



Being affected, Translated by Mylene Hengen and Matthew Carey

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► To cite this version:

Jeanne Favret-Saada. Being affected, Translated by Mylene Hengen and Matthew Carey. Journal of Ethnographic Theory - HAU, 2012, 2 (1), pp.435-445. halshs-01188433

HAL Id: halshs-01188433

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01188433>

Submitted on 31 Aug 2015

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| Translation |



Being affected

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*Translated from the French by Mylene Hengen
and Matthew Carey*

Between 1969 and 1972, I conducted fieldwork in rural North-West France, protecting it from media curiosity by vaguely referring to it as the “Western French Bocage [Hedgerow region].” I gathered two types of material from this research: a field journal in which I recounted daily events in great detail, and a typed account of some thirty dewitching seances that I had tape-recorded.

Two books were drafted from the material in my field journal: *Les Mots, la mort, les sorts. La sorcellerie dans le Bocage* (1977), and *Corps pour corps. Enquête sur la sorcellerie dans le Bocage* (1988). The first one progressively introduced the reader to a world that is, in theory, inconceivable for him—that of Bocage witchcraft. The text consists of, on the one hand, accounts of events, narrated by the ethnographer who engaged with them; and on the other hand, an ethnographic commentary that relates them to wider aspects of Bocage culture and so renders them intelligible. The dividing line between the different voices present in the text (those of Bocage peasants, the narrator, and the interpreter-commentator) should be immediately clear to the reader: the ethnography endeavors to assign a particular form of discourse to each.

In the second book, *Corps pour corps*, the narrator and the commentator become one, since it is a personal diary. The text describes my progressive entry into local witchcraft, the way bewitched peasants and their dewitchers gradually accepted my presence, and the difficulties I had in submitting to their demands.

It ends on the day when, after eighteen months on the field, I made an appointment for myself with a dewitcher called Madame Flora.

Publisher’s note: We are very grateful to Éditions de l’Olivier for giving us the permission to publish this translation of chapter six “Être affecté,” from the author’s book *Désorceler* (Éditions de L’Olivier, 2009).

Ten years later, the typed record of these séances, as well as their analysis, allowed my colleague J. Contreras and I to identify the various mechanisms of dewitching; these had in fact completely passed me by during my time on the field, and so did not figure in my journal. A dozen articles dealing with this research were published in social science or psychoanalysis journals during the 1980s. In 2009, I returned to this work in *Désorceler*, a book that concludes the series of texts on Bocage witchcraft.

Following my return from the Bocage, I also underwent psychoanalysis, approaching it not as *the* therapy to rule them all but rather as a therapy among others.

This led me to reflect on what a general *anthropology of therapy* might look like—one that encompassed African rites of affliction, shamanism and Bocage dewitching, as well as a century and a half of a European and American psychotherapies. The main difference between Western psychotherapies and those more commonly studied by ethnologists is that the latter radically isolate and treat the individual psyche as atom, whereas the former (each in their own way) engage with the psyche, the body, life, certain *others*, material possessions, etc. as a whole. The comparative analysis of these therapeutic treatments together allowed us to interrogate psychotherapy's theoretical assumptions, and offer a comparative analysis of the mechanisms of therapy.

It is within this wider framework that one must read *Désorceler*, despite the fact that it mainly deals with Bocage dewitching. The book is made up of disjointed chapters, which resist any attempt to craft them into a continuous narrative: nobody could claim to know all of the mechanisms of therapeutic treatment—except of course for the founders of particular doctrines, intent on transforming them into coherent autonomous schools of therapy. Others (practitioners of these therapies, for example), are content to put a certain number of these mechanisms into practice, or, if they are ethnographers, to identify them.

Désorceler explores these mechanisms throughout its five chapters. “*Prélude*” presents the Bocage, along with witchcraft and my conceptual journey into this universe. “*La sorcellerie sans le savoir*” demonstrates, by analyzing the use of language and the different types of narrative present in witchcraft, why we should consider witchcraft to be a form of therapy. “*L’invention d’une thérapie*” compares witchcraft narratives encountered in the Bocage in the early 1970s, with those collected there a century before. All of these narratives refer to “tradition,” but we see this “tradition”’s content change from one century to another. In addition, the stories I brought back from the field share certain elements with 20th century psychotherapy—whilst retaining a certain enthrallment to “tradition.” “*Ah la féline, la sale voisine...*” circumstantially examines the means by which Madame Flora, a dewitcher, brings about change in her patients unbeknownst to them. More specifically, she sets in train a “clutch of violence”: a formal device deployed through a complex maneuvering of rhetoric and voice. Finally, “*Les ratés de l’ordre symbolique*” explores social factors at work in a bout of witchcraft: why it only strikes peasant families, or artisans and shopkeepers working in family businesses; why the bewitched all agree on the fact that their misfortunes began when they became self-employed; why they only accuse their neighbors of having bewitched them, and never their kin.

“*Etre affecté*,” the book’s conclusion, can be read as a stand-alone work: its first version was in fact a lecture given at the American Anthropological Association’s

1987 Congress in Chicago. It is, however, best seen as the culminating point of a three-volume anthropology of witchcraft, two volumes of which describe in detail the situations in which I, the ethnographer, was “caught,” as well as the ways in which I came to understand and accept (or not) the demands made of me.

This methodological and epistemological text emerges out of the condition of being “caught” in witchcraft: a condition I was forced to submit to in order to access events relating to it. I deconstruct the confusing comfort-blanket of “participant observation” (being outside while imagining oneself completely inside), and expand on the wider methodological and theoretical usefulness of the notion of “being *affect*-ed.”

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My work on Bocage witchcraft led me to reconsider the notion of affect and the importance of exploring it. Both as a way of addressing a critical dimension of fieldwork (the state of being affected) and as a starting point for developing an anthropology of therapy (be it “savage” and exotic or “scholarly” and Western). And finally as a way of rethinking anthropology itself.

Indeed, my efforts to challenge anthropology’s paradoxical treatment of *affect* as a notion were inspired by my experiences of fieldwork (of dewitching¹) and psychoanalysis (therapy). The central role of affect in human experience has frequently been neglected or denied; and when it is acknowledged, this is either (as testified to by an abundant body of Anglo-American literature) in order to demonstrate that affect is a purely cultural construction and has no reality outside of this construction, or (as testified to by French ethnology, as well as psychoanalysis), to condemn affect to irrelevancy by forcing it into the realm of representation. My work, on the contrary, focuses on the idea that the efficacy of therapy depends on an engagement with non-representational forms of affect.

More generally, my work calls into question anthropology’s parochial emphasis on the ideal aspects of the human experience, on the cultural production of “understanding,” to employ a term derived from classical philosophy. It seems to me that there is an urgent need to rehabilitate old-fashioned “sensibility,” the more so as we are now better equipped to address it than seventeenth century philosophers were.

First, however, a few reflections on the manner in which I obtained my field-data. I could not but be affected by witchcraft, and I developed a methodological approach that subsequently allowed me to put this experience to use. This approach was neither participant observation, nor, above all, empathy.

When I went to the Bocage, in 1969, there already existed an abundant literature on witchcraft, divided into two separate currents, each unaware of the other: that of the European folklorists (who had recently upgraded themselves to the status of “ethnologists,” though their way of approaching the subject had remained unchanged), and that of Anglo-American anthropologists, especially Africanists and functionalists.

1 The term *dewitch* (*désorceler*), and its derivatives, has also been translated as *unwitch*, notably in the author’s book *Deadly words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, translated by Catherine Cullen (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

The European folklorists had no direct knowledge of rural witchcraft: following Van Gennep's recommendations, they conducted regional studies, meeting with local elites—the people least likely to know anything about it—or presenting them with questionnaires, and then tacking on a few interviews with peasants to see if “people still believed in it.” The responses received were as uniform in nature as the questions: “Not here, but in the neighboring village—they're backwards . . .” followed by a few skeptical anecdotes, ridiculing believers. In short, French ethnologists interested in witchcraft avoided both participation and observation—indeed, this is still largely the case today (Favret-Saada 1987).

Anglo-American anthropologists at least claimed to practice “participant-observation.” It took me some time to work out what they actually meant by this curious expression, in empirical terms. In rhetoric, it's called an oxymoron: observing while participating, or participating while observing—this is about as straightforward as eating a burning hot ice cream. In the field, my colleagues seemed to combine two types of behavior: an active stance, involving regular work with paid informants whom they would interrogate and observe; and a passive one, in which they attended events linked to witchcraft (disputes, visits to mediums, etc.). The first type of behavior can scarcely be described as “participation” (though the informant does indeed appear to “participate” in the ethnographer's work); and in the second case, participation seems to mean trying to be present, which is the minimum requirement for observation.

In other words, what mattered, for these anthropologists, was not participation, but observation. They had in fact a rather narrow conception of it: their analysis of witchcraft was reduced to that of accusations because, they said, those were the only “facts” an ethnographer could “observe.” For them, accusation was a type of “behavior.” In fact, it was the principal form of behavior present in witchcraft (its archetypal action), as it was the only one that could be empirically proven to exist. The rest was little more than native error and imagination. (Let us note in passing that, for these authors, *speaking* is neither a behavior nor an act capable of being observed.) These anthropologists gave clear answers to one question and one question only—in a given society, who accuses whom of witchcraft?—and disregarded almost all the others: How does one enter into the state of being bewitched? How does one escape from it? What are the ideas, experiences and practices of the bewitched and of witches? Even an author as precise as Turner does not help us to answer these questions and we are forced to return to the work of Evans-Pritchard's (1937).

Generally speaking, the relevant literature blurred the boundaries between a number of terms that it would have been well to distinguish: “truth” overlapped with “reality,” which in turn was confused with the “observable” (this term also confusing empirically attestable knowledge with that knowledge which could be accessed independently of native discourse) and then with such terms as “fact,” “act” and “behavior.” The only thing that united this terminological nebula was that each term could be contrasted with its symmetrical opposite: “error” overlapped with “imaginary,” which in turn overlapped with “unobservable,” “belief,” and finally onto native “discourse.”

Nothing is in fact as uncertain as the status of native speech in these texts: sometimes, it is classified as a behavior (as with accusations) and sometimes as a source of false propositions (as when witchcraft is used to explain illness). The act of speech itself, however, is magicked away and native discourse is reduced to its

end-product—acts of speech mistaken for propositions. Symbolic activity, then, is little more than false propositions. As we see, all these confusions circle around one common point: the disqualification of native speech and the promotion of that of the ethnographer - whose activity seems to consist of making a detour through Africa in order to verify that only he holds . . . we're not sure what, a set of vaguely related notions that, for him, apparently equal the truth.

Let us go back to my work on witchcraft in the Bocage. As I read the Anglo-American literature to help understand my field, I was struck by a curious obsession present in all of the prefaces. The authors—and the great Evans-Pritchard is no exception—regularly denied the possibility of rural witchcraft in contemporary Europe: it was seemingly long since dead and buried. Mair, Evans-Pritchard, Douglas, Marwick, Thomas—to cite just a few well-known authors—always discuss it in the past tense.² Marwick is particularly explicit about this. According to him, the end of criminal trials for witchcraft, in the seventeenth century, represented our “emancipation from widespread belief in witchcraft.” The idea that witchcraft might, in *our* societies, have continued to bubble along under the surface is “debatable,” a “figment of the imagination.” “In modern society,” witchcraft has been reduced to “myths and fairy-tales,” it has fled to the realm of fantasy. Those practices that still today claim to be “witchcraft” are mere “artificial” cults and “complete fabrications.” Marwick doubtless has in mind the famous British covens, a recent urban practice that should not, in fact, be associated with rural witchcraft (Marwick 1979: 11).³

However, the refusal, within Anglo-American anthropological literature, to admit the existence of rural witchcraft in Europe, was always coupled with reflections on the distance that “we” are meant to maintain with witchcraft. It lies outside our immediate experience and escapes our understanding. So, possessed as we are of a “European spirit,” we must take a detour via exotic anthropology in order to represent it (Middleton, Winter, 1963). Or it is claimed that it only exists in “small-scale societies . . . out of touch with modern science” and with “limited medical knowledge.” Witchcraft being the medicine of illiterate, ignorant peoples, we Europeans, with our education and medical knowledge, have no use for it (Mair 1969: 9).⁴ And so these anthropologists, supposedly practitioners of the most rigorous form of empiricism, engaged in an absurd attempt to recreate the Great Divide between “Us” and “Them” (“we” also believed in witches, but that was

2 See Mair (1969), Evans-Pritchard (1937, 1972), Marwick (1970), Douglas (1970), Thomas (1971). J. Caro Baroja's book, *Les Sorcières et leur monde* (1972) was translated into English, but its readers do not seem to draw any conclusions from the few pages where he notes the presence of peasant witchcraft in the Basque country.

3 On these present-day urban cults, see, for example, Glass (1965). To say that rural witchcraft disappeared in seventeenth century Europe is factually false, as attested to by eighteenth century reports of Episcopalian visits; in the nineteenth century, those of the prefects, certain criminal archives and the work of folklorists; finally, in the twentieth century, press and a few European ethnographic works dedicated to witchcraft.

4 I had a long conversation with her on the topic: faced with the empirical fact of rural witchcraft in France (with me as material witness), she immediately abandoned her initial position for that of the French folklorists. Evans-Pritchard, on the other hand, jokingly dismissed it, and I admired his 1937 monograph so much that I did not insist.

three hundred years ago, when “we” were “them”), and thereby to protect the ethnologist, this acultural entity whose mind only contained true propositions, from contamination by his object.

Perhaps this was possible in Africa, but I was in France. Bocage peasants obstinately refused to play the Great Divide with me, as they knew full well where it would end: I would be on the side of truth (that of knowledge, science, the real, see above), and they, of ignorance. The press, television, the Church, school, medicine—all these national bodies of ideological control—were ready to pillory them just as soon as an example of witchcraft went wrong and led to some tragedy. For a few days, some parcel of countryside was transformed into a hotbed of infamy: people believed in witches, accused their neighbors of witchcraft, and collectively cultivated passionate hatred for it. According to the press, the lives of these peasants were not merely insignificant, they were despicable, morally repugnant, shadowed from the light of reason, and blind even to straightforward common sense. And so, Bocage peasants protected themselves from these well-intentioned institutions by building a wall of silence which they justified with statements such as: “if you’ve never been ‘taken’ you can’t speak about witchcraft,” or “we can’t talk to them about it.”

Thus, they only spoke to me about it once they thought that I too had been “taken”—i.e. when uncontrollable reactions on my part showed that I had been affected by the real (and often devastating) effects of particular words or ritual acts. Some people took me for a dewitcher and asked me to help out, whilst others thought I was bewitched and offered their help. Notables aside (who were happy to speak of witchcraft the better to dismiss it), nobody ever discussed these things with me because I was an ethnographer.

I, myself, wasn’t quite sure whether or not I was bewitched. Of course, I never believed in a propositional sense that a witch might harm me with charms or spells, but then I doubt that the peasants did either. Rather, they asked of me that I personally (rather than scientifically) experience the real effects of the particular network of human communication that is witchcraft. In other words: they wanted me to enter into it as a partner, to stake the contours of my then existence in the process. Initially, I oscillated between these two pitfalls: if I “participated,” fieldwork would become a personal activity, that is to say the opposite of work, but if I attempted to “observe,” meaning keeping myself at a distance, I’d have nothing to “observe.” In the first case, my scientific project was threatened, but in the second, it was ruined.

Though I didn’t know, when I was in the field, what I was doing, nor why, I am struck by the clarity of my methodological choices: everything happened as though I had undertaken to make “participation” an instrument for knowledge. During my meetings with the bewitched and the dewitchers, I let myself be affected, without seeking to study what they were doing, nor even to understand and remember it. Once home, I wrote up a sort of chronicle of these enigmatic events (often, situations occurred that were so intensely charged that they would render me incapable of this *a posteriori* note taking.) This field journal, which was for a long time my only material, had two objectives.

The first was very short-term: to try to understand what they wanted from me, to find an answer to such vital questions as: “Who does this person take me for?” (a woman bewitched, a dewitcher); “What does so-and-so want from me?” (that I dewitch him . . .). And I needed to find the right answer, because next time, I’d be

asked to act. In general, however, this was beyond me: the ethnographic literature on witchcraft, both French and Anglo-Saxon, did not allow me to figure the positional system that constitutes witchcraft. Instead, I was discovering this system by staking my own self in the process.

The other objective was more long-term: I never accepted that what was, above all, a fascinating personal experience, would remain beyond my understanding. At the time, I wasn't sure for whom or quite why I wanted to understand. For myself? For anthropology? Or even for European consciousness? But I organized my field journal so that I might make something of it later on. My notes were maniacally precise, so that one day I might re-hallucinate the experience and so—because I would no longer be “taken” but rather “retaken”—finally understand them.

Josée Contreras and I rewrote and published parts of this journal as *Corps pour corps*. Those who have read it may perhaps have noticed that there is nothing in there to link it to the journals of Malinowski or Métraux. The field journal was for them a private space where they could finally let go, find themselves again, outside the hours of work during which they constrained themselves to put on a brave face in front of the natives. In short, a space for personal recreation, in the literal sense of the word. Private or subjective reflections are, to the contrary, absent from my own journal, except when particular events from my personal life were evoked in conversation with my interlocutors, that is to say included in the network of witchcraft communication.

One aspect of my fieldwork experiences was all but untellable. It was so complex that it defied memorization and, in any event, it affected me too much. I am speaking of the dewitching séances that I attended either as a woman bewitched (my personal life was closely scrutinized and I was ordered to alter it), or as an onlooker, present at the behest of either client or dewitcher (I was repeatedly ordered to intervene on the spot.) Initially, I took a great many notes once I got home, but this was principally done to soothe the anxiety of having to engage personally. Once I accepted the place that was assigned to me during the séances, I practically never took notes again: everything went too fast, I let situations unfold without second guessing anything and, from the first séance to the last, I understood practically nothing of what was happening. But I discreetly recorded some thirty of the roughly two hundred séances I attended, in order to constitute a body of material on which I could later work.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, I'd like to point out that “participating” and being affected are categorically not techniques for the acquisition of knowledge via empathy, however one defines it. I shall now explore two of its principle definitions and show that neither corresponds to my experience in the field.

According to the first definition, drawn from the *Encyclopaedia of Psychology*, empathizing consists of “experiencing by proxy the feelings, perceptions and thoughts of another.” This type of empathy, then, necessarily implies distance: it is because we are not in the place of the other that we attempt to represent or imagine what it would be like to be them—what we might feel, perceive and think. I, however, *was* in the native's position, shaken by the feelings, perceptions and thoughts that affect those who are part of the system of witchcraft. I contend that one must occupy these positions rather than merely imagine them, for the simple reason that what occurs within them is literally unimaginable—at least for an ethnographer used to working on representations. When we are in such a position, we are bombarded with specific “intensities” (let us call them affects) that are, for

the most part, unsignifiable. This position and the intensities that come with it must therefore be experienced: it is the only way to address them.

The second conception of empathy—as *Einfühlung*, which we might translate as emotional communion—instead emphasizes the immediacy of communication, the interpersonal fusion one can reach via identification with another. This idea says little of the mechanism of identification, instead stressing its result: the fact that it allows for the knowledge of another's affective states. I, on the contrary, would argue that occupying such a position in the witchcraft system in no way informs me of the affective state of another; occupying such a position affects *me*, meaning it mobilizes or modifies my own stock of images, without necessarily informing me of that of my partners. However—and this is crucial, as the type of knowledge I am aiming for hinges upon it—the mere fact of my occupying this position and being affected by it opens up the possibility of a specific form of communication: a necessarily involuntary form of communication, devoid of intentionality, and one that may or may not be verbal.

When it is verbal, this is more or less what occurs: something (I cannot say what or why), drives me to speak about, say, unrepresented affect. For example, I might say to a peasant, in echo of something he previously said to me: “Actually, I dreamt that . . .,” and I’d have a hard time explaining that “actually.” Or, my interlocutor might remark, *a propos* of nothing: “The other day, so and so told you that. . . . Today, you have these zits on your face. . . .” In both of these cases, the speaker implies that I have been affected. In the first example, the speaker is me, whilst in the second it is somebody else.

And what of non-verbal communication? What is communicated and how? We are in fact dealing with the form of immediate communication invoked by the term *Einfühlung*. However, what is communicated to me is only the intensity with which the other is affected (the young Freud spoke of a “quantum of affect,” or an energetic charge). The images that, for he and he alone, are associated with this intensity, escape this form of communication. I, on my end, receive this energetic charge in my own, personal way: I might, for example, suffer a temporary blurring of vision, a quasi-hallucination, or a change in dimensional perception; or I might be overwhelmed by a sense of panic or massive anxiety. It is not necessary—and in fact not common—that this also be the case for my interlocutor: superficially, he may be completely unaffected.

Let us suppose that instead of struggling against this state, I accept it as an act of communication regarding what I do not know. This pushes me to speak, but in the manner mentioned earlier (“You know what? I dreamt that . . .”), or to hold my tongue. In such instances, if I am able to forget that I am in the field, that I have my stockpile of questions to ask . . . , if I am able to tell myself that communication (ethnographic or not, that is no longer the problem) is taking place there and then, in this unbearable and incomprehensible fashion, then I can connect to a particular form of human experience—the state of being bewitched—because I am affected by it.

When two people are affected, things pass between them that are inaccessible to the ethnographer; people speaks of things that ethnographers do not address; or they hold their tongues, but this too is a form of communication. By experiencing the intensities linked to such a position, it is in fact possible to notice that each one presents a specific type of objectivity: events can only occur in a certain order, one can only be affected in a certain way.

As we can see, the fact that an ethnographer allows herself to be affected does not mean that she identifies with the indigenous point of view, nor that her fieldwork is little more than an “ego-trip.” Allowing oneself to be affected does however mean that that one risks seeing one’s intellectual project disintegrate. For if this intellectual project is omnipresent, nothing happens. But if something happens and the intellectual project is somehow still afloat at the end of the journey, then ethnography is possible. It has, I believe, four distinctive traits:

1. Its starting point is the recognition that ordinary ethnographic communication—i.e., verbal, voluntary and intentional communication that seeks to discover the informant’s system of representations—is among the most impoverished forms of human communication. It is especially inept at providing information about non-verbal and involuntary aspects of experience.

I note in passing that when an ethnographer reminisces about the key moments of his time in the field, he always speaks of situations where he was not capable of engaging in this impoverished form of communication, because he was overwhelmed by a situation and/or by his own affect. However, within ethnographies, these situations of involuntary communication, frequent as they are, are never analyzed *as* what they are: the “information” the ethnographer gleaned from them appear in the text, but with no reference to the affective intensity that accompanied their transmission: and this “information” is placed on the same level as information that emerged out of voluntary and intentional communication. We could in fact say that becoming a professional ethnographer is a matter of learning to disguise any particular episode of one’s experience in the field as an act of voluntary and intentional communication seeking to discover the informant’s system of representations. I, on the other hand, chose to grant those situations of involuntary and non-intentional communication an epistemological status: my ethnography consists of their repeated re-experience.

2. The second distinctive trait of this ethnography is that the researcher must tolerate a form of split experience. Depending on the situation, she must either give precedence to that part of her that is affected, malleable, modified by the experience in the field, or to the part that wants to record the experience in order to understand it, and to make it into an object of science.
3. The process of understanding is spread out in time and disjointed: in the instant one is the most affected, one cannot recount the experience. In the moment when it is recounted, one cannot understand it. The time for analysis comes later.
4. The material collected is of a particular density, and its analysis inevitably leads us to break with certain well-established scientific certitudes. Take dewitching rituals. Had I never been thus affected, had I not taken part in so many informal episodes of witchcraft, I would have accorded a central importance to the rituals: first, because as an ethnographer I am supposed to privilege symbolic analysis; and second, because standard witchcraft narratives grant them pride of place. But, having spent so much time among the betwitched and the dewitchers, both within and without séances, having heard a wide variety of spontaneous conversation on witchcraft, in addition to formal representations of it, having experienced so many affects associated with certain specific

instances of dewitching, having seen so many things done that were not part of the realm of ritual, I was made to understand the following:

Ritual is an element—the most spectacular but not the only one—through which the dewitcher reveals the existence of “abnormal forces,” the life and death stakes of the crisis his clients are undergoing, and the possibility of victory. But this implies setting in motion a very complex therapeutic device both before and long after the ritual proper. This device can, of course, be described and understood, but only by if we are prepared to run the risk of “participating,” of being affected by it. It cannot simply be “observed.”

And to conclude, a word on the implicit ontology of our discipline. Empiricist anthropology presupposes, among other things, the human subject's essential transparency to himself. Yet my experience in the field—because it allowed space for non-verbal, non-intentional and involuntary communication, for the rise and free play of affective states devoid of representation—drove me to explore a thousand aspects of the subject's essential opacity to himself. This notion is in fact as old as tragedy itself, and has been at the heart of all therapeutic literature for a century or more. It matters little what name is given to this opacity (e.g., “unconscious”): what is important, in particular for an anthropology of therapies, is to be able to posit it, and place it at the heart of our analyses.

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