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*Words and Deeds, Truth and Conduct – Method in Anthropology and Moral Philosophy:  
A Review Essay of Paul Rabinow and Anthony Stavrianakis's Designs on the Contemporary*

Paul Rabinow and Anthony Stavrianakis, *Designs on the Contemporary: Anthropological Tests*, University of Chicago Press, 2014, 137 pp. + notes, terms, index, \$22.50 US (pbk), 9780226138473.

For puzzle fans, this book is fun; so let the games begin. I enjoyed the engagement and intend whatever passing criticisms as friendly volleys and occasions for correction where I may have misread. A long review for a short book: but one that needs to address several audiences. Readers of this journal may wish to skip down to the section on the Rushdie Affair, and then scroll back or ahead. I assume a philosophically attuned audience (whether trained in the rich critical apparatus of the *madrasah* or in Western style universities): I would write somewhat differently for those who test everything within a fundamentalist believer's defense system, but Muslim academics will know themselves how to negotiate different vernaculars of particular local Muslim communities and class- or nation-linked religiosities. I write this note, fully aware that my own analysis of the Rushdie Affair included in *Debating Muslims*<sup>1</sup> generated the reaction among some Muslim friends that the book would have been excellent apart from that essay. I still firmly believe that those really trained in Islamic debate traditions would recognize and understand, and even others, if they would allow themselves to relax, would accept the analysis of Rushdie's novel and affair, much as they do discussions of the successful Iranian film "The Lizard," which made fun of Iranian clerics to the amusement of many of them; or the verses of Hafez and Sa'di that refute fundamentalist belief. The debate (*bahs*) between Rabinow and myself should be familiar to lovers of the *madrasah* form of debate, and I hope that it will also serve as an entry into more serious debates about how to pursue the study of human societies (anthropology).

Truth and conduct, testing of self and of one's tools of perception, are key terms that this book, *Designs on the Contemporary: Anthropological Tests*, struggles to align under the complicated conditions of what the authors call the "contemporary." The "contemporary" is

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<sup>1</sup> Michael M.J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

a methodological horizon of indeterminations, puzzles, trade-offs, impossibilities, and challenges to do something new with left-overs. The “contemporary” thus contrasts with the “actual” (what actually is the case) insofar as the contemporary remains open to alternative ways of seeing the present and projecting the future. The “present” also contrasts with the “actual”: the present is an immediacy that can be reanalyzed through various distancing and defamiliarizing analytics to perceive or construct the actual. These are perspectival and analytic conundra known to most religions (“tying [conduct] back” [to truths], *re-ligio*), as well as to anthropology (the study of human moralities and ethics in which actors are never in control of all the background causalities or intentions of others; and of social, socio-technical, and probabilistic systems in which actors variously game, and thereby change, projected outcomes, as in the continually changing algorithms by which Google projects changeable flu, buying, or popularity trends, or the stock market gambles on Federal Reserve interest rate interventions or other market influences). The authors look for help especially to classic Greek *authors and words* (rather than, say, their social contexts and deeds), providing a lexicon of Greek (and German) terms at the back of the book. In particular they wish to distinguish themselves as beyond the historical horizons of Michel Foucault’s drawing upon Seneca’s stoicism, Immanuel Kant’s pragmatic anthropology,<sup>2</sup> and John Dewey’s pragmatism (interpreted as reconstruction and reduction).

Two case studies provide the test beds: (a) the figure of the contemporary German artist Gerhard Richter, operating in his studio under a grey photograph of the Birkenau concentration camp (grey standing in his palette for absence of colors and their cultural connotations); and (b) the figure of the contemporary British-Indian and American writer, Salman Rushdie, extracting himself from the double-binds of Muslim efforts to transcend the conditions of media and lack of communal controls over public discourse. I use “figure of” in both cases to mark the indeterminations of Rabinow and Stavrianakis’ own interpretations.

### *An Artist in and of the Contemporary*

One of Richter’s works (not discussed by Rabinow and Stavrianakis) to which I am drawn for sociological reasons is his Design for the South Transept Window of Cologne Cathedral (completed in 2007). It was made of many small color squares, based on his 1974 Color Chart painting, “4096 Colors.” It was made through the financial contributions of many large and small donors including Richter’s own donation of the piece. Lee Rosenblum notes, in her *CultureGrrl* blog, that her tour guide said it was “subjected to computer analysis, to insure [sic] that no ‘unfavorable [i.e., inappropriate] imagery’ could be discerned within its ostensibly abstract patterns. (Can’t you make out that fuzzy Baader-Meinhof group member in the lower left? Just kidding.)”<sup>3</sup> The replacement of a historic window, destroyed in World War II, by a large community of named and anonymous donors, made of a non-figural assortment of color squares seems a wonderful expression of the best of contemporary social solidarities.

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<sup>2</sup> On which see also Michael M.J. Fischer, “Ask Not What Man Is, But What We May Expect of Him,” Chapter 6 in *Anthropological Futures* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Lee Rosenblum, “Fine on the Rhine: Richter’s Cologne Cathedral Window Unveiled Next Month,” *CultureGrrl*, July 5, 2007, [http://www.artsjournal.com/culturegrrl/2007/07/fine\\_on\\_the\\_rhine\\_richters\\_col.html](http://www.artsjournal.com/culturegrrl/2007/07/fine_on_the_rhine_richters_col.html).

Rabinow and Stavrianakis are drawn to the “indetermination” of much of Richter’s work. In their reading, and that of art critics they cite, Richter paints over photographs and prints creating puzzles that draw attention to both referentiality and abstraction (109), nostalgia and the avant-garde (107), chance and systematicity (110), finished and unfinished (116), series and ruptures, denial and affirmation. This is a tactic of what is often called the poststructural or postmodern—the effort to point out the terms of variance that are selected for any artwork or conceptual formation, and the effort at postal relations among modernities, refusing the singular “modernity.” Focusing on these indeterminations that provide the ground for selection, interpretation, or reading (i.e. determinations for the moment) is what Rabinow and Stavrianakis call the “mood” or “affect” of pathos. “Affect,” they specify, is not emotion, not an interiority, but a structural relation, and pathos is one of four tropes they identify along with comedy, tragedy and irony (overlapping with the four tropes Hayden White used in his 1973 analyses of the inability of master historians to coherently align argument, ideology, and plot).<sup>4</sup> The affect of pathos, they argue, is the one proper to what they call the contemporary, because it does not rest upon momentary resolutions (comedy), nor perennial failures (tragedy), nor “as if” distancing (irony, satire). Pathos works with lack of success (thus has some relation with tragedy), also with hope (thus some relation with comedy), and with a play with relationships themselves (thus some relation with irony). Kaja Silverman’s reading of Richter’s work in psychoanalytic terms, therefore, they specify, is not “contemporary” because it rests on determinations which they call ironic.

Richter is of interest to Rabinow and Stavrianakis, perhaps, because there are hints of alternatives to polemics and ideologies surrounding such events as the German concentration camps, the death of members of the German Red Army, and the American invasion of Iraq. Polemics and ideologies have become stupid (in the technical sense of blunt and merely emotive). Art’s function instead is to put forms on the chaos of nature and events, an entirely different register, one that Richter often finds consoling in the aftermath of the remains of war. While there is a whiff of art for art’s sake in this adjacency to actual politics, Rabinow and Stavrianakis want to see it, following Michel Foucault’s investigations into changing historical ideologies of care of the self, as a mode of testing: of the self, of art, and of a proper mood or affect for anthropology itself.

Consolation. Discussing his *War Cut*—catalyzed by the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was composed by taking a large abstract painting done two decades previously, photographing and reproducing it in multiple small images, and montaging these with clips from the German press, selected as they fit the layout rather than according to their meaning—Richter says that newspaper articles were ineffectual and impotent, but their plain presentation of facts “consoled me.” “Form,” he goes on to say, “is all we have to cope with fundamentally chaotic facts and assaults.” Rabinow and Stavrianakis suggest that the analogue of chance effects generated by Richter’s distancing and defamiliarizing techniques (overpainting with lines, black splotches, squeegee moving of paint over figural images, selecting color chips arbitrarily and then arranging them) lies in nature itself, “spontaneous, arbitrary, meaningless selection” that “result nonetheless in living forms and beings.” Richter says, “It was good to paint something like this [*War Cut*]. Something story-like. Something fantastic. The absolute opposite of war” (122). Richter’s landscapes are haunted by war, the

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<sup>4</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

woods full of darkness and concealment. His photographs of the Alps overpainted, Rabinow and Stavrianakis say, give “an affect of danger, nature’s inhumanity, uncontrollability, foreignness” (115). Rabinow and Stavrianakis are fascinated by the meaningless forms made by the overpainting, that seem nonetheless to provide affects of warning, of alert. They say, “whatever Richter’s techniques are for escaping more skeptical scrutiny should be marked by cultural observers as worthy of more attention” (116). Richter works with and recreates remains, like Freud’s after effects (*Nachträglichkeit*, or what Rabinow calls *Nachleben*, a term he takes from Abby Warburg referring more to styles in painting than cultural or psychic content), Walter Benjamin’s ruins and dialectical images (holding past aspirations of hope in tension against current banalizations), or Adorno’s imminent critique (finding redemption in seeing the world as it is otherwise, often in music or aesthetics), and what Marcus and Fischer called “cultural critique through juxtaposition.”<sup>5</sup> Richter himself notes, “Even the present has moments of promise” (132).

The photo in Richter’s studio, and his tinting of other concentration camp photos to keep them “present” and active (rather than fading into too often seen images that no longer serve as alerts), as well as his Cologne Cathedral window of color chip mosaics, are perhaps moral stances of acknowledgement and weaving of past evils into healthier, less dangerous, futures even as the mechanical (now electronic) means of production and reproduction destroy or transmute many of our older tools of perception—though, of course, Richter insofar as he is “contemporary,” must not assert any such thing, and as is “actually” the case, things in the future could still break bad.

*A Novelist in and of the Contemporary Who Got Caught in the Actual*

Such indeterminations can perhaps be clarified by the other case study, the Rushdie Affair, which has arguably higher stakes in the actual world, at least by the “metric” of lives at risk. Testing is centrally at issue here: testing of Rushdie’s own sense of self, testing by Islamicists of political moves, testing of the anthropological tools of interpretation. Rabinow and Stavrianakis suggest that anthropologists’ usual, and insufficient, tools of interpretation are either contextualization or apologetics for the native point of view (in either case, what philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Gellner in his debates with philosophers flagged or alerted as danger in the difference between explaining and explaining away). They assign Jeanne Favret-Saada to the former insufficiency, and Talal Asad, Saba Mahmoud, and others to the latter.

In fact, however, ignoring their own charge of contextualizing away, they use Favret-Saada’s analysis of the (failed) charge of blasphemy in the Rushdie affair as working like witchcraft accusations in France, requiring (a) a reservoir of potential theological interpretations and sanctions; (b) a denouncer; (c) an accused; and (d) an authority capable of imposing sanctions. They simplistically identify Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini as providing that authority. It is simplistic because of the contested nature of the *fatwa* (by other *mujtahids*), the history of the use of the charge that they collapse into “blasphemy” (*mahdur al-dam*, death without trial for those viewed as corruptors of the earth), used to execute and murder Baha’is in Iran (just as Agamben describes *homo sacer* for the Romans), and of course in the long run the facts that the Iranian state dropped its support for the death sanction, and since Khomeini died its effect lapses (*fatwas* only have force for present action if the issuer of the

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<sup>5</sup> Marcus, George E. and Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

*fatwa* is alive). The “authority” to enforce a call for death without trial then becomes simply populist and extra-jurisprudential, in what Rabinow and Stavrianakis call “a situation of polemics” (86, 89, *passim*).

The sociolinguistic or linguistic pragmatics and genre analytics they deploy from Chateauraynaud and Tory draws attention to what Victor Turner<sup>6</sup> would have called the “social drama” or processual phases or steps from: (1) *alerts* (*future possible* victims) calling for preventive *administrative* action, banning the book on grounds of public safety without judgment on its content (the Indian Ministry of Finance banned the book’s importation but explicitly said it did not contest the literary or artistic merits of the novel); to (2) framing of legal grounds (unsuccessfully) for a *trial* (*past actions* with “malicious intent” against *identified victims*; violation of lapsed British blasphemy laws, which would be repealed in 2008 thanks to the Rushdie Affair); to (3) *polemical situations* played out in the media and demonstrations (book burnings, assassinations; *revelation* of truth and *exhibition of victims*). Rabinow and Stavrianakis want these sociolinguistic analyses to provide distance, so that the anthropologists are not themselves entangled in the polemical situation.

But there are a number of factual, evaluative, and social analytic slippages that undo their claims to be sustainably “contemporary” and outside the field of polemics. Indeed the essay ends on a polemical (“it goes without saying”) note citing and agreeing with the polemicist, atheist and “anti-theist” Christopher Hitchens in favor of Enlightenment values.

Factual slippages. Rushdie’s novel does not, as Rabinow and Stavrianakis claim, start either narratively or logically from a “historical event” in early Islam, but instead from the double psychological adjustments of migration and of vernacular jumble of stories told by the entertainment film industry in Bollywood and in memories of childhood religious instruction. This makes a huge difference since it puts the evaluations of the novel on an entirely different plane, not one of proper or improper invocation of the satanic verses (that no one denies exists in the Islamic traditions), but rather on how Muslims teach one another and non-Muslims about their traditions.

Nor is it the case that the novel “dispenses with a historical frame” (77, 78) since it is about the actual world when it was written, and in fact was sufficiently in the trope of pathos to diegetically anticipate some of the reactions within its own “contemporary” frame, albeit not what Rabinow and Stavrianakis nicely call the series of “amplifiers” that turn retorts and slogans of “death to” into “actual” polemical violence. It is those amplifiers, as Ayatollah Sistani would identify during the subsequent Muhammad cartoon affair as not only sharing the blame, but violating the Islamic rules against slander and stirring up trouble against neighbors that can rebound to tarnish the reputation of Islam and its ability to flourish.<sup>7</sup> While it is true that the debates from the earliest days of Islam about the status of the hadith about the satanic verses form the ostensive (though misrecognized) focus of the subsequent “Rushdie affair” (since there is little made up in the novel on this score), its primary transgression is exposing well-known stories and debates to outsiders (including unsophisticated Muslims). It is a social transgression rather than a dogmatic or theological one. Yes, one of the interpretations of the significance of the satanic verses is as a parable of

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<sup>6</sup> See: Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> See: Michael M.J. Fischer, “Iran and the Boomeranging Cartoon Wars: Can Public Spheres At Risk Ally With Public Spheres Yet to be Achieved?” *Cultural Politics*, 5(1) [2009]: 27-62.

testing human desire, but equally important is its role in the methodology of determining which are abrogated verses that remain in the written transcript of the oral Qur'an.

More seriously, Rabinow and Stavrianakis assert (their voice) that a headline reading "An Unequivocal Attack on Religious Fundamentalism" is the same thing as saying "an attack on Islam" (90), thereby dismissing the agency, sentiments, and convictions of millions of educated, cosmopolitan, liberal, as well as ordinary, normally pragmatic, Muslims. Similarly, to concede to Talal Asad the claim that questions of cultural politics and their inflection by faith in absolute truth "is not recognizable as a problem to 'most Muslims'" (96) would be to mischaracterize the history of fourteen hundred years of debate among Muslims over interpretation and the humility not to engage in *shirk* (the heresy of assuming to know God's intent), not to mention the struggles within Islamic countries over the past two centuries against absolutism in both government and theology. Cultural politics cannot be set aside. Rushdie was rightly upset at Madhu Jain, author of the pre-publication review, for privileging among various stories and threads of significance in the novel an attack on *fundamentalism* (which she, like he, would support). Rushdie recognized her tactic as a polemical hammer where a scalpel-like alert was needed, where a work of art, a novel, has a chance, and polemic has none. Rabinow and Stavrianakis rightly call Jain's review an "amplifier" on the road to creating a polemical situation.

Related is a misreading of Fischer and Abedi's analysis, which Rabinow and Stavrianakis note and quote from approvingly (an appreciated change from the usual citational absence from the many articles on the affair) but then dismiss it, saying, "the tragic, comic and ironic moods [analyzed by Fischer and Abedi] miss the problematic ratio of breakdown and repair" (99). On the contrary, one might argue that while Rabinow and Stavrianakis' focus on the immediate sociolinguistic *tactics* of alert, trial, or polemic is salutary as far as it goes, it foreshortens and obscures the playing out of longer-term coalitional, class, and immigrant politics that Fischer and Abedi identify as emblematic of the contemporary across distinct if overlapping political arenas. Fischer's own other writings on "torn religions" (Islam, Jainism, Judaism, etc.<sup>8</sup>) point to the distinctive (non-hagiographic) contemporary double-voiced biographies of religious leaders that simultaneously track testing of self, of tactics, and of social analysis of author and subject in their parallel but different modernities (e.g. Massignon and al-Hallaj<sup>9</sup>). These are never-ending struggles across shifting grounds of moral commonsense. Part of Fischer and Abedi's effort is to oppose all-too-easy defenses of the counter-modern (as Rabinow and Stavrianakis say are the cases of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmoud and others), or of the modern, and instead to expand the understandings of metaphor, rhetoric, and interpretation in multiple traditions that allow religious figures and communities, despite lack of consensus (fundamentalist, liberal; secular, religious), nonetheless to live together and to recognize one another's arguments within their own traditions, or on the contrary provide the justifications for conflict. It is indexical of the continuing struggles (breakdown and repair) between fundamentalism and tolerance that the same publisher (Penguin Books, New Delhi), urged by its advisor Kushwant Singh not to publish Rushdie's book, is also the publisher that was intimidated by Hindu fundamentalists this year (2014) into withdrawing well-known Sanskrit expert Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus*

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<sup>8</sup> Michael M.J. Fischer, "Autobiographical Voices (1, 2, 3) and Mosaic Memory: Ethnicity, Religion, Science (An Inquiry into the Nature of Autobiographical Genres and Their Uses in Extending Social Theory)," Chapter 6 in *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, 4 Volumes, translated by Herbert Mason (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).

from the market.<sup>10</sup> The replay is similar to the reprise of the Rushdie Affair with new circuits and amplifiers a decade later with the Muhammad cartoon wars, within the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as across secular and Islamic lines.

Of various series of events that Rabinow and Stavrianakis construct (yes constructivism)—they composed an archive of over one hundred texts and documents relating to the Rushdie Affair, but omit to tell us which documents, so this claim of diligence or method tells us little why these and not other texts and documents, or why they only look at certain transnational circuits and amplifiers and not others. They assemble a set of four items of *visibility*, rather than writings, in France and the U.S. to ask about anti-Muslim triggers to Muslim anger (in the actual), and to ask about how these might be understood in terms of a mode of subjectivation, a mode of transmission, and anthropological judgment. It is an odd set that they admit they can only manage to put into “a common frame” (85) through the above three (unanswered) questions: two covers of the Paris satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* from 2011 and 2012; an inflammatory anti-Muslim video uploaded in California in June 2012 said by some to have contributed to causing the attack in Benghazi and the killing of U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and others on Sept 11, 2012, albeit by militants armed with military grade weapons. The four items perhaps can serve anthropological judgment as “alerts,” but we are given little guidance. In the wake of the October 2011 victory in Tunisia of the moderate Islamist Ennahda party and violent protests in Sidi Bouzid over the cancellation of seats won by the Popular List, *Charlie Hebdo*’s 3 November 2011 issue joked it was “guest-edited” by “Mohammad” who was depicted on the cover of the satire magazine as saying “100 lashes if you don’t die laughing”; while the Sept 19, 2012 cover of *Charlie Hebdo* showing a Hassidic rabbi pushing an imam in a wheelchair, both saying “don’t mock us,” is laid out as a movie poster for a sequel to the 2011 French film *Intouchables* about a wealthy quadriplegic who hires a young Muslim ex-con as a caregiver (released 2 November 2011, becoming the highest grossing non-English language film globally), based on a true story and a previous TV documentary. November 2011 in France thus provides both a positive image of Muslims (the film) and a skeptical one (on Tunisia). The puzzle remains how these four items actually form a set.

More trenchantly, Rabinow and Stavrianakis retell the efforts of Rushdie to extract himself, by writing, from a polemical situation as a form of *askesis* (training of the self to avoid folly). The effort reaches a nadir when Rushdie gives in to the suggestion of a group of Egyptian clerics that all he need do is to submit to a public declaration of Islamic faith. Not only is it “a spectacular failure” convincing no one, it feels terrible for Rushdie, a self betrayal, a betrayal of his supporters, as well as a betrayal by the clerics—especially when he sees these same clerics on television vilifying homosexuals or defending a man’s right to slap his wife.

### *Logic(s), Forms, Bios (Emergent Forms of Life?)*

With the test beds in mind, we can return to the methodological first part of the book. Chapters Two and Three on Logic (Dewey, Seneca, Foucault) and Forms (Aristotle, Foucault) are straightforward introductions to the terminology already used above, and will appeal to those who enjoy reminders of various Greek (and a few German) terms as cross-linguistic exercises that can sometimes bring out thought-provoking alternative perspectives and reanimate dead metaphors or turns of phrase. The danger is that, as with the James

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<sup>10</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

Strachey “standard” English translation of Freud, one creates a stilted jargon that can become a barrier to readers and does violence to the fluidity of ordinary talk (Ich, das Es, Über-Ich, ordinary words in German, turned into Latinate ego, id, and superego, losing much of the cultural resonance of childhood development in German daily discourse). I don’t think (testing) I’ve lost much above in avoiding the Greek in favor of ordinary English. Still, sometimes it helps to have immobilized foreign language tags or jargon as sign-posts for students to use to keep themselves on message, though for professionals a fuller comparative mode across lively languages in their lability and historical contexts would be more useful.

Chapter 2 (Logic): Facts emerge during inquiry, judgments require warrants, and logics are invented as conceptual orderings of experience that are confirmed or disconfirmed as one proceeds. These are the elementary lessons of pragmatism (John Dewey, but also Karl Popper’s confirmationism, and logical empiricists in their variety such as: William James and C.S. Peirce in the U.S.; Alfred Tarski and Ludwik Fleck in Poland; Otto Neurath, Moritz Schlick, Rudolph Carnap, Paul Lazarsfeld, Marie Jahoda, the later Ludwig Wittgenstein in Vienna and Cambridge; Charles Morris, Hans Reichenbach, and Thomas Kuhn again in the U.S.). Note, particularly, Neurath, Lazarsfeld and Jahoda were social scientists operating in the visual as well as the writing field, in developing ethnographic and social psychology as well as quantitative methods. Rabinow and Stavrianakis call this “pragmatic and realist,” which is fine, but then undercut themselves with an unexplained anti-intellectual dig by saying it “carries with it none of the constructivist or deconstructivist baggage” (32) as if there were no value of construction in, say, geometry or origami in building on the nanoscale, or in Russian constructivism or film montage, or of deconstruction in the analysis of language through disambiguation by showing how multiple meanings can be carried by words and tropes, and how the seemingly best laid claims of philosophers (Kant) and methodologists (Descartes) can go awry.

In any case, the observation that judgments are midstream pragmatic *reductions* operating on the threshold between the actual and the contemporary (34) makes sense in the context of the essays on Richter and Rushdie. Seneca then is used to shift the discussion towards care of the self, using asceticism and daily practices of writing as ways of distancing and reflection on the moral self apart from the flux of the present. The problem for anthropological method in Seneca’s stoicism, say Rabinow and Stavrianakis, is the goal of absence of inner turmoil (36). Foucault is invoked to repair this failing by stipulating that the turn to the self is not a turn away from the world, but a turn to freedom in nature (see Richter above) as opposed to the obligations, even servitude, of civic duty. The idea is that living in the present or the actual induces motion or seasickness, and one needs to step back.

There is, however, a larger problem with using Seneca in Stavrianakis and Rabinow’s earnest efforts to align truth and conduct. Seneca lived in a world of such corruption that it is hard to know what to make of what he preached and wrote. We know he did not live up to the way he preached (virtue above all). He served Nero as tutor, then advisor and speechwriter, lending Nero his eloquence to cover up Nero’s crimes, amassing wealth (saying philosophers could handle it, but saying little about its exploitative sources). While at a certain point he distanced himself from the court and was caught up in a coup attempt, even his forced suicide was staged as a “hubristic imitation of the death of Socrates.”<sup>11</sup> For Tacitus, the classics scholar Mary Beard concludes, “Seneca was the ‘perfect’ imperial courtier—the true *imago* [image, but also illusion] for whom...hypocrisy and dissembling

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Beard, “How Stoical was Seneca?” *The New York Review of Books*, October 9, 2014, 31.



were a way of life.”<sup>12</sup> He wrote plays full of passion, contrasting with his restrained philosophical *Letters*. He dictated his last philosophical thoughts, says Tacitus, to circulate as an image of his life (*imago vitae suae*), using the double dealing word *imago* (illusion, image). “Philosophy was like dissembling; it turned out not to help anyone,” says Beard, and did not save Seneca from a difficult death.<sup>13</sup>

The chapter on forms briefly alludes to Rabinow’s unhappy engagements with synthetic biologists and his unsatisfactory withdrawal into a diagnostic “haven” (his office).<sup>14</sup> Again there is a turn to Foucault for repair, marking out an overly simple field of ethics: (i) reflection on an ethical object terrain, (ii) a mode of subjectivation or inducement of an attitude towards that terrain, (iii) goals for an ethical practice, and (iv) the ascetic discipline to achieve that attitude and those goals. Again the goal here seems to be to aid a sense of a free relationship to oneself apart from one’s social obligations in the actual world, in other words (ala Stavrianakis’ figure of Seneca), self-possession, clear-eyed conception of one’s own time, and a sense of the actual in which one operates, and thereby to foster a sense of flourishing (ala Aristotle’s discussions of *eudaimonia*). It is, Rabinow and Stavrianakis claim, a mode of “seizing” (*lepsis*, German *Begriff*, or concept formation), of self-possession, which is *meta* or contemporary (*metalepsis*).

Or said differently, Rabinow in particular wants to free himself from what he regards as the stultification (“*stultitia* and *stasis*”) of the “already known” as well as from the “vertigo of the merely speculative”(x), which however he has just conceded is what logic is all about, conjecture-refutation, confirmation-disconfirmation. This narrowing of his bandwidth may turn out to be self-defeating. Dewey’s analytic reconstruction (the relation between the breakdown of actions based on planners or experts’ claims, creating crises that generate active, informed, publics), Kant’s pragmatism (the stress on what man can be, not what he is, the struggle for a republican cosmopolitics to come), not to mention his fellow anthropologists also working the terrain of the contemporary, may have more to offer than Rabinow lets on.

Bios, the opening chapter, is the most open to objection. Without much discussion (contextual, testing, or otherwise), Rabinow and Stavrianakis want to distinguish themselves from Giorgio Agamben (millennial reduction of bios to zoe or bare life), from Nikolas Rose (reformatting the self under neoliberalism), and from Clifford Geertz (an ongoing ungenerous Oedipal antagonism against a former teacher), and instead champion Hans Blumenberg with a few nice-sounding phrases (history of ideas as a series of occupations and reoccupations, a chess game, rather than linear progress; nature as “embodiment of the possible results of technology,” in a milieu of self-assertion or existential projects, a refraction of Bruno Latour’s quip that humanity is but the recoil of technology).

There is no particular pay-off in objecting to the treatment of Geertz, except to note that there are quite different possible readings of the list of charges. Geertz tells a story against himself of his mismanagement of relations with a local scholar when he felt that the scholar was borrowing his typewriter too often. According to Rabinow, Geertz failed to acknowledge the asymmetrical power, debt and credit relations, casting these as merely the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 33..

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> See: Paul Rabinow, *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Paul Rabinow, *Designing Human Practices: An Experiment with Synthetic Biology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); and Paul Rabinow and Anthony Stavrianakis, *Demands of the Day: On the Logic of Anthropological Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). See also my reviews of *The Accompaniment* in *The American Anthropologist*, 2014, 116(1): 41-42; and *Demands of the Day* in *Anthropos*, 2013, 109: 324-25.

breakdown of a fiction of recognition of equality in being scholars). But the question of struggles for recognition from Hegel to Charles Taylor *is* one of power relations. Again it is hard to see the difference between Geertz contrasting analytic disinterestedness with ideology as attempting to establish patterns of belief and value, and Rabinow contrasting his call for an attitude of pathos and *askesis* with “situations of polemic” that defend patterns of belief and values. These discussions of authority, legitimacy, and hegemony go back to Karl Marx, Max Weber, Antonio Gramsci, and Ernesto Laclau among others. Rabinow and Stavrianakis seem on firmer ground when they turn to the socio-linguistics of alerts, trials, and polemics. To argue, as Rabinow does, not only in this text, that for anthropology the “existence of many cultures required a relativism of the truth content” (21), or his claim that hermeneutics is self-enclosed, remain unlikely. Why should getting a native point of view right, as a basic step of anthropological due diligence, imply anything about its wider, dialogic, comparative, conflictive, or integrative positioning?

A similar myopia causes him to claim that *Writing Culture*<sup>15</sup> lacked any further venues for working out its initiatives. What about the eight volumes of *Late Editions* edited by George Marcus and an editorial collective,<sup>16</sup> *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*,<sup>17</sup> *Critical Anthropology Now*,<sup>18</sup> the journal *Cultural Anthropology*, the journal *Public Culture*, and the Center for Transcultural Studies, all of which engaged considerable networks of collaboration extending and developing arguments in *Writing Culture* and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*? (See also *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology*, edited by Orin Starn, a twenty-five year anniversary reconsideration.<sup>19</sup>)

### *Designs on...*

Design is a contemporary buzzword from architecture and engineering, often invoked in contemporary discussions on pedagogies in favor of studio-based, project-oriented, flipped classroom, hands on, active learning (everything is design). It also easily carries a double meaning implying imperialist appropriation (to have designs on). The plain cover of the book’s (ironic?) design seems to mimic bureaucratic project folders; the blurb on the back by Marilyn Strathern, Professor Emerita of Anthropology and Provost Emerita of Cambridge University, is part of an advertising come-on that one is not supposed to take literally: “a nonpareil, a configuration of thought with no equal.”

Surely conversation would improve if, instead, the book were aligned with others that mine the same terrain: one thinks of Bruno Latour’s very similar/different effort to construct a metaphysics, nay even an ontology, out of Wittgensteinian-Lyotardian language games, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*<sup>20</sup>; the parallels in

<sup>15</sup> James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> George E. Marcus, ed., *Late Editions: Cultural Studies for the End of the Millennium*, 8 Volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993-2000).

<sup>17</sup> Marcus, George E. and Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> George E. Marcus, ed., *Critical Anthropology Now: Unexpected Contexts, Shifting Constituencies, Changing Agendas* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Orin Starn, ed., *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). See also my review in *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 2014, 4(1): 331-55.

Michael Fischer's *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice*,<sup>21</sup> and *Anthropological Futures*,<sup>22</sup> in which questions of both "moving ratios of modernity" and pragmatically changing analytics are constantly at issue; Joseph Dumit's *Drugs for Life*,<sup>23</sup> and *Picturing Personhood*<sup>24</sup> where Kenneth Burke or Erving Goffman like grammars of social action, self-fashioning, and manipulation of means of knowing are at issue; Donna Haraway's *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan© Meets\_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*<sup>25</sup> where multiple logi of social justice, gender, and science are at play in serious political and conceptual occupations and reoccupations; Kim Fortun's *Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disasters, New Global Orders*<sup>26</sup> where questions of gendered communities of enunciation constituted by Deweyan breakdown, as well as Salman Rushdie-like efforts to escape Batesonian double-binds, and embodied actualities counter bureaucratic classifications; Michael Fortun's *Promising Genomics*<sup>27</sup> where chiasmus is a structuring feature of economic, scientific, and cultural logi constituting the contemporary; Rabinow's own debates with George Marcus's studio-like staged para-ethnographies alongside fieldwork, in the volume with James Faubion and Tobias Rees, *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*<sup>28</sup>; and the volume edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhargupati Singh, *The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy*.<sup>29</sup>

All of these pay close attention to socio-linguistic, narrative, rhetorical, and pragmatic modes of narration, to configurations of the contemporary, the actual and the present, nature as "embodiment of the possible results of technology," in milieux of self-assertion or existential projects, and moving ratios of modernity (viz Raymond Williams' "dominant, residual, emergent"). Still, this volume is Rabinow's clearest statement to date about his distinctions between the present, the actual, and the contemporary. We'll see if the terminology catches on, and if it can do productive work, or merely causes confusion because the terms in ordinary English are so interchangeable. Meanwhile the two essays on Richter and Rushdie add to growing literatures on each.

Michael M.J. Fischer  
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<sup>21</sup> Michael M.J. Fischer, *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropological Futures* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Dumit, *Drugs for Life: How Pharmaceutical Companies Define Our Health* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Dumit, *Picturing Personhood: Brain Scans and Biomedical Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan© Meets\_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Kim Fortun, *Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disasters, New Global Orders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Michael Fortun, *Promising Genomics: Iceland and deCODE Genetics in a World of Speculation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Paul Rabinow and George Marcus, James Faubion, and Tobias Rees, *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhargupati Singh, eds., *The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

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