

Afterword

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Dignity, Conviviality, Moral Contests of Belonging

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Afterword

Dignity and indignities in the quest for conviviality

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Anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers have been using ‘conviviality’ in the last decade or so as a concept to theorize living with/across difference in everyday life, usually in multiethnic urban contexts. They draw on Paul Gilroy’s hopeful use of conviviality to describe “the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life” (2004, xi)—a feature that slipped under the radar of the anxieties and debates associated with “panicked multiculturalism” (Noble 2013). By the mid-2010s, conviviality seemed to eclipse the qualified cosmopolitanisms (situated, vernacular, rooted, ordinary, visceral, banal, everyday...) that had previously been employed in empirical studies of how people lived with each other in plural societies. These terms had in their turn succeeded others, such as everyday multiculturalism (Wise and Velayutham 2009).

Each new coinage or new use of an old word in our disciplines casts a different light on analyses of social life, illuminating some facets and obscuring others. By means of ethnographic research conducted in Brazil, Canada, Spain, Chile, and the USA, this thematic section of *Anthropologica* gives us excellent material to think through how conviviality, as a concept, can help or hamper our understandings of what it means to live together in the world. Importantly, it also flexes and stretches the concept in new ways by counterbalancing it with the concept of dignity. In this commentary, I want to ask first what we gain and then what we risk by embracing the idea of conviviality, as well as what contribution the combination with dignity makes.

One strength of conviviality—especially for anthropologists—is that it is explicitly enmeshed in *sociality*. It makes no sense to imagine a person being convivial all by themselves; solitary conviviality is a contradiction in terms. (This contrasts with the idea of being cosmopolitan, for example, which is quite often ascribed to individuals.) Every article in this section shows that conviviality is social and relational, accomplished through interactions between people living in particular circumstances. Neighbours embedded in networks of reciprocity in the peripheral neighbourhood of Barra do Ceará, Brazil, use convivial collective memories to level differences of class or politics among them (Jerome). Older women from Guyana and Korea create hospitable conviviality among themselves and for others as they cook suppers for the local community at their Presbyterian church in Toronto (Davidson). Students and teachers strive to find ways of relating across differences of culture and class in schools in El Ejido, Spain (Taha) and along the US-Mexico border (O'Connor). Young US Muslims seek to build inclusive communities first within and then beyond the *ummah* (Welji). Black feminist activists deftly disarm the crude racist banter of a government minister in Brazil (da Silva). Chilean artists engage in visual and participatory call-and-response with their publics in order to articulate the crisis of inequality in their country (Ashley). Conviviality cannot be abstracted from everyday life. Even where *convivencia* is addressed in policy, like in the school in El Ejido, it is not an enduring ambience; rather, people make it and break it together, as they interact.

Relatedly, it is striking how often conviviality is identified with fields of social reproduction—including, in this collection, the domestic spaces of a marginalized neighbourhood and the community spaces of a church and mosques, and schools, colleges, and student societies. These are all realms where forms of everyday sociability are fundamental to the processes of raising or caring for people or moulding them into members of society. Such spheres of activity are, moreover, highly gendered, and the key actors in most of the articles in this section are women and girls, whose social skills are especially critical to the evaluation of their success as persons.

Conviviality is also *active*: it is accomplished by people acting and responding to each other in their everyday context. The close attention paid to language—or more specifically, to conversation—in several of these articles demonstrates this especially well. For example, in O'Connor's ethnography of a school near the US-Mexico border, white teacher Julia builds rapport with her Mexican

students by showing she understands their wordplay when they turn her word *barista* into their funny word *burrista* (she who rides burros). Julia's engagement in this linguistic dexterity is a sign not only that she can appreciate classroom banter (the mode of interaction), but also that she respects their rural way of life (the position the students speak from). Jerome's account of conversations among a group of women living in a *favela* in northeastern Brazil explains how they appeal to shared memories of the neighbourhood, both pleasant and unpleasant, as a way to manage and soothe tensions arising over differences of political opinion. The turns of their nostalgic conversation participate in preserving their network of reciprocity. These analyses show how conviviality is indeed an "interactional achievement" (O'Connor). Conviviality is not a given; it is emergent, contingent upon what people say to each other and do together, and how they treat each other.

Conviviality thus always carries the risk of its *opposite*: conflict, or inhospitality, or communicational rupture. Davidson's article underlines how acute this risk is: when the white women in the Presbyterian church finally begin to participate in the community meal preparation that the racialized immigrant women of the congregation had founded, they took over the project entirely, substituting cheap deals on spaghetti sauce and plastic cutlery for meals made from scratch served with proper silverware. In so doing, the white churchwomen destroyed the camaraderie—conviviality—that had emerged among the immigrant churchwomen as they cooked, served, and cleared up together. The white churchwomen's unthinkingly inhospitable actions, taken in the name of efficiency and efficacy, are an example of what I will call *contraviviality*, to coin a term—'living against'. Contraviviality captures this obverse of conviviality that lurks in its shadows.

Being social, relational, contextual, and contingent, and accomplished in interaction, the concept of conviviality further implies that there are people who are not involved or included in it; it has in-groups and out-groups. The *boundaries* around conviviality can be larger and looser or smaller and tighter, more or less porous or permanent, but they are, inevitably, there. Conviviality cannot encompass all the people, all the time. Taha's ethnography of the school in El Ejido provides a case in point: when Moroccan schoolgirls were accused of stealing food from a peer, the school's policy of open, dialogic, *convivial* communication was closed down to these particular students, who already often found themselves having to defend their supposed cultural differences

in citizenship classes. The norm of conviviality was swiftly suspended for the students suspected of breaking other school rules, even though it was supposed to be a standard policy. In this way, conviviality can be conditional.

Conviviality can have a certain clubbiness, especially given the everyday meanings of the adjective in English and French, which emphasize warmth and friendliness (the 17th century meaning of convivial was “fit for a feast”). The parties Boris Johnson hosted at No. 10 Downing Street in May and June 2020 during strict Covid-19 lockdowns in the UK were no doubt convivial in that sense, but they were hardly occasions where participants sought to bridge cultural difference. This, to me, highlights the potential *slipperiness* of conviviality as a concept: because it refers to temporary, informal sociality as well as the social-scientific concept of living-with-difference, it can point to starkly different sets of circumstances. Thus, even within this thematic section, we find opposite situations labelled as convivial. On one hand, the racist *brincadeiras* that members of the upper classes of Brazil use to keep Afro-Brazilians in their low-status place are characterized as convivial (although they are increasingly called out, as Silva explains). On the other hand, also convivial are the anti-racist, cosmopolitan outlooks of young Muslims in the USA who base their activism on a belief in the equal dignity of all human beings. There may be other terms that sometimes mean their opposites in this way—we can think of development initiatives that impose “empowerment” from the top down, or “participatory” research that is anything but, for example—but such contrariness is something to critique rather than to encourage.

Part of the problem may be that conviviality in English or French is not used colloquially in the sense that Paul Gilroy and those who followed his lead mean; most of our social-scientific definitions of the word are *etic* ones, not *emic* ones. In Spanish-speaking countries, the equivalent word is more likely to be in common parlance: as Taha notes, “*Convivencia* has long been a major emphasis in Spanish schooling and society.” Clearly, *convivencia* there has a political and programmatic history that might be more similar to, say, “multiculturalism” in Canada or the UK. *Convivencia*, then, is not quite commensurate with conviviality, which is why the *aula de convivencia* in Taha’s article sounds a little creepy in translation as the “conviviality room.” Presumably, it is a place where students are sent to resolve conflicts and find ways to get along with each other, rather than to endure enforced conviviality!

Slipperiness notwithstanding, conviviality and contraviviality are thought-provoking analytics for thinking through everyday social life as well as broader social relations of power (*rappports de force*). What makes the contribution of this thematic section especially original is that it sets conviviality in tension with dignity. This makes it plain what is at stake in the pursuit of conviviality. Living together across difference, whether differences are construed as intra-group or inter-group, and whether the coexistence is of the order of “minimal consensus” (Heil 2015) or something more involved, implies practices of civility and signs of recognition. The people who are doing the living-together will (ideally, eventually, at some points) be treating each other and recognizing each other as full persons. However, since conviviality is negotiated, dignity is not always fully accorded, and some social actors at some points will suffer moments of indignity.

Dignity can be found and felt in various domains. Jerome and Davidson both speak to the dignity of being able to offer hospitality. Practices of hosting are certainly convivial, but they also imply dignity. In Barra do Ceará, favours small and large exchanged over the long term within kin-based and neighbourhood-based social networks help even out relations among richer and poorer network members, according dignity to those who may not be able to afford the most materially. In the Presbyterian church in Toronto, the white women’s contravivial takeover of the community suppers is a double indignity for the racialized immigrant women. Not only are they deprived of the dignity of hosting (in God’s house, moreover), but also of the dignity of self-expression. They feel they must not complain, in order to preserve overall harmony in the church—so they are in effect taking on more than their fair share of affective labour in the quest for conviviality.

The articles by Taha and O’Connor both discuss the dignity of “communicative entitlement” (Taha): the dignity of being heard, both in substance (what is said) and in voice (who is saying it, from what social position). Taha emphasizes that the Moroccan students accused of stealing and lying appeal to the school’s policy of *convivencia*, which favours the right to speak and be heard, even while they point out that it has failed them. O’Connor’s research shows how social differences between groups become “ethical affordances” for taking moral stances that can accord or withhold dignity to/from the group perceived as other. Thus, students notice the class, linguistic, and educational

differences between US-based and Mexico-based students attending university on the US side of the border, and mobilize them in making judgments that can either sharpen or blur lines of difference. O'Connor exposes the constant work of morally evaluating the self and others that underpins both convivial and contravivial interactions.

In the articles by Silva and Welji, as well as the art review by Ashley, what is at stake is the equal dignity of all persons, their fundamental worth as human beings. In a way, Silva and Welji start at opposite ends of dignity. In the context of their interviews with Welji, the young Muslim activists in the US are in a position of agency vis-à-vis universal human dignity: they recount seeking others beyond their immediate religious circles who share their beliefs and arenas where they can act upon it (such as food insecurity research for Farah and prison abolition in Diab's case). In contrast, Silva's article takes as its starting point out-group perspectives—and outright mockery—of domestic workers, sometimes publicly relegated in Brazil to a less-than-human status. Silva moves the arguments towards dignity by describing how Black activists like senator Benedita da Silva led the resistance against this racist joke that reinforced racialized social stratification. They reclaimed agency and mobility for domestic workers by means of linguistic tactics that subverted degrading clichés (turning “a woman's place is in the kitchen” to “a maid's place is wherever she chooses”). This refusal of “Black abjection” (Vargas cited by Silva) is a claim to dignity that shifts the terms of supposedly convivial humour in Brazil. Finally, in Ashley's account of public protest art in Chile, we learn that dignity was literally projected onto a central public square in Santiago (Plaza Baquedano, popularly renamed Plaza de la Dignidad during the protests). This artistic intervention and others were part of a long *estallido social* (social outburst) crying out that *convivencia* cannot be accomplished in a context of ever-increasing social inequality.

By linking the concept to dignity, this rich thematic section stretches the strands of debates around conviviality in important ways. It shows not only that conviviality is social, interactional, and emergent, but also that it is caught up in the moral contests and evaluations of “ordinary ethics”. Although it does not escape the conceptual ambiguities of conviviality, it helps clarify (better than many collections on the theme) the actual mechanisms of conviviality—and how they fail. Finally, in weaving conviviality with dignity, it begins to raise crucial questions about how the sharing and circulation of symbolic and

material resources across social divides—or, alternatively, their hoarding by those on the privileged sides—affect the everyday realization or rupture of living together.

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