.

Viewed in conjunction with dignity and belonging, conviviality dovetails with explorations of care, hospitality, and friendship (Bell and Coleman 1999; Black 2018; Candea and Da Col 2012; Selwyn 2001; Ticktin 2011) and invites explicit connection to the anthropology of morality. Interactions within disciplining systems of power and amidst competing value orientations constitute deeply conflicted pursuits of virtue and the good life (Lambek 2010).

## Contributions to the Special Issue

These analyses benefit from long-term ethnographic commitments to various field sites and at various scales. From a Presbyterian church in Toronto to Ismaili Muslim social justice circles in the U.S. South; from a neighbourhood in Northeast Brazil's urban periphery to classrooms in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands; and from vociferous national debates over racialist humour in Brazil to barely-heard accounts of teenagers' fights in Spain, participants' moral striving emerges as a constant despite widely varying material and social challenges. By bringing ethnographic detail to bear on instances in which competing identities fail to fully explain insider/outsider experiences, we are particularly interested in participants' deployments of what they deem justified action in unjust circumstances.

Addressing encounters that span face-to-face interactions, household networks, and national media discourses, the studies move from contexts and ideologies of gendered community care (Jerome and Davidson) to dominant and contested discourses of convivial expression (Taha and Silva) to deliberations over justice and deservingness (Welji and O'Connor). Contributions by Jessica Jerome and Brendan O'Connor bookend this sequence, providing theoretical insights that frame the collection. I will introduce each of the articles in turn, and also encourage readers to seek out Jennifer Ashley's contribution to the Film and Exhibit Review Section. Invited to share her work in connection with this special theme, Ashley's account of Chilean artists' creative resignifications of public spaces speaks to the limits of "living together" amidst crisis.

Jessica Jerome's longitudinal study of convivial values, behaviours, and discourses among residents in an urban peripheral neighbourhood in Northeastern Brazil provides a thought-provoking opening for the themed issue. Taking as her starting point that conviviality has suffered from conceptual "slipperiness" (Lapina 2016, 34) that hampers its broader analytic purchase, Jerome draws attention to the distinct scales—etic and emic—at which conviviality tends to be discussed and the limitations that arise from treating it as a normative benchmark for "successful" or easeful encounters across difference. Jerome instead frames her analysis in terms of sociality, tracing connections between modes of value-laden interaction among residents in Barra do Ceará and the shifting material, political, and infrastructural realities that shape negotiations between ideals of hospitality and autonomy. Jerome's critique is a useful starting point in that it grounds our collective discussion in

cultural and linguistic anthropological approaches to everyday sense-making while interrogating multiculturalism and/or superdiversity as precursors to contemporary concerns with "living together around difference" (Wise and Noble 2016).

In detailing the changing social rhythms and spatial articulations of Cearense life in the last two decades, Jerome reveals the central role of older women in maintaining (primarily kin-based) support/resource networks amidst the continual flux of migration from rural areas. In a community whose members share ethnic and religious backgrounds, poverty is the bright line of social difference, and not one that inspires generosity or inclusion as a matter of course. What locals tout as a spirit of '*convívio*' is tempered by emphasis on dignity through self-reliance—and more recently by debates over deservingness in relation to government stipends for low-income people. The "delicate politics of exchange" that Jerome observed in her first years of fieldwork unfolded against spatial, linguistic, and economic norms of circumscribed care. By shining a light at the level of the household, Jerome does something unique in this themed issue, moreover. She illustrates how this carefully organized space of meso-sociality demarcates intimate and public engagements, exposing mundane but shifting value orientations around belonging and thriving. In a final move that portrays the affective pull of convivial ideologies, Jerome describes her participants' recent tendency to invoke conviviality as an object of nostalgia while the neighbourhood grows increasingly anonymous and fractured. Their experiences of precarity notwithstanding, this rosy lens asserts a convivial past and attenuates current tensions, Jerome argues.

Lisa Davidson's study of older women's interactions at a Presbyterian church in Toronto highlights the affective burdens of navigating convivial ideals across spiritual and social domains. Based on two years of participant observation, sustained interviews, and ongoing friendships with multicultural and multiracial women congregants, Davidson identifies "convivial hospitality" as a core value motivating older women of racialized and immigrant backgrounds to spearhead the preparing and sharing of meals as part of the church's community dinner series. In what constitutes a distinctive contribution to literature on multicultural conviviality, Davidson argues that it is not merely the social fact of commensality that creates ground for dignified belonging among these women, but also the multisensorial and narrative experience of collaboration, month after month, that nurtures common cause. Recounting

one's trip from the market to the kitchen affords a remapping of the city, marked by moments of kindness from strangers as proof of divine grace. The smell of Guyanese roti, a spicy bite of jerk chicken, and cheers of admiration for the cook give entree to memories, stories of personal difficulties, and opportunities to share knowledge.

Tracing tensions between the pious ideal of convivial hospitality and the realities of racially over-determined rifts in the church, Davidson describes how the intervention of White female church elders in planning community dinners turned homemade meals into optimally managed events. Citing economic concerns, they sourced bulk ingredients from grocery store bargain bins and served meals on paper plates; original organizers found themselves sidelined, frustrated and demoted to essentially servile roles. In examining the prized convivial register of church interactions, Davidson reveals in the White women's managerial intervention the personal and collective costs of normative hospitality. Conviviality—in a rather strict idiom of polite forbearance, tied in complex ways to expectations of Christian charity—reveals "host" as a position of power, and "stranger" or "guest" as its opposite. Davidson's work movingly portrays how older women of colour, in striving to embody and extend the spirit of hospitality to which they are faithfully called, get shuttled by their White counterparts into roles as racialized strangers, instead. Behind the doors of the church, a microcosm of super-diverse Toronto, internal divisions speak to the contradictions and limitations of racially structured sociality.

In my own article, I discuss the circumstances of a conflict surrounding Moroccan youth contributors to my research on education and intercultural citizenship in southeast Spain. Highlighting three girls' stance-laden moves in a ten-minute confrontation that two of them secretly audio recorded, I argue that their jockeying for moral absolution amidst multiple accusations—of stealing sandwiches from a disabled classmate, fighting, gossiping, and lying—both leveraged and critiqued ideals of *convivencia* that were prominently advocated at school. My approach is grounded in ethnomethodological attention to unfolding interaction and builds on analyses of youth as moral arbiters and keen analysts of social power (Goodwin 2002; Shuman 1993). I identify communicative entitlement as a central domain of convivial interaction, tied not only to educational ideals of inclusion and open exchange, but more urgently to the sense that interpersonal dignity was tethered to the right to speak and be heard. In a context where Moroccan immigrants were collectively stigmatized, the girls' immediate dispute drew complex connections to the ethnoracial,

gendered, and linguistic parameters of othering that they experienced during encounters with peers, teachers, family, and community. Their attempts at reputational rehabilitation took place amidst cycles of (dis)entitlement and in a social field dominated by messages of normative convivencia (coterminous here with "getting along," respect, empathy, and tolerance).

I address the centrality of dignity within the conflict by discussing how reputational attacks doubled as threats to social recognition and belonging. Dependent as the girls were upon others' evaluations of their characters and actions, I point out that just because normative convivial frameworks invoke difference as a potential source of conflict does not mean that actual instances of conflict are not also bids for inclusion. My participants' attempts to clear their names at school, most of which backfired, exposed how very few outlets were available to them for social and institutional validation. In light of this, I devote the last part of the article to examining the ethical implications of writing about their secret recording and the fact that they ultimately shared it with me. These moves drew me as ethnographer into closer reputational compromise with my participants than I could have anticipated. Given the many contradictions that unfolded, I observe that conviviality has been projected into Spanish public life as a paramount value (cf. Robbins 2004, 11–13) and must coexist with other entrenched modes of relating such as reputational assessment and adjudications of trust.

Expanding upon Amanda Wise's (2016) notion of everyday "convivial labour," Silva explores the alarming mundanity of Brazilian "convivial humour," which reinforces racist, sexist, and classist ideologies of exclusion and privilege. In so doing, he highlights the extent to which the interactional work and conditioned laughter that help preserve Brazil's convivial democratic identity require the silence or ideological conscription of marginalized Brazilians. Silva's discussion of a 2020 *brincadeira* (joke) uttered by a Bolsonaro cabinet member to the press reveals a discursive ecology of "convivial humour" circulating through prominent political voices, social media, and everyday talk—taking for granted that poor, female, and particularly Black and Brown domestic workers might be foils for laughing off Brazil's endemic inequities. Silva's analysis of backlash against the minister's remarks further reveals that there is growing impatience with such glib dehumanization. His intricate deconstruction of Representative Benedita da Silva's creative response marshals classic linguistic anthropological tools—stance and footing—to show that Brazilians' negotiations over the terms of convivial difference are anything but decided. If laughter "out of place"

(Goldstein 2003) continues to signal Brazilians' thinly disguised discomfort with living together across lines of racialized, gendered, and class distinctions, then Silva's study shows that activist discourse is pulling back the mask on the structural and ideological status quo. Language once treated as unremarkable in a context of "everyday racisms" (Wise 2016, 482) is now subject to public critique and deliberation.

As such, Silva's take on conviviality aligns closely with that of Wise and Noble (2016), foregrounding the effortful, if often under-recognized, attention demanded of those in historically inequitable settings to dealing with others across salient categories of difference. Too, though, he recognizes in defences of Brazil's racialist and racist *brincadeira* tradition the echo of Gilroy's (2004) celebratory but ever-aspirational cosmopolitan conviviality. Usefully, Silva's contribution frames the conceptual friction between conviviality and social/racial justice as necessary for a critically informed-and-accountable conviviality, understandings of which are available via analysis of interactants' subject positions and discursive agency.

The young Muslim American adults featured in Haleema Welji's article treat dignity and conviviality not as a set of given social and moral conditions but as fields of deliberation and intervention. As people of faith who often describe themselves as sheltered from the wider world in childhood, encounters with an increasingly diverse age cohort at university spark broader understandings of the human condition and dissatisfaction with what they perceive as pressure to conform within the Muslim community. Welji juxtaposes the foundational notion of *ummah* (the global Muslim community united in identity and belief) with her participants' growing commitments to social justice and posits that these young activists seek to (re)position themselves within a broader human family as Muslims, children of immigrants, and politically compassionate, savvy members of society. Of particular importance here is the price that Welji's interviewees often pay for pursuing Western liberal-democratic ideals, as their embrace of racial equity, LGBTQ+ rights, and prison abolition put them at odds with more narrow definitions of the ummah. For many, their transition into adulthood is also fraught with distancing from Islam.

Welji's exploration of this trade-off exposes her participants' self-conscious grappling with ethical and moral stances regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion as dignity-seeking practices within overlapping contexts of university, family, and faith. In asserting common cause with a range of diversely identified

others, Muslim American interviewees expand their understandings of the ummah to embrace Black and LGBTQ+ believers, and even non-believers, for instance. Similarly to Davidson's work, Welji thereby highlights tensions among religious devotees striving to embody and enact spiritual ideals (for example, hospitality to strangers, unity among believers) even as they find themselves discomfited by exclusions that condition those ideals (for example, White dominance, heteronormativity). Welji's key ethnographic contribution is in sharing her interviewees' critical and ambivalent questioning about whether and how possibilities for being good people and good Muslims align in their particular generational and social contexts. Her framing of these deliberations as intra- rather than intergroup tensions provides a valuable window onto the shifting ideological diversity of the ummah while refusing to treat named sociological identities (race, gender, sexuality) as de facto determiners of inclusion. Indeed, Welji's research participants display a great deal of individual and intellectual agency and, in contrast with the older women of racialized and immigrant backgrounds in Davidson's study, enjoy positions of relative privilege that allow them to experiment with defining their terms of engagement with the religious community.

As O'Connor (below) also notes for some of his participants, young people's enactment of what Martha Radice has called "everyday cosmopolitanism" (2016, 436) motivates imaginative decentring and recontextualizing of identities within a wider field of accountability, stitching the self into relation with others whose differences, Welji's respondents maintain, should not mitigate dignified treatment within the ummah. Welji's participants' earnest self-cultivation around an ethos of social justice raises further questions about differences in convivial strategies among people not only across cultural settings, but also across the life span.

Brendan O'Connor's analysis of teachers' and students' treatments of social differences in the US-Mexico borderlands rounds out the special issue by bringing conviviality squarely into the arena of moral anthropology. He elucidates how axes of difference constitute "ethical affordances" (Keane 2014) that, when made interactionally salient, not only spark dispositional performances, but also build up social personae linked to evaluations of moral character. O'Connor thus illuminates the interactional *how* of convivial sociality without trying to explain away discord. Building on Nowicka and Vertovec's (2014, 344) observation that conviviality is both laborious and

fragile, O'Connor uses linguistic anthropological frameworks to define it as an "emergent discursive object" and "provisional interactional achievement." Here, conviviality is not an ideal collective state or abstract value but instead an interactional possibility, as contingent upon interactants' material circumstances as upon their ideological dispositions. The analytic strength of this approach lies in recognizing how social distinctions—such as race, class, and language—act as ethical affordances, fodder for evaluative stancetaking that encourages or forecloses convivial engagement. In deconstructing a range of teacher and student interactions in two unique educational contexts in Arizona and Texas, O'Connor finds that his participants' identities cannot be predictably mapped to their enactment of convivial stances. Where race and linguistic differences might be expected to create unbridgeable divides, students and their teacher find common ground through shared rural backgrounds. And where social distinctions seem minimal, some participants hew to non-convivial stances, citing linguistic and moral failings among their counterparts.

Indeed, O'Connor's attention to participants' negotiations of respect and deservingness transforms the question of dignity, much like conviviality and belonging, into an interactional one. Locating his study in the domain of "ordinary ethics" (Das 2012), he makes an important theoretical contribution to this special issue and to studies of multicultural conviviality more broadly. By tracing moments of moral stancetaking across speakers' ongoing interactions, O'Connor unpacks processes by which different dimensions of interactants' moral personhood get iteratively "typified" and made available as resources for convivial alignment. Conviviality-as-interactional-achievement therefore rests on treating emergent moral personhood as distinct from category-bound social identities.

## Conclusion

Sharing our work several weeks after Britain's longest-reigning monarch has died makes the articles that follow interventions at a new moment in decolonial life. If Elizabeth II's constancy was a source of comfort to many of her subjects (Kunzru 2022), then this moment—for the moment—suggests an opening in which the melancholic empire that Gilroy (2004) critiqued may be further dismantled. Even so, as First Nations leaders call upon the new monarch to renounce the Doctrine of Discovery (CBC News 2022), it is clear that Gilroy's framework of "ordinary multiculturalism" may not quite apply. Diversity, as

a mundane social fact, exerts very little pressure in matters of Indigenous sovereignty, racial justice, or systemic reparations. Gilroy notes, to be sure, that his move to normalize identity-based differences in the early aughts was tied to the moment in which he wrote *After Empire.* Growing suspicion against Muslims as Al-Qaeda increased the frequency and scale of its attacks translated into handwringing across Europe and North America, where anxiety about terrorists "living amongst us" sparked questions about the wisdom of multicultural models for liberal democratic life. By 2010, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that multiculturalism had "utterly failed" (Weaver 2010), public, political, and scholarly focus on a presumably renewed clash of civilizations had revived images of religious crusades and righteous defense of homeland. Us-versus-them ideologies informed immigration policy changes, school curricula, and electoral campaigns—alternatively reinforcing and challenging the divide, but steeping public discourse in questions of moral personhood, who was deserving (or not) of welcome and belonging, and how individual rights and community dignity might be protected in the midst of war, suspicion, and violence.

The authors in this issue write from a time of pancontinental fascist resurgence but also a time of expanding public concern for repairing systemic injustices. Indeed, we write from a time of overlapping crises (public health, environmental, social justice, geopolitical) that lend urgency to understanding the mechanisms that turn differences into points of connection or contention. Our work, like Gilroy's, challenges the notion that difference is a problem to be managed/solved (particularly through assimilation). But we ground our inquiries in long-term ethnographic research, testing the analytic mettle of conviviality across contexts in which categorical treatments of identity (race, culture, religion, etcetera) cannot fully account for the negotiations taking place.

Together, these articles find in participants' deliberations and corrective actions indexes of (often unrealized) criteria for dignified living in spaces of interconnectedness and ethico-moral competition, further shaped by the crosscutting influences of political polarization, displacement, and rising ethno-nationalisms. Our focal participants are themselves self-consciously aware of their status as "others" or "strangers" from a standpoint of power: migrants, female heads of household, and racial and religious minorities among them. The forms of conviviality that emerge when dignity claims mediate competition over space, status, recognition, and resources may be tenuous, but our participants

pursue them nonetheless, contesting and shaping the *shoulds* that will afford them a say in their own personhood and social connections.

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## Acknowledgments

Thanks to my colleagues for following the trails that this issue's questions led us down. Our articles saw early iterations on a panel at the 2018 American Anthropological Association Meetings, where commentary by Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz provided feedback that deepened the work. *Anthropologica*'s wonderful editorial team—Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier, Sue Frohlick, Karli Whitmore, and Jelena Golubovic—have provided consistent, responsive, and collaborative leadership throughout the publication process. Finally, I thank former *Anthropologica* Editor Sonja Luehrmann (1975–2019) for her early advocacy for this special theme; her support and enthusiasm propelled us forward.

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