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Top of the heap: Paul Rabinow and Joshua Craze

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By Maria Cecilia Dedios and Ekaterina Anderson



In this installment of “Top of the heap”, Berkeley anthropology professor Paul Rabinow and his student Joshua Craze share titles that span music, humanitarianism, witnessing, and photography.

Paul Rabinow

Peter Brown: [Through the Eye of the Needle](#) (Princeton, 2012)

An extraordinarily important book, *Through the Eye of the Needle*, is a kind of *summa* of historian Peter Brown’s life work on late antiquity. He shows with a patient, fluid prose backed by immense and judiciously evaluated scholarship that “Christianity” did not simply replace “The Roman Empire” when it came to its understanding and approach to

wealth, its excesses and deficits. Brown shows how over the course of a century, the fourth, the Roman conception, practices and institutions of obligation and care of those included in the civic was gradually challenged, modified and to a degree supplanted by the Christian understanding of the poor (not a uniquely economic category). Read today, the book casts surprising illumination on the dilemmas, contradictions and achievements of humanitarianism in its current form, without ever mentioning them directly. *Through the Eye of the Needle* is both history and genealogy at their most inspiring and instructive.

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John Eliot Gardner: [Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven](#) (Knopf, 2013)

The renowned conductor narrates, with intense passion tempered by a helpful presentation of recent scholarship as well as a deceptively calm ability to present the technical intimacy of Bach's compositions, a contemporary biography of sorts that is also an *apologia* of music and creation in general. He succeeds in his stated task of "making Bach human" (graduate students will be encouraged or dismayed about how many positions Bach did not get) as well as the internal unfolding of Bach's vocal music. Much of this music, Gardner underscores was performed with little rehearsal time and as a prelude to the sermons that followed it in Church (where attendance was closely overseen and noted by authorities both secular and ecclesiastical). Lest anyone think that vocation was in harmony with power in the Enlightenment (or why they should even pose the question), Gardner's book is an instructional guide, a tonic thick description and an *homage* to the power of both art and vocation.

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Mark Godfrey: [Abstraction and the Holocaust](#) (Yale, 2007)

History did not stop after Adorno's dictum of the impossibility of philosophy after the Holocaust. Godfrey, an art historian and curator at the Tate, guides us through a selected series of compelling attempts to artistically cope with (acknowledge and pass through) the historical condition of the challenge of unrepresentable and its correlative demand to continue creating, ranging from the early paintings of Morris Louis on through Peter Eisenman's Berlin memorial which he juxtaposes to the lesser known and quite different *J Street Project* of Susan Hiller. Godfrey demonstrates that through disciplined scholarship, distillation of theory, and eschewal of trendiness, it is possible to show how abstraction had been confronted as a problem of art and life not as an empty metaphysical game of academic sleight of hand and mind.

Joshua Craze

Part of my dissertation focuses on a number of photographers working in Sudan and South Sudan. Unwilling to reproduce narratives of victimhood or horror in a world inured to their effect, but no longer in a historical epoch in which photographers could be as partisan as Robert Capa, these photographers found an ethical challenge in their craft: how to be give form to what they see in a way that would escape contemporary image-fatigue? In trying to answer these questions, I have found little help in contemporary theory of photography, much of which is based on a suspicion of the craft. If I were to take this work as my guide, I should denounce the claims of photography, and—yet again—deconstruct it.

The four books below stand out from the repetitive choir, and have opened up new paths for my thought. The American writer Susan Linfield begins [Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence](#) with an invective against photography criticism's hatred of photography. She goes on to trace how a number of contemporary photographers—including Gilles Peress and James Natchwey—have navigated both contemporary inertia in the face of images of political violence, and criticism that claims their photographs pornographically exploit their subjects. Linfield writes with a care and attention to the formal and ethical struggles of these photographers that reopens questions of the relationship between the production of images and ethical witnessing.

Linfield deeply cares about photography, as does the great European critic John Berger, some of whose writings on photography have recently been compiled by Geoff Dyer in [Understanding a Photograph](#). All Berger's essays are journeys into photographs. They begin with an intuition, or a sentiment, and then, as Berger wrestles with what attracts him in the image, open out into the world around the photograph. As ever, he writes with the aphoristic confidence of Rousseau. On occasion, the thoughts seem shrill, but then I have never possessed the certainty of Berger's politico-moral compass. The shrillness is infrequent, the depth and seriousness of his engagement astonishing. When his sentences work, they open up windows.

Israeli critic Ariella Azoulay's [The Civil Contract of Photography](#) begins with her attempt to try to see again: how does one look at a photograph today, thirty-some years after Sontag, in a world radically transformed by a heterogeneous variety of images that circulate at unprecedented speeds, and in incredible quantities. It is striking that it is at this moment, amid the sheer morass of images which surround us, that scholars like Azoulay and

Linfield are re-opening questions about the ethics of photography. In the opaque movements of the people that populate the photographs she studies, Azoulay finds the ground for a different conception of politics.

The last book that has sparked my interest is the South African writer Ivan Vladislavic's latest novel, [Double Negative](#). It opens with the dropout Neville Lister—young, smart, and in pain at the ravages of apartheid Johannesburg—accompanying renowned photographer Saul Auerbach for a day trip. The book moves between the famous two photographs Auerbach takes on that day, and Lister's re-encounter with Johannesburg, decades later. Vladislavic embeds the disruptions and dislocations of history in Lister's reflections of the moments of contingency contained in Auerbach's photography. It is a book that made me want to look again.

Paul Rabinow is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, and Director of the [Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory](#) (ARC). His latest book is [Demands of the Day: On the Logic of Anthropological Inquiry](#) (with Anthony Stavrianakis).

Joshua Craze is a 2014 UNESCO-Aschberg Laureate Artist in creative writing, and is currently finishing a doctorate in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. He lives [here](#).

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