

For Professor Paul Rabinow, a.k.a., Paul the Elder.

Reflections & remembrances on the occasion of Paul's passing.

Gabriel G. Coren

April 8th, 2021.

Paul left New York City for Berkeley anthropology in 1978, one year after the watershed publication of *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. It is well known lore that after Paul's dissertation advisor, Clifford Geertz, read the manuscript for *Reflections*, Geertz informed Paul that should he dare submit it to presses, Geertz was prepared to leverage the full measure of his then unmatched esteem within American academic anthropology to ensure it would never see publication. Paul dared. On Geertz's urging, eighteen university publishers passed before the University of California Press—and then the University of California department of anthropology the following year—accepted him.

By the time I arrived at Berkeley in the fall of 2012, Paul had already been a resident of Kroeber Hall for thirty-four years. No longer an unknown antiestablishmentarianist threat to the discipline, Paul had instead become inveterate to anthropology, establishing himself by more than once transforming what anthropology—*anthropos + logos*—was, could be, could think, and might become. From *Reflections* in the '70s to *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* at the end of the '80s to *Making PCR: A Story of Biotechnology* and *French DNA: Trouble in Purgatory* in the '90s, Paul had continuously pushed the limits of narrative form, experimenting, often recursively, with myriad manner of inquiring into and then presenting the modern figure of the human's predicament: "that being," he aphorized in *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment*, "who suffers from too many logoi." Ever restive, Paul's style shifted registers project to project, period to period. Yet, no matter the idiom he yoked (and later invented) to express his thinking, his work remained anthropology's vanguard.

Paul influence on the field of anthropology was such that my initial encounter with his work occurred not at Berkeley but at the New School for Social Research, through two of his students. The first anthropology class I ever attended was an economic anthropology course taught by Janet Roitman, who was then the NSSR's department chair. During seminars, when materials made her stir, she would speak endearingly of her postdoctoral mentor, Paul Rabinow. One day in 2011, I was in her office hours asking yet again "what anthropology is," when a package arrived. It was a copy of a golden jacketed book, *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary*. "This," she told me, "is anthropology."

Soon after, I enrolled in my second ever anthropology course, which wrestled with the overlapping genealogies of philosophical anthropology, on the one hand, and the contemporary neurosciences on the other. The instructor was a newly hired Professor, Nicolaus Langlitz, a recent graduate of Berkeley anthropology and student of Paul's. When I expressed my mounting interest in the anthropology of life and science, Nick suggested that I read three books and then return to discuss the field: Immanuel Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*,

Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, and Paul Rabinow's *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*. By the second decade of the twenty first century, introductions to anthropology like these—and, through an eclectic array of students who had learned with him, to Paul's work—were possible in many departments around the world.

My cohort at Berkeley anthropology first met Paul Rabinow the man in person in March 2012, at the department's annual welcome for incoming graduate students. All of the recent admittees to the program were gathered in the Gifford Room together with the full faculty for a general meet-and-greet. Each faculty member introduced themselves, so that my cohort might finally put faces to names. During the Q&A that followed, a prospective student raised their hand to ask how marginally competitive the funding packages and institutional perks were going to be relative to a slew of similarly regarded U.S. anthropology departments. Felted hat in hand, Paul rose from his chair, indicating that he would care to field the question. "This is Berkeley," he said pridefully, if with an edge. "It is a public university," he went on, looking about the room at each of us. "As with any university today, it has problems. Many problems," he added drolly, setting off a choral mix of groans and giggles around the room. "But this *is* Berkeley, a public institution, and that means something worth thinking about. Look, if you just want to make sure that the bathrooms have brand new toilets and fancy trashcans, you should probably just go to Chicago." That was Paul: frank, humorous, prone to cantankerousness, and a defender of the dignity of one's place—in this particular remembrance, the place of the public university in civic life and the privilege afforded those who wished to reside there.

Every alumnus of Berkeley's anthropology department, from each of the cohorts incoming between 1978 and until Paul's retirement in 2019, can picture similar scenes. But what those in (or near to) my cohort did experience, but which graduates from prior decades did not, was the pleasure of engaging Professor Rabinow during the period of what he might call—in homage to Theodore Adorno on Beethoven—his "late style."

Together with his student, collaborator, and co-author Gaymon Bennett, he had just published *Designing Human Practices: An Experiment with Synthetic Biology*, in which they chronicled their multi-year attempt to establish a collaborative venue—at the interface of the human and life sciences—for innovating with inquiry into the ontology and ethics of a newly emerging domain of bioengineering. With their experiment concluded, the anthropologists had returned home (Bennett to the Univ. of Arizona, Rabinow to Kroeber Hall). And Rabinow's return from his years as the leader of "Thrust 4: Human Practices" at SynBERC—and subsequent remediation of the experience of that endeavor—marked a pivot from a prior to a later stage in his life and work. It was a period largely free of travel, a quieter period, reflective and more inward.

It was also, of course, a period of particular productivity, creativity, and care. Together with Anthony Stavrianakis, Paul poured himself into his undergraduate teaching as well as the Labinar. Labinar, a neologistic mashup of laboratory + seminar, was a haven of creativity, play, and collaborative engagement with contemporary problem-spaces. A graduate seminar-styled outgrowth of the ARC, or the Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory, the

Labinar afforded those who were interested a pedagogical experience unavailable elsewhere in the increasingly formalized and bureaucratic university of this century: exercises in collective inquiry, experimentation with media and technology as vehicles for giving form to thought-in-action, and the opportunity to experience graduate school seminars in a desubjectivational mode—a freedom from the otherwise near-ubiquitous demand for virtuosic performances of subdisciplinary competency. The Labinar had emerged in the mid-2000s, but its final years were intimate and particularly improvisational. The last years of the Labinar with Paul were animated by a small group of us who then were anthropology graduate students, Anthony Stavrianakis, Lyle Fearnley, Joshua Craze, and Roy Fischer.

Alongside the cultivation of his “late style,” during this period Paul pursued the composition of his late works. There is the trilogy of books co-written with Anthony Stavrianakis and published in 2013, 2014, and 2019: these are *Demands of the Day: On the Logic of Anthropological Inquiry*, *Designs on the Contemporary: Anthropological Tests*, and *Inquiry after Modernism*. This trilogy of works is nothing short of monumental, and it culminates in an epiphanic “remediation and reoccupation of anthropology” after its late modernist variants and their variations have played out. What is gathered conceptually and elaborated experientially, rather, is a virtual plane upon which “a contemporary mode” for anthropological inquiry today can be practiced in care with others—and the conditions for crafting a crucible ‘midst modernist anthropology’s problems. If in the mid/late 20th century, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* catalytically transformed traditional anthropology’s bounds, *Inquiry after Modernism* offers the anthropology of our time a turning point—a *kairos*—for inventing traditions in anthropology anew. In addition to its significance for the field of anthropology more broadly, the trilogy is a monumental achievement in as much measure for Rabinow, the wise and weathered elder, as for Stavrianakis, the gifted and searingly sensitive student-become-scholar. That this is so is a testament to the horizons of possibility that Paul opened up by practicing what he preached, or in ethical terms, by linking his thinking with his conduct: collaboration, curiosity, care, “thinking in fields of tension,” incessant self-reinvention.

Paul came to Kroeber Hall every day that his health permitted until the pandemic arrived last March. Meandering the third-floor corridors, one could pass the door to his office—always open—and expect to see Paul there. From 2018 to 2020, if Paul wasn’t entertaining a friend, guest, or visitor, one would find him sitting meditatively in his dimly lit studio, with either early modern liturgical compositions or jazz (Coltrane, often) playing from the speakers on his iMac.

It was during this time that Paul composed his final book manuscript, a poignant and deeply vulnerable text titled *The Privilege of Neglect: Science as a Vocation Revisited*. It is a quixotic, fragmentary, poetic work upon himself as subject, a remediation of his experience over the arc of his vocation as anthropologist, a periodized series of sojourns, lamentations, moods, memories, minor affects, and insights. Over its pages, the seasoned anthropologist comes to the realization that resolutions to strife—let alone, solutions to perennial problems—are illusory at best; instead, he finds something like solace in the wistful whispers of a Dürer engraving (or perhaps, a *daemon*) and is “seized by the need for care and repair.”

The Privilege of Neglect is a mark of the time of its untimely author, a coda to the creation of the contemporary. Near the end, Paul takes up and turns over a maxim from Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, in which Adorno remarks upon a certain "delicacy and fragility of thinking" in "fields of tension." Paul reflects upon some of the relations he had arranged and sustained throughout different times in his life in order to think in fields of tension with others: among them, with Clifford Geertz, Georges Canguilhem, Richard McKeon, Claude Levi-Strauss, Louis Dumont, Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, Donna Haraway, Michel Foucault, Robert Bellah, and Marilyn Strathern. Paul's reflection on his past relations yields to a minor maxim of his own: "If circumstances permit, seek a field of tension for thinking."

Paul Rabinow offered the circumstances for thinking in a field of tension to whomever sought to establish one with him. For Berkeley's department of anthropology and for the multitude of students, colleagues, friends, and passersby who did so, he will be deeply missed, the gravity of his loss of particularly pull. Yet all—including the many many thousands of readers, past and future—who encounter his wisdom, wit, and words in written form, are forever grateful to Paul for his exemplary, passionate life and work in thought.