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## Book review: Paul Rabinow's *The Accompaniment*

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By Jason Alley

[\*The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary\*](#)



by [Paul Rabinow](#)

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011

248 pp, US\$21.00 paperback

From the start, I should note that I have never particularly liked the genre of the book review. They always read like the experience of going to a museum and listening to one of those guided audio tours—complete with headsets and portable listening device—as you make your way through the space of an exhibit. So I will do my best to spare the reader perusing the pages of *Somatosphere*. If readers are looking to find out if Paul Rabinow's *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary* (2011) is a worthy read, then the answer is an unambiguous “Yes.” If readers are looking for a guided tour of another's take on their own reading experience after the fact then the present review might have something to offer. A chapter-by-chapter survey seems a harmless enough path through the museum. Instead—sticking close to ethnographic praxis—let me focus on some key moments.

A first moment comes courtesy of Nietzsche when Rabinow tells us that in

German the term for the contemporary is *Zeitgenossen*, referring to “...‘those who accompany us in time’” (3). One of several etymological excursions, it sets the stage for what follows. Here we witness an encounter unfolding between the author and the history of ideas—the library as accompaniment. Barthes, Foucault, Geertz, Luhmann, Dewey, Weber and Michaud will join the bibliophilic chorus. A second moment is in the mode of remembrance. In the book’s early sections he treats us to vignettes of Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz (most of Part One). The snapshots of Foucault are interesting, but the portrait of Geertz easily worth the price of admission. In a chapter drawing from the period of his early fieldwork, Rabinow revisits his memories of Geertz and Paul Hyman, the photographer who supplied the images peppered throughout *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Rabinow 1977). This looking backwards is hardly nostalgic (as readers will discover). It reminds us all of the centrality of the webs of relationships that make any cultural and intellectual moment possible at all—nicely echoed by recent appraisals (Rich 1998, Clifford 2012).

A third moment comes when Rabinow maps the work of collaboration undertaken by himself and his graduate students as they try to imagine a different form and venue for learning and working together (Chapter 6). The *labinar* (lab meeting + seminar) and the Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory ([www.anthropos-lab.net](http://www.anthropos-lab.net)) emerge as heterotopic spaces of experimentation. And a fourth moment comes when Rabinow turns to the worlds of science and art in trying to imagine the contemporary. Here we are presented with failures—participatory work within a synthetic biology research center and a less than inspiring set of responses to “A Questionnaire on the Contemporary” culled from the pages of *October* (Chapters 7 and 9). Failures are a constitutive feature of any research venture or collaborative undertaking but rarely are they deployed to do theoretical work. Rabinow gleans lessons from these cases in his Conclusion when he takes up the question of “sacrifice” and knowledge production. Here his goals are explicitly articulated:

In anthropology, it ought to be time—although unfortunately it seems not yet to be time—to sacrifice the *individualism* as the subject position that has been at the core of anthropology’s approach to research, publication, pedagogy, and, above all, thinking. (202)

All of these moments do not add up to an overarching theory of accompaniment. The chapters are presented as case studies in philosophy, ethics, work and politics. In [Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary](#), he and George Marcus articulate how a refashioning of anthropological precepts and training of graduate students would have to

take place in undertaking an anthropology of the contemporary (Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion and Rees 2008). Here Rabinow continues that conversation, drawing on the range of sources enumerated above. Though the book's subtitle could have continued the noun form with "assemblages," the author gives us the active verb "assembling" to describe his task. As for the singularity of "the accompaniment" in the book's title, Rabinow demonstrates that this accompaniment can take many forms—a biographical individual, a text, a problematic, a venue, a collaborative endeavor. But Rabinow does not easily assemble the future for us. This book does not offer a treatise in defense of collaboration *writ large*. Rabinow writes of blocks and bad faiths as much as he does of possibility. And at book's end, he offers up the dyad of "care" and "rigor" as that which should motivate the kind of critique worth practicing in the uncertain present and future (209).

What does all this hold for anthropology? If one were looking for a map of how to reassemble the contemporary in anthropological praxis, this book is not the place to begin. Rabinow's conversations with Marcus and company is the better text in this regard. Yet *The Accompaniment* is, for this reader at least, one of the best instances of the essay I have come across recently. Not the peer reviewed specimen, but what Adorno had in mind when he described the essay as that which "...presses for the reciprocal interaction of its concepts..." and "...coordinates elements instead of subordinating them..." (Adorno 1991: 13; 22). If the contemporary is good for scientific and artistic manipulation then maybe, just maybe, Rabinow urges, it could help anthropology problematize its own default settings and epistemological comfort zones. Easier said, written and read than done.

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