

Michael Taussig

Fieldwork

Notebooks

I

Roland Barthes despaired of keeping a diary. Too boring. Too frustrating. The *diary disease*, he called it. But there was one point of interest, and that had to do with re-reading an entry several months or years later. This could provide pleasure due to the awakening of a memory not in what was written but in “the interstices of notation.” For instance, on re-reading the entry relating his having to wait for a bus one disappointing evening on the rue de Rivoli in Paris, he recalls the grayness—“but no use trying to describe it now, anyway, or I’ll lose it again instead of some other sensation, and so on, as if resurrection always occurred alongside the thing expressed: role of the Phantom, of the Shadow.”¹ This is certainly intriguing, yet what is this Phantom, and what might it tell us about fieldwork notebooks?

In answering this question, I should note at the outset that not only anthropologists have fieldwork notebooks. One noted intellectual, Walter Benjamin, seems to have been lost without one. “At any rate,” writes Hannah Arendt, “nothing was more characteristic of him in the thirties than the very little notebooks with black covers which he always carried with him and in which he tirelessly entered in the form of quotations what daily living and reading netted him in the way of ‘pearls’ and ‘coral.’”² The reference is to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.

*Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made,
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.*

The allusion to pearls and coral suggests that a notebook transforms the everyday into an underwater world in which things on the surface become transformed, rich, and strange. The notes in a notebook are what has been picked at and plundered from an underworld. They are of another order of reality altogether, and to all accounts the notes in Benjamin’s notebook form a wild miscellany. Arendt emphasizes the surreal impact of the juxtapositions of the entries. Next to a poem such as “Als der erste Schnee fiel” (As the First Snow Fell) was a report from Vienna dated summer 1939 saying that the local gas

1 | Roland Barthes, “Deliberation,” in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 491.

2 | Hannah Arendt, introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 45.

company “had Jewish population. The numbers were especially high for communists.”

Benjamin had a collection of these. This came to be called the *Fieldwork* collection. Of the few cases that have been published, the most interesting is the one published in his *Selected Essays*, on observations, no

Long before his essay entitled “The Work of Art in the Modern Age,” he had ideas about collecting. More than to fieldwork collections.⁵ At the *Encyclopedia*, on propensities. By chance, a collection of these is the first private investigation at random to Greece a hundred cut-ins and over stopping the morning, the blinds wind as he walked. The man danced. His “thinking out sections of the record consciously. “The out and walking

In other words, the collection, a that not only an insightful way of another feature the way the notes on oneself, like an eye, the more evocative

What this means is not obvious when objects do not

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company “had stopped supplying gas to Jews. The gas consumption of the Jewish population involved a loss for the gas company, since the biggest consumers were the ones who did not pay their bills. The Jews used the gas especially for committing suicide.”³

Benjamin had long wanted to publish a book made out of nothing but quotations. This came to pass with the publication long after his death of what came to be called *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*), all 954 pages, one of the few cases on record where a notebook—or a set of files of notes—has been published as such in its pristine state.⁴ (He referred to the only book published in his lifetime, *One-Way Street*, a collection of his aphoristic, surreal, observations, not as a book but as a notebook.)

Long before the posthumously published *Arcades Project*, in a charming essay entitled “Unpacking My Library,” Benjamin set forth some remarkable ideas about collecting, which I take to be pertinent to his notebooks no less than to fieldwork notebooks because fieldwork notebooks are exactly that—collections.⁵ At one point, he characterized a “genuine” collection as a *magic encyclopedia*, on account of what he saw as its occult properties and divinatory propensities. Because the items in a collection gravitate into one’s hands by chance, a collection can be used as an instrument of divination, seeing that chance is the flip side of fate. For sure this is a wild idea, like you find with the private investigator Clem Snide trying to solve a case by sitting back, listening at random to sound recordings he made in the dead man’s empty villa in Greece a hundred feet from the beach. His recorder is “specially designed for cut-ins and overlays and you can switch from Record to Playback without stopping the machine.”⁶ He records the toilet flushing and the shower running, the blinds being raised, the rattle of dishes, the sound of the sea and the wind as he walks along the beach, as well as the disco music to which the dead man danced. He cuts in by reading sections from *The Magus* as well as with his “thinking out loud” about the case. Later he randomly chooses different sections of the recordings while watching Greek TV so that he listens only subconsciously. “I’ve cracked cases like this with nothing to go on, just by getting out and walking around at random,” he says.⁷

In other words, chance determines (what an odd phrase!) what goes into the collection, and chance determines how it is used. (Imagine a social *science* that not only admits to this principle but runs with it!) This strikes me as an insightful way of portraying a fieldworker’s notebook. But I want to add still another feature that applies to the magic of the *magic encyclopedia*, and this is the way the notebook is actually an extension of oneself, if not more self than oneself, like an entirely new organ alongside one’s heart and brain, to name but the more evocative organs of our inner self.

What this new organ does is incorporate other worlds into one’s own. Is this not obvious when Benjamin himself states that for the genuine collector, his objects do not come alive in him, but rather it is he who lives in them?⁸

This I will call a *fetish*, an object we hold so dear as to seem possessed by spiritual power. While it is a *thing*—in all the deader-than-dead sense we may attach to a *thing*—it is nevertheless revered to the extent that it can come to stand over you and turn you into its willing accomplice, if not slave. What is meant to be a mere instrument or a tool, a mere notebook, ends up being an end in itself.

This was the gist of what Marx sardonically suggested in his masterpiece, *Capital*, where he coined the notion of *commodity fetishism*, meaning that today we live in a world of phantoms we take for reality, that by a twist of fate the

3 | *Ibid.*, p. 46.

4 | Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999).

5 | Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” in Benjamin, *Illuminations* (see note 2).

6 | William S. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981), pp. 43–44.

7 | *Ibid.*, p. 140.

8 | Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library” (see note 5), p. 67.

product of our labor escapes our control and comes to dominate us. So it was with God, too, the product of man's imagination who turned the tables and told man that he, the one and only God, had created man. But with your hard working 24-7 fetish, like a magic charm, the situation is not quite so one-sided. The fetish has to come through. It is revered, of course, but it is also commanded and expected to perform magical work.

What irony that the anthropologist, namely myself, given to studying fetishism, should have unwittingly developed with his notebooks a fetish all of his own and become not only a slave to his fetish but enamored of it! For in my first two years of fieldwork in Colombia, South America, I came across sugar cane cutters, *corteros*, who, paid by the ton cut, were rumored to be in league with the devil and possessed of a wooden figurine secreted in the undergrowth toward which the *cortero* would, in his solitary way, cut a swath through the cane while uttering strange cries so as to magically harvest well above the average worker. And there was I, the anthropologist, recording all this in my notebook full of its own strange cries.

The cane cutters might have their mysterious figurines. But I had my mysterious notebooks, which sure improved productivity, comparable to tons cut, and the notebooks did this because they were not a dumping ground or parking lot for information. The notebooks became ends in themselves and thus actively encouraged contributions from the field, the field being of course at once observer and observed and observer observed. The notebooks became hungry for inputs, like the demons said to rest in the stomachs of witches in Cameroon that I have read about, demons that were initially allies in self-advancement, but ever ready to turn on their masters.⁹

But Benjamin's fetishes are more endearing. "I carry the blue book with me everywhere," he wrote in a letter of thanks to Alfred Cohn in 1927:

and speak of nothing else. And I am not the only one—other people too beam with pleasure when they see it. I have discovered that it has the same colors as a certain pretty Chinese porcelain: its blue glaze is in the leather, its white in the paper and its green in the stitching. Others compare it to shoes from Turkistan. I am sure that there is nothing else of this kind as pretty in the whole of Paris, despite the fact that, for all its timelessness and unlocatedness, it is also quite modern and Parisian.¹⁰

Could this be a case of what Frazer in *The Golden Bough* called "homeopathic" magic, the magic of *like affecting like*? For does not Benjamin use the fetish of the notebook in order to ride on the back of the fetishism that has, according to his interpretation of Marxism, come to define the modern world? This strategy of alliance with the fetishism of commodities would certainly be consistent with Benjamin's work as a whole, indeed its inspiration. What the notebook adds to this strategy of alliance with the fetishism of commodities, however, is that the very instrument of research is a fetish. In English we have a phrase, "set a thief to catch a thief," the idea being that a thief knows best the mind of another thief. What is happening with Benjamin's use of notebooks is analogous: setting a fetish to catch a fetish.

The fetish character of the notebook with its "pearls" and "coral" is here fated into existence by its being, first, a gift before a word has been written into its charming interior. This is because gifts carry within themselves a spirit, that of generosity and that there be a return gift. They are things that have, so to speak, a will and life of their own. Indeed, in his famous essay on the gift, Marcel Mauss described this as "the spirit of the gift" because gifts obli-

9 | Peter Geschiere, *Occult in Postcolonial Africa, The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997).

10 | *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, trans. Esther Leslie, ed. Ursula Marx et al. (London: Verso, 2007), p. 151.

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gate the recipient to reciprocate, and this Benjamin does fulsomely in his thank-you letter to Cohn, providing something charming in return—charm for charm—giving over something wonderful of himself that the gift of the notebook draws out.

And then what goes into this gift that is Benjamin's notebook? What exactly are its "pearls" and "coral"? Well, in one way or another they have everything to do with what Marx called the commodity, from things bought and sold on the market to their most diffuse presentation in the farthest reaches of society.

In other words, his notebook represents the fetish quality of the gift brought to bear on the fetish quality of the commodity. In this regard, what we might call the inner being of the notebook is a world-historical joust between gift and commodity, parallel to the actions of those characters close to Benjamin's heart who stand on the threshold of the market; namely the *gambler*, the *flaneur*, and, of course, the *collector*. They stalk through all 954 pages of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*.

Apart from Alfred Cohn's gift, there are other of Benjamin's notebooks that have been saved, and they, too, suggest that their owner cathected onto them because of their material detail, as when he confesses to what he calls his "shameful weakness" for the "extremely thin, transparent, yet excellent stationery, which I am unfortunately unable to find anyplace around here."¹¹

Fastidious. Obsessive. And something more. This "something more" is not lost on the editors and collectors of Benjamin's remains, as when they write of the "almost magical quality" and of what they call the "cult" the notebooks possessed for their owner. Indeed, they seem to have caught quite a dose of the fetish bug themselves, as when they tell us that the "chamois-colored paper of a notebook bound in cardboard, with notes, drafts of critiques and diary entries from the years 1929–34, is thicker and has—crosswise and longwise—a fine line structure."¹² Yet that degree of absorption into the thingness of the thing is nothing compared with the illustrations they provide of some of the notebooks—as with the full-page color photograph of what they entitle *Notebook Ms 673. Leather cover (1927/1929)*. Here, the entire page is nothing more than a black rectangle with a slightly uneven top edge and traces of unevenness in the surface (why color for something that has none?).¹³ The nothingness gleams with occult significance. "You can take our picture," winks the fetish, "but you can't take our power."

Same thing with Le Corbusier's seventy-three notebooks. I mean sketchbooks. Yes! Seventy-three, and all, as far as I know, published in more than four thousand pages containing a photographic replica of each of the original pages. What he wanted were editions that would reach the widest possible audience, to scatter his seed among the masses. "Corbu" is how our architecture librarian refers to him, like a pet dog or pop idol. His books occupy a special niche behind the reserve desk. I open the page of volume 1, published by the MIT Press. I can barely handle the weight of the book with just one hand. Volume 1 covers the years 1914–48. In lieu of a table of contents, the book opens out onto rows of undistinguished tiny gray rectangles that, on closer inspection, turn out to be photographs of the covers of thirteen sketchbooks, one after the other, that make up this time period. Such reverence! Like the crown jewels. Some have an obscure doodling on them, others a date, like "Paris/1918." As with the full-page color photograph of the Benjamin notebook, the gap between the esteem aroused by the object and its pictorial representation as an object is woefully large—which automatically raises the question, *Why bother?* What is the need here—the need to grasp the object as an image at close distance?

11 | *Ibid.*, p. 152.

12 | *Ibid.*

13 | *Ibid.*, p. 155, fig. 6.1.

With this question we hit upon a profound and disturbing truth regarding notebooks: that sure! they may be fetishized by their owners, but how much more so by their followers, amounting to a twofold, double process—fetishization of the fetish! It is as if the notebook provides the “inside story,” the “inside track” to the soul of the person keeping the notebook, and likewise the inside track as to the genesis of their ideas and achievements. It is like being privy to the secrets of an alchemist’s laboratory, enlivened by their all-too-human foibles and weaknesses.

And are we not all of us “followers”? Is not this conceit about the “inside track” something we all cleave to and what, in fact, lies behind my own interest in the value of notebooks? We think we are watching a mind at work and can, as it were, eavesdrop. But really when we open up to most any page of Corbusier’s sketchbooks we don’t know what to think. It is all frightfully obscure, like a genius doodling to his muse. We are left at best with a warm glow.

“When traveling with Le Corbusier,” writes the author of the preface, “one often saw him take a notebook from his pocket in order to record something he had just thought of or seen. At these moments Le Corbusier drew as one would take notes, without trying to make a pretty picture, simply to imprint upon his memory some central idea, to remember, and assimilate it. He often said, ‘Don’t take photographs, draw; photography interferes with seeing, drawing etches in the mind.’” He would jot down “those spontaneous phrases that cannot be repeated, too vague for anything but one’s notebook.”¹⁴

The notebook is enchanted as well as enchanting, at least from afar. The way it slips in and out of the Great Man’s pocket. It is all body, too. Forget photography. It gets between subject and object. Go corporeal. Draw! A photograph captures only the surface, but the notebook gets at the deep truth of things. Full grammatical sentences? Forget that. Just jot. And jot some more. Short-circuit language and me, the writer, along with it.

Such is the idea of the notebook at its mystical best. Fetish of the fetish. Inside of the inside. Small wonder, therefore, that even though Barthes despaired of the diary, he found the Phantom therein.

II

Notebooks like to travel, first to new places, second to new ideas. There is a disquieting rhythm to my own notebooks. I keep them only when traveling, when engaged in what I think of as “fieldwork.” I do not and cannot keep a diary, journal, notebook—call it what you will—when at home, what I will call “home,” although that is a long way away, across a huge ocean of sea and memory.

The editors of *Walter Benjamin’s Archive* note that Benjamin was frequently traveling and that he loved to write while on the move *wherever he happened to find himself*. This parallels an anthropologist’s notebook. “Could he have found a more faithful companion for all that than his notebooks?” they ask.¹⁵ And I in turn must ask what could more faithfully express the fetish quality of the notebook than its being described as a “faithful companion,” yet how sad, too, given the loneliness of its owner. Are we to assume that the notebook is an alter ego, that it is to this strange entity to whom you write in your notebook, making of it—this mere object of paper (and its smart leather cover)—a keenly receptive human being, thirsty for more?

14 | André Wogenscky, preface to *Le Corbusier Sketchbooks*, vol. 1, 1914–1948, ed. Fondation Le Corbusier (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981–82), n. p.

15 | Walter Benjamin’s Archive (see note 10), p. 153.

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William S. Burroughs had his travel notebook, too. He would, he says, divide the page into three columns. The first would have the more or less factual elements of the journey, checking in at the airport departure desk, what the clerks are saying, other things he overhears, and so forth. The second contained what these things made him remember. And the third, what he called his “reading column,” consisted of quotations from books he had taken with him that connected with his journey. He found the connections extraordinary, “if you really keep your eyes open.”¹⁶

The notebook is like a magical object in a fairy tale. It is a lot more than an object, as it inhabits and fills out hallowed ground between meditation and production. Truly, writing is a strange business. “He was fueled by ambition to fill them,” comment the editors of *Walter Benjamin's Archive*.¹⁷ Without the notebook, *nada!* Or at least very little, although I note mythical exceptions such as Edmund Leach, who wrote his classic, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, after losing most of his fieldwork notebooks fleeing the Japanese army in Burma during World War II.¹⁸ Was this loss connected to—or fated by—his feisty attempt to later overthrow the stable equilibrium model of society that dominated British social anthropology? In a way, he overthrew nothing. What he did was reestablish that model of social equilibrium on a higher plane, preserving the cycle of social transformation from anarchy to hierarchy and back again over a longer time period. This cycle parallels the cycle of loss and rediscovery.

In other words, this loss of the fieldwork notes turns out to be the proverbial exception that proves the rule, another cyclical form. The drama of loss here—like losing one's child or lover—provides backhanded testimony to the mighty power of the notebook, whose loss can actually provide more of a notebook-effect than the notebook itself. The loss of the notebook—and who has not suffered this terrible fate at least once in their lifetime?—opens out onto the great emptiness from which the subsequently published monograph draws its strength. Behind the lost notebook stands the ghost notebook. (What does the fetishist do when he loses his fetish?)

The converse is no less true. How many notebook keepers go on to complete their projects without once consulting their notebook? A lot, that's for sure. So long as the notebook is there in its thereness, you don't have to open the cover. There is something absurdly comforting in the existence of the trinity consisting of

You

the Event

and the Event notated as a Notebook Entry

for now you can, as it were, proceed to walk upright, and maybe even on water, without having to consult the entry. Simply knowing it is there provides the armature of truth, of the “this happened,” that, like a rock climber's crampons, allows you to scale great heights.

This is why the materiality of the notebook attracts so much attention. It is a contraption that stands in for thought, experience, history, and writing. The materiality of the notebook received from Alfred Cohn is adorable. It is beautiful, as with the blue of Chinese porcelain. How wonderfully polished, fragile, faraway, and exotic is the indefinable quality of texture and light that is the “glaze” of blueness in the leather! And then there is the whiteness of the paper and the green of the stitching that holds the whole thing together.

The green stitching: Could Benjamin be green-stitching himself into his notebook as he speaks of it, like the homeless person he was? Is a notebook a way of squirreling yourself away from the world, stealing its secrets, with which you line your burrow?

16 | Interview with William Burroughs by Conrad Knickerbocker, St. Louis, 1965, “White Junk,” in *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs, 1960–1997* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), p. 69.

17 | *Walter Benjamin's Archive* (see note 10), p. 153.

18 | E. R. Leach, “Appendix VII: A Note on the Qualifications of the Author,” in *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 311–12.

At one point, Benjamin appeals to his notebook benefactor, Alfred Cohn, for another notebook because “I cannot contemplate the prospect of soon having to write homeless thoughts again.”¹⁹ But it is he who is homeless.

To the materiality of the notebook we should add the materiality of the language as manifested by the microscopic writing of the notebook. Benjamin could pack an entire essay onto one page. In the sixty-three pages of one notebook, for instance, there are the drafts of complete transcriptions of more than twenty essays. “The writing of a man in prison,” Klaus Neumann once told me. Then there is the care Benjamin took with graphic form in his notebooks. There are, it seems, plenty of Dada-like layouts, and lush colors, such that the subheadings, in green, yellow, blue, red, and orange, leap out at you.

III

So much for the *notebook*. But here I must pause to address the difference between the *notebook*—that provisional receptacle of inspired randomness—and the *diary*, that more or less steady confidante of the daily round.

At the outset, I am struck by the polarized reaction I have come across with respect to keeping a diary. While I find the diary form congenial to my work, others are disdainful. I have met anthropologists who tell me they can’t bear to look at their field diary because it is so boring. But recall here Roland Barthes’ “interstices of notation,” his recognition that a typically mundane diary entry, waiting for a bus at seven in the evening under a cold rain on the rue de Rivoli in Paris, makes him recollect—on rereading—the grayness of the atmosphere *precisely because it is not recorded*. “Role of the Phantom, of the Shadow.”²⁰

I take this intriguing observation to be a striking endorsement of Freud’s image of the mystic writing pad, that the moment an observation is processed—in this case, by writing, as on the mystic writing pad or in the diary—it disappears. Of course, with respect to the diary, it does not literally disappear. It is there and remains there on the page, even if it is never looked at again. What disappears is a quality more than a fact. But as it disappears, so some other *silenced sensation* emerges upon rereading. Truly, writing is a complicated business—this is what diary writing reveals—but not nearly as complex as reading, especially rereading what one has written about one’s recent past.

I think of Barthes’ Phantom as belonging to the same family of representational familiars as does the *third meaning* that he discerns in the film image. It is what Joan Didion directs our attention toward in her essay “On Keeping a Notebook,” but, unlike Barthes, she finds it useful, indeed inspiring, to tug at the Phantom.

She, too, has little time for diaries. Like Barthes, she has tried to keep a diary but, whenever she tries dutifully to record the day’s events, is overcome, she says, by boredom.²¹ The results, she says, “are mysterious at best.” And why mysterious? “What is this business,” she writes, “about ‘shopping, typing piece, dinner with E, depressed’? Shopping for what? Typing what piece?” And so on.

But a notebook—her notebook—is different from a diary. For Didion, notebooks have nothing to do with the factual record of the daily round. They contain what I would call “sparks,” or, better put, dry tinder, that in the right hands at the right moment will burst into flame. Perhaps I should call this dry tinder “interstices of notation.” In other words, the notebook lies at the outer

19 | *Walter Benjamin’s Archive* (see note 10), p. 152.

20 | Barthes, “Deliberation” (see note 1).

21 | Joan Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook,” in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), pp. 131–41.

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reaches of language and order. It lies at the outer reaches of language in its ungrammatical jottings and staccato burps and hiccups. And it lies at the outer limits of order because it represents the chance pole of a collection, rather than the design pole. It is more open to chance than the diary, for example, which is ordered by the wheel of time. In other words, the notebook page is all interstices—impossible but true. Impossible because interstices are spaces between things. But here there are no things. It's like having an unconscious without a conscious. Which takes us back to rereading one's diary, evoking the *silenced sensation*. Diary and notebook meet on this crucial point.

Yeats expresses pretty much the same idea when he jots the following down in his journal in 1909: "To keep these notes natural and useful to me I must keep one note from leading on to another, that I may not surrender myself to literature. Every note must come as a casual thought, then it will be my life. Neither Christ nor Buddha nor Socrates wrote a book, for to do that is to exchange life for a logical process."²²

Offhandedly Didion wonders if the notes in her notebook would best be called *lies*, the sort of momentary observations a writer (of fiction?) might one day find useful, such as the entry, "That woman Estelle is partly the reason why George Sharp and I are separated today. *Dirty crepe-de-Chine wrapper, hotel bar, Wilmington RR, 9:45 a.m. August Monday morning.*"

In fact, she starts her essay "On Keeping a Notebook" right there *in medias res* with "That woman Estelle," thus triggering Barthes' mechanism of the Phantom. She has pulled at that thread and created a marvelous concoction, or should I say concatenation, of events and ideas. "How much of it actually happened?" she asks at the end when she has time to draw breath.

She writes of the "girl from the Eastern Shore" leaving the man beside her, going back to the city, and all "she can see ahead are the viscous summer sidewalks." The woman is worried about the hem of the plaid silk dress and wishes she could stay in that nice cool bar . . .

In other words, the stray remark in the bar turns out to be the caption to a picture, to a string of pictures, and there are plenty of other "random" notes in her notebook that no doubt could be pulled at so as to release the Phantom therein. A line by Jimmy Hoffa: "I may have my faults, but being wrong ain't one of them." A man checking his coat says to his friend, "That's my old football number." During 1964, 720 tons of soot fell on every square mile of New York City. This one is labeled "FACT."

And so on. The notes in the notebook work the same as the visual "moments" that Barthes relishes in film as the "third meaning." Apart from what he called the information in any given image, and apart from its symbolic values, something else lurked in the background. "I receive (and probably even first and foremost) a third meaning," he wrote, "evident, erratic, obstinate," and he speaks of being "held" by the image.²³

Yet for all the (apparent) randomness of the notes jotted down in her notebook, Didion sees a continuity. All these fragments of perception that lend themselves to pictures release something because they strike a chord, and that chord is the author's life, which, like ours, keeps changing. The notebook—which is strenuously opposed by her to the diary—is thus nevertheless a personal archive and something more, a collection that keeps the current self in touch with former selves through the medium of external observations and overheard remarks. (This sounds very like an anthropologist, I must say.) "It is a good idea," she notes, "to keep in touch, and I suppose that keeping in touch is what notebooks are all about."²⁴

22 | W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 341.

23 | Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," in *A Barthes Reader* (see note 1), p. 318.

24 | Didion, "On Keeping a Notebook" (see note 21), p. 140.

Writer as anthropologist? What was her notebook like when she was in El Salvador preparing her book on the Great Communicator's dirty little war there?²⁵ Big brave America with Ronald Reagan leading the charge. How many nuns raped and killed by the U.S.-supported troops and right-wing death squads? Archbishops assassinated?

But this is my real question. What about a diary of the daily round in that place at that time? No! Not much shopping there, I shouldn't think. Indeed, in an Other place, the distinction between the *diary* and what she thinks of as a *notebook* tends to break down. I would think. "Role of the Phantom, of the Shadow."

This Other place can be right here, if you want to be literal about it, as with Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, about her husband's sudden death between Christmas and New Year's of 2004 in their apartment in New York City at the time their only child was in a coma, which eventuated in death, too.²⁶ What I am getting at is that Didion here (as elsewhere in her work) draws on many types of records and memories that have the feel of a diary. She draws on diarylike incidents and, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, produces a text that is like an elaborated diary written in the present tense or having the intense feel of a diary recording in cliff-hanging detail the present in scenes and flashbacks.

The point is that a fieldworker's diary is about experience in a field of strangeness. It is not about waiting for the bus to take you to your accustomed, safe abode so that you can write another article on the death of the author. A fieldworker's diary retains loyalty to Didion's "touching." It retains loyalty to feelings and experience within the field that is fieldwork such that it merges with the aforesaid notebook where the Phantom who inhabits the interstices of notation roams.

Writer as anthropologist? "Put all the images in language in a place of safety," writes Jean Genet in his last book, *Prisoner of Love*, "and make use of them, for they are in the desert, and it's in the desert we must go and look for them."²⁷ He certainly did. Like an anthropologist, only more audacious, more self-involved, and with no research grant, several times he thus ventured—creating ethnographic, diary-based, crossover literature, neither fish nor fowl, where the unwritten thrives because of the written, midway between fiction and nonfiction, coming from the hand of the thief, sexual nonconformist, convict, and camp follower of the PLF.

Let me emphasize this strange place where the unwritten thrives because of the written. This is the *place of safety* to which Genet refers us, and it is like Didion's notebook or an anthropologist's diary. There they hibernate, those "images in language," like spirits of the dead. Do not all writers have their familiars? As in Barthes' "interstices of notation," the images have to be exiled, as it were, lying in the wilderness where we must go and look for them. Spirits—I mean images—do not come easy, not for us, at least. You have to tug at the Phantom.

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25 | Joan Didion, *Salvador* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983).

26 | Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

27 | Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1986), p. vii.

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100 Notes – 100 Thoughts / 100 Notizen – 100 Gedanken

Nº001: Michael Taussig

Fieldwork Notebooks / Feldforschungsnotizbücher

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