ROBERT COLE, DOING DOCUMENTARY WORK
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Introduction

At one point early in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee stops to contemplate the awesome task before him, that of doing justice to the lives of the tenant-farmer families he and Walker Evans had met in July of 1936. They had been sent south by the editors of *Fortune* magazine to do a story on the agricultural economy of that region. They had chosen central Alabama as their locale, the heart of the so-called black belt, a phrase meant to describe not a racial population but a kind of earth, rich and productive for growing crops. They had made their way, with the help of others, to three families, all of them white—and now faced the task of figuring out what to try to learn, and then what to offer the readers who would challenge their words and images. That documentary task troubled Agee enormously—some, reading him, might say needlessly. He reveals to us in the first pages of his

book the aesthetic, intellectual, and moral struggle he waged as he spent time with those fellow citizens, fellow human beings, then considered what to report of what he had witnessed. He refers to "the cruel radiance of what is," and seems to despair of ever being able to render it. Soon enough, he turns to anger and scorn, which he directs at those who sent him and Evans south, at himself, even at his eventual readers. "It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying," he writes, "that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings. . . ." That is the mere beginning of a very long sentence which, in its sum, charges the editors of *Fortune* and their two employees, James Agee and Walker Evans, with (at a minimum) insensitivity, thoughtlessness, arrogance. As for us who may happen to pick up the book that came of this journalistic assignment, we are all too likely to be as culpable in our own way as the writer surely is, as he has reminded us many times. Late in a section titled "Education," Agee refers to his "self-disgust," which he attributes less to his "ignorance" than to his "inability" to declare adequately what might be done to remedy the distress he has seen; and he also chastises himself for an obvious "inability to blow out the brains with it [his description of what needs to be done on behalf of the people about whom he is writing] of you who take what it is talking of lightly, or not seriously enough."

I suppose such intense, dramatic, scattershot anger can be dismissed as mere rhetoric—an ingenuous or coy effort to engage the reader, through the writer's confessional remarks, in a necessary moral introspection: how earnestly and thoroughly might one take such a book to heart? Still, Agee's anger is ultimately less personal than his heated language sometimes suggests. He is constantly railing, really, against our very humanity as writers and readers, even as he

tries so passionately and brilliantly (and prolixly, some would aver) to uphold the humanity of those others who share his nationality and race, even his own not-so-distant background (his father was of Tennessee-yeoman ancestry), though of course not his educational level, his class. A central source of tension in the book is Agee's sense of inadequacy to the task at hand—his sense that any manuscript he will complete and send to a publisher won't convey so very much that matters about the lives of the people he has met, and yes, his worry that his readers won't realize that to be the case, because he as a writer might persuade and charm them, his caveats notwithstanding, into the dangerous notion that when they have finished reading *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* they will have learned just about all they need to know on a subject not exactly central to most of their lives.

In desperation, at the very start of his writhing documentary writing (doomed to futility and inadequacy, we are repeatedly warned) Agee issues a mock challenge: "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement." He most certainly *might* have done "it," abstained from the considerable labor and public agony, the performance, a skeptic might say, of his book, now readily and justifiably called an idiosyncratic work of genius by so many of us—but quite apparently he couldn't stop himself from giving us this extended spell of writing, warts, multiple self-condemnations, and all. We who follow him, as readers of his torrent of words, have every right, every responsibility to figure out the psychological and ethical conundrum he almost nonchalantly (the book is full of such provocative asides) tosses our way. Was he frivolously, self-indulgently carried away, hence this book with all its rage as well as its penetrating, large-minded lyricism? Was he right in his suggested alternatives to a book, even in his mention of

photography as somehow more truthful and adequate to the job at hand—never mind the other suggested (and provocative) offerings? Was he reminding us, ironically, in a remark that on its surface seems so dismissive, even denigrating to writers, how important words can be—the means, after all, by which the idea of the "fragments" and "bits" and "pieces" and "phials" and "records" and "plates" are conveyed to you and me? Of course, the rock-bottom issue is *which* words, meaning what kind of language, written by what person, possessed of what acquaintance and knowledge, acquired in what manner, justifies both the exploratory effort made (that time spent in central Alabama during the summer of 1936) and the several years' worth of additional exploration (their tangible form called "drafts") that culminated in the publication of what Agee with scarcely concealed and distancing derision refers to as a book?

I will be coming back to Agee and his book in this book, but here I want to indicate with his help some of the occupational hazards, as it were, of so-called documentary work. The intense self-scrutiny Agee attempts is, one hopes, an aspect of all writing, all research. In my work, that of psychoanalytic psychiatry, we properly put great emphasis on the capacity for self-deception, under the sway of early and now unconscious influences, not only of our patients but of ourselves—so-called "transference" in them, "counter-transference" in us. Unfortunately, our journals and books stress the former far more than the latter, perhaps out of the all-too-human inclination toward self-protection; and unfortunately, the words "transference" and "counter-transference" don't quite encompass or explain the possible range of mental responsiveness, conscious and unconscious,—or, put differently, knowing and unwitting—that characterizes our unspoken, never mind quite explicitly avowed, way of getting along with one another. Not all of our irrationality, even, stems from childhood experiences within a family. Moreover, as we get older a host of social attitudes grow within us, a consequence

of the kind of life we have lived, and they bear down on us constantly, making us sensitive here, relatively indifferent or even callous there. Each of us brings, finally, a particular life to the others who are being observed in documentary work, and so to some degree, each of us will engage with those others differently, carrying back from such engagement our own version of them.

The word *documentary* certainly suggests an interest in what is actual, what exists, rather than what one brings personally, if not irrationally, to the table of present-day actuality. Documentary evidence substantiates what is otherwise an assertion or a hypothesis or a claim. A documentary film attempts to portray a particular kind of life realistically; a documentary report offers authentication of what is otherwise speculation. Through documents themselves, through informants, witnesses, participants, through the use of the camera and the tape recorder, through letters or journals or diaries, through school records, court records, hospital records, or newspaper records, a growing accuracy with respect to a situation, a place, a person or a group of people begins to be assembled. Agee is getting at that mode of inquiry when he provocatively makes mention of cotton and the earth and cloth as well as the more obvious "variable" of speech that is heard and remembered in notes taken—his way of urging us to pay the closest attention to anything and everything that is a part of the life we are attempting to get to know. But his repeatedly acknowledged, fiercely declared impatience with himself and his readers, his outbursts of scorn, self-directed but also hurled indiscriminately at those who happen to open his book, remind us that a search for the factual, the palpable, the real, a determined effort to observe and authenticate, and, afterwards, to report, has to contend, often enough, with a range of seemingly irrelevant or distracting emotions—the search for objectivity waylaid by a stubborn subjectivity. These days (far more than in Agee's time) that subjectivity is amplified for writer and reader alike by a cultural interest

in all things psychological, so that Agee's outbursts, or those of Orwell in his documentary writing (*Down And Out In London And Paris, The Road To Wigan Pier*) get quickly characterized by my students, by me, as manifestations of "guilt" or "shame"—an angry nervousness that belies a sense of complicity in some wrongdoing, or an embarrassment connected to one's good luck as it is rubbed into one's awareness by the sight of others utterly down on their luck.

At other moments in history, the strong expressions of personal feeling in an Agee might have been differently regarded—an expression of proper social outrage, or a righteousness quite in keeping with the task at hand: the moral underpinnings of social inquiry. Today some of us want no part of that—want, rather, a "value-free" social science, for instance. To connect again with my own profession's introspective struggles, I remember well the desire for "neutrality" that some of us young psychiatrists kept expressing, our wish, even, to cover our personal tracks, in order that our patients would tell us a "truth" uninfluenced (as much as possible) by our attitudes and values, as expressed in the books and pictures we might be tempted to put in our offices, for instance, or what we might absent-mindedly say about ourselves or others, not to mention the events of the day—hence those dimly lit rooms, bereft of "stimuli," of hints and more of ourselves. The point was to encourage our patients to use us in a certain way: we weren't *ourselves*, we were "objects of transference," or "instruments" (note the depersonalized language) by means of which our patients would discover *themselves*. They would do so, we hoped, one after the other, no matter the variations in them, because we had striven mightily for a kind of resolute impassivity, a disappearance, almost. Some of us in our theoretical talk referred to ourselves as a "screen," an interesting image—a blankness upon which others "projected" themselves, their

attributions with respect to us amounting to a collective revelation about their past experience with parents and siblings.

But how much self-effacement is really possible, either in a clinical setting or out in that "field" where fellow human beings are "studied"? We psychiatrists may keep our mouths shut most of the time, and when we speak, we may be very careful to do so in an even-handed way that eschews emotionality or judgmental passion. We may be properly wary of showing our feelings, and we may furnish our offices in such a way that little of ourselves is visually there for our visitors. But those offices are located in certain neighborhoods; they are hardly "value-free"! Moreover, it is impossible for us to attend everything we hear or see with a fine impartiality. We notice what we notice in accordance with who we are—and, like Agee and Orwell, we are paid money for our efforts to understand others, who as patients are presumably "poorer" than we are (that is, in trouble, hurt, bewildered). Even as Agee and Evans poked and peered at the downtrodden, we watch every move, listen to every word of the downcast. No question, we have had medical training, hospital and clinic experience—we clothe ourselves in the intimidating garb of science, and with some justification. We are "trained," a word that is meant to certify ourselves and reassure those who come to our offices. Writers or photographers don't go through such a spell of study, but they have their own apprenticeships, and presumably the editors of *Fortune* had confidence in the ability of Agee and Evans to do a thorough job, come back, and render accurately what they had seen and heard. Still, many patients have accused their doctors of failing to understand them in a full and just way, and not a few doctors have joined Agee in a public lament of what is or is not possible in a clinical setting—have even been willing to resort to a strenuous criticism of the work they nevertheless keep doing, even as Agee, for all his complaints or asides kept doing his self-directed

work as an observer, a writer, and ultimately delivered a manuscript to a publisher.

To take stock of others is to call upon oneself—as a journalist, a writer, a photographer, or as a doctor or a teacher. This mix of the objective and the subjective is a constant presence and, for many of us, a constant challenge—what blend of the two is proper, and at what point shall we begin to cry "foul"? Here the moral side of our nature can trouble us, if not haunt us—Agee's exclamations, Orwell's diatribes (I shall come to them later), and the "indignation" Erik H. Erikson dared summon for his psychoanalytic colleagues as a most important and desirable quality (this at a time when detachment and "cool" were decidedly the postures those colleagues found desirable, or rather, mandatory, even as Agee and Orwell were and are regarded by many readers—many of my students, certainly—as impossibly hotheaded, and thereby untrustworthy as the dispassionate social observers they ought to have been). One person's *ought* is another person's *naught*, of course; and we go through cycles and eras, times when documentary writers or photographers are inclined (and expected) to be relatively aloof from their chosen "field of study," their "subjects" (again, the evocative and suggestive power of language!), or times when the hope is for a virtual entanglement of those under scrutiny and those giving them the once-over—to the point where some social science research has been called, with firm approval, "participant observation," wherein those much discussed "roles" that sociologists and anthropologists struggle to define end up merging.

I bring up these matters because they keep coming up, I notice, in seminars I teach, attended by writers and photographers and filmmakers and journalists and social scientists who have tried to put into words or represent through pictures (or on film) what they have witnessed as observers, as reporters, as (a catchall word) documentarians. Again and again, our discussions center on the attitudes these

men and women have toward their work (its nature, its possibilities, its limitations) and toward themselves as the individuals (outsiders, people of relative privilege) who are doing that work. Sometimes the issue is methodological—how one does a specific project, how one writes it up or puts together the visual documents obtained. Sometimes the issue is psychological or personal—how one comes to terms with a host of emotions that keep arising as one leaves a campus, a privileged suburb, even an only modestly comfortable or conventional life, to take the measure of others who are different in this or that way. Nor is the issue always a matter of class—specifically, a reasonably well-off investigator spending time with poor families. No question, much of the documentary tradition has featured that kind of encounter: a journalist or essayist or photographer or university-connected researcher or filmmaker who wants to learn how it goes across a particular set of railroad tracks and then returns with the makings of an article, a book, a film, a series of pictures to be put on display or published. But documentary writers and photographers have also crossed other barriers—of race, obviously, of region or nationality, of culture. Sometimes, as a matter of fact, such fieldwork involves moving "up" rather than "down," to the point where one thinks of a parodic version of Orwell's first book—"up and about" in, say, two "gold coast" communities. I well remember the personal responses and difficulties of three students of mine who did such work, tape recorders and cameras in hand, minds on the line, with as much to consider as their colleagues in the seminar who had taken themselves to ghettoes or to migrant-labor camps.

Ultimately such students, such fieldworkers, sort out the questions that keep coming to mind as partly psychological, partly moral—though there is (and ought be) a blur when one looks for a boundary between the two. Nor are those who do documentary work only a problem, as it were, to themselves. To be sure, there is plenty of

soul-searching, as we shall see; but there is also the obvious reality of the observed, who have their own notions about what these visitors, these outsiders, these men and women on a mission of sorts, intend to do, are doing—and will do, later, when they have departed. I am afraid that not enough is made of the terms of entry, the terms of departure in so-called "fieldwork"—what has been arranged, for instance, for the observer, at the start, by various scouts, informants, or intermediaries, and what has happened toward the end of a particular stay, in the way of pledges, avowals, or worries expressed and even threats made. Agee's "Late Sunday Morning" in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* more than hints at what can happen as two Yankees, laden with gear, show up: "When they saw the amount of equipment stowed in the back of our car, they showed that they felt they had been taken advantage of, but said nothing of it." In that one sentence, necessity confronts an only apparent, fearful courtesy, and wins the day—though at a price.

To do his work, Evans needed his cameras. The white landowners who were taking him and Agee to meet some of their tenants would not be anything but polite and welcoming. Still, their eyes had widened at the invitation, and reservations (if not outright apprehensions) had crossed their minds. Agee's mind, too, had been stirred—he had seen below the surface of his hosts, even as they had perhaps seen below his ostensibly cordial and (by implication) beseeching manner. Soon enough, as he accepts the favors of these men, he is beginning to take note of their authority, their fearful power over those who work for them, and he is, right away, turning on the hands that feed him. He also wastes no time in turning on himself. There he is, showing up at the homes of these tenant farmers with their bossmen. He has begun to realize, of course, that such a start to his work is not without significance, without consequences for the nature of that work. No question, someone had to help him meet these shy, easily intimidated, impoverished people who lived in

out-of-the-way places and were hardly prepared to be available in the comfortable "coffee shoppe" where Agee and Evans had met the landowners. Moreover, these two visitors from up north were on a specific assignment. They didn't have all the time in the world to spare, nor were they free simply to hang around, letting time and conversations and the accidents of particular acquaintance give shape to the direction of their work. They knew whom they had to see before they left New York City, and whom they had to see upon arrival in Alabama—the "contacts" who would presumably pass them along to those whose lives would become the subject matter of a proposed text to be illustrated by Evans's camera work.

A powerfully suggestive writer, Agee could offer so very much to consider through a remembered moment's exchange, relayed in the very first paragraph of that introductory section: "Walker said it would be all right to make pictures, wouldn't it, and he said, Sure, of course, take all the snaps you're a mind to; that is, if you can keep the niggers from running off when they see a camera." In a rather candidly devastating statement, four sentences further along, he lets us know, with respect to one of the two (white, of course) landlords chauffeuring them around, that "nearly all his tenants were Negroes and no use to me."

Agee is frank to tell us that no matter his avowed, painfully uttered sympathy for, and empathy with, the people whose lives get presented in his book—the lyricism constantly extended them by a gifted poet and essayist who happened to be on a magazine's errand—he and his friend were quite capable of being cannily practical. The use of the vernacular in those passages is especially devastating—and revealing: of how much we can take for granted, if we are certain people and if certain other people are our sponsors. As for those who, anyway, don't count—they are not going to be any problem. They're of "no use" to these temporary visitors, whose high-mindedness, whose generosity of soul, whose fineness of sen-

sibility don't stand in the way of their lives as, right now, negotiators: take us where we'll get the job done, to people who will cooperate (that last word a signpost in documentary work—the degree to which "respondents" are willing to be forthcoming). I say the above not with animus or out of sarcasm. Agee himself was simmering while with those two bossmen, and his later recall and use of the vernacular, though it implicates him and Evans (they said not a word in disagreement or protest), lets us know what he thinks of them, shows all too clearly their smug sense of themselves, their smug indifference to the others (whose toil enabled them to be who they were, relatively well-to-do people). Soon enough Agee's bitterness and rage would be on the lookout for fuller expression. He was thwarted by his "research" needs, the exploratory requirements of a journalistic project, from telling off these two, who were (the ironies keep mounting) doing him a big and important and utterly necessary favor, but his mind was resourceful, and others (the liberal intelligentsia, for instance, back home) would get quite a slamming, to the point where they seem far more malevolent, at times, than those two fellows who owned the land tilled by Agee's "three tenant families," as they get called on his book's title page.

As for Agee's departure from Alabama, one can only speculate on what happened to him as he took leave; but he never did write that article for *Fortune*. In a sense, his mission failed; and it surely did, to some considerable extent, because of his passionate desire to make some kind of amends to people whom he would eventually present to the world as hurt, yes, but as almost enviably noble—as, indeed, worthy of the Biblical "praise" due "famous men." I doubt that Agee and Evans knew they were going nowhere with their article when they actually departed Alabama, but I suspect they had set the stage for their future blocks and impasses and temporizations, their inability to come up with a "product" or deliver the goods, by the way they (most especially Agee, one suspects) said good-bye to the

people with whom they had stayed, and, more generally, to the situation in which they had immersed themselves so thoroughly. The self-recriminations that keep making their way into *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* bespeak a moral agony somehow unsettled in the South, and hence a force to be reckoned with down the line, in the Northern world of typewriters and editorial offices.

So it would go with Orwell, when he left Wigan, where he did his observational stint with miners the very same year that saw Agee and Evans in Alabama with tenant farmers. *The Road To Wigan Pier* offers almost unlimited admiration for miners, to the point of veneration—while others near and far do less well, for sure: the shopkeepers of Wigan, for example, or the intellectuals of London, including the very folks, the editors of the New Left Book Club, who gave Orwell his documentary commission. Orwell never does tell us how he gained access to a given world, what he shared with those he met as to his intentions, and how he said his farewell; but as with Agee, the vehemence of his assault on the world to which he belonged before he left for Wigan—the world, after all, whose inhabitants would be his readers—makes one wonder not only about his particular documentary effort, but about those initiated by all of us. If we don't somehow settle a certain score with ourselves, never mind those we go to "study" (to be crude, calling upon Agee's chosen crudity, those we "use") while we are out there, in that elusive, ever-changing entity abstractly called "the field," we are apt to show that ambiguity of feeling to others in our writing, maybe even in the editing we do of our film footage, or the titles we give to our photographs, the selections we make, the way we arrange them. I will be coming back to such matters in the pages ahead with the help of my students, not to mention through an examination of my own documentary journey, with its attendant missteps, its blind spots, its dead-end detours. Here I have wanted to set my sightings, and thereby give a clue to one of this book's purposes, one of its

destinations: a look at what happens to those of us who venture into streets not our own in pursuit of the awareness those streets (one hopes) can offer—what happens morally and psychologically within us, and what subsequently happens to us as writers, photographers, filmmakers, or academic researchers.

Of course, as several students in one of my early seminars on this subject pointed out to me, the "field" can be one's own backyard—the critical matter being an attitude toward the daily life that surrounds one: how consciously and deliberately (with a documentary goal in mind) does one go about the routines of a life? More on that, too, during a later discussion. Here I acknowledge a great debt to those students I've already begun mentioning, from those seminars I have taught for nearly twenty years now, at Harvard and at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke. The so-called "literary-documentary tradition" served as the mainstay of that teaching for a long spell: the writing of Agee and Orwell, already mentioned; books such as *An American Exodus*, by Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor; various collections of photography, from those of Lewis Hine and Doris Ullman to the range of work sponsored by the Farm Security Administration (FSA); as well as Walker Evans and the images of Russell Lee, Marion Post Walcott, Ben Shahn, Edward Rothstein. I have also called upon Frederick Wiseman's documentary films, which in their sum amount to a major examination of American institutional life as it concretely affects those who are a daily part of it: students and teachers in our schools, workers and customers in our stores, patients and doctors and nurses in our hospitals.

All of that reading and visual matter, supplemented by guest appearances, such as J. Anthony Lukas's *Common Ground*, Oscar Lewis's *Children of Sanchez*, Studs Terkel's *Working* and *Division Street*, has prompted in us many thoughts about the work we ourselves have been doing: each member of the seminar has been engaged in

doing documentary work, be it the taking of pictures, the making of a film, or the writing of a report, an essay, an extended description of others, of oneself with others. In time we have begun to realize, together, three major domains of concern and discussion, hence the first three sections of this book. As befits those who are attending a seminar under the auspices of a university, we have constantly struggled with matters of the intellect (perhaps too much so, and with no small risk of pride and self-importance). What kind of work are we doing, and to what purpose? How are we to proceed—through which intermediaries in pursuit of which men, women, children, living in what neighborhoods? How does our work compare with that of others who work for newspapers, who do more traditional social science (survey research, for instance), or who do a kind of social history that does not entail interviews with ordinary folk? When does enough turn out to be enough—when, that is, do we leave reasonably satisfied, and if so, with what messages given to the people with whom we have worked? What *is* our responsibility to such people, and how ought it be acknowledged? What about ourselves—when does honorable inquiry turn into an exercise in manipulative self-interest, even (that word of words!) "exploitation"? Who is to make such judgments, calling upon what criteria? As for ourselves, in the lonely corners of whose minds a certain vague yet ever so pressing moral awareness can restively lurk, ready in the most unexpected moments to pounce on us, bear down on our sense of who we are and what we've become—what ought we to consider appropriate or inappropriate in this kind of relatively idiosyncratic endeavor, of a kind not usually regulated by the rules of departmental disciplines, by textbooks that spell out steps and routines and procedures and the theories that justify them?

Speaking of theory—how to think of "documentary studies" in the abstract, as well as in the implementation of the concrete? Speaking, too, of the personal and ethical, as so many of the above ques-

tions do—how to talk directly, candidly (using what kind of language), about the psychological hazards of such work, and, too, the ethical challenges that appear, it sometimes seems, from out of nowhere? Moreover, what to make of one's interventions, as a writer, as an editor of tapes or notes, as the person who picks and chooses words, crops and cuts photographs, splices constantly the tapes of a documentary film? When do selection and arrangement and a response to narrative need, in the form of one's comments and asides, become so decisive that one story ("raw interview material" or "unedited footage" or photographic film that hasn't been sorted or sequenced) has turned into quite another? What of pictures cropped (with a possible attendant shift in emphasis, focus, not to mention the substance of a scene)? What of films that move back and forth across time and space while presenting an apparent narrative and chronological continuity? When does fact veer toward fiction—and how are those two words to be understood with respect to one another: as polarities, as contraries, or as kin, working a parallel, often contiguous territory, and borrowing from another now and then? It is such questions that I hope to discuss in the chapters ahead.

In a sense, I have been preparing to write this book, and especially the introductory words to it, for over thirty-five years—it was in 1960, actually, when I began to do so, began to scribble notes about the nature of the work that my wife, Jane, and I were doing as we tried to make sense of what we saw on the streets of New Orleans amidst the struggle of school desegregation, and as, too, we tried to make sense of ourselves, as witnesses, as onlookers and listeners, as individuals doing "research," as people trying to figure out what mattered and why (and, therefore, who we were, never mind what others were saying, or trying to accomplish, and why). Since that New Orleans encounter on our part (an accident of fate) with the

four black children who endured the resistance of months of mobs, assembled daily to heckle and threaten them, I have spent my working life trying to understand how children (and their parents, and indeed their grandparents) manage to live under a variety of circumstances. The result has been a series of books about children (the five volumes of the *Children of Crisis* series, the three volumes of the *Inner Lives of Children* series), and, too, books in which I've worked with photographers, responded to photographers who have also done documentary work: *The Old Ones of New Mexico* and *The Last and First Eskimos* (with Alex Harris); essays connected to the work of Dorothea Lange, Doris Ullman, and Thomas Roma. In much of that work I've tried to discuss (in chapters titled "Method") the nature of documentary work as I've experienced it. I've also been teaching courses for many years which draw upon the documentary tradition. I've described that teaching, to some extent, in *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* and *The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism*—the ways in which certain novelists or photographers help us understand the world, help us figure out, too, the obstacles to such an understanding. This book belongs with those two—a continuing exploration of how we might, through the reading of narrative, through the effort of service, through projects in the "field," do justice to the complexity of observable life, to the moral responsibilities and hazards that confront us as we try to change aspects of that life, and, finally, to the nature of the documentary work that brings us closer to the world around us, but that also poses many questions and challenges for us to consider.

A good portion of this book was originally presented as three lectures, delivered in May of 1996 at the New York Public Library, as a contribution to a series there sponsored in collaboration with the Oxford University Press. I thank the editors of the Press and the officials of the Library for their courtesy and kindness toward

me. A substantial part of the last chapter was first published elsewhere in a different form. I thank the magazine editors who let me thereby again explore themes examined more fully here. I also want to mention right off the gratitude I feel day by day for the written and spoken words of Dr. William Carlos Williams. I'd have had a different life if I'd not known him, and as the reader will see, his lyrical statements run through the pages ahead, a leitmotif for me as I try to make sense of my own work and that of others. I thank, finally, my colleagues at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and those who are part of the community at *DoubleTake* magazine, which is published there, for the great privilege of being connected to them—and I dedicate this book to all of those individuals, with much affection.

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The Work

Locations In Theory

The noun *document* goes back centuries in time. It is derived from the Latin *docere*, to teach, and was originally, of course, used to describe something that offered clues, or, better, proof, a piece of paper with words that attested evidence. In our time, a photograph or a recording or a film have also qualified as documents. In the early eighteenth century (1711), the word *document* became more active—a verb, whose meaning conveyed the act of furnishing such evidence; and eventually, as with the noun, the range of such activity expanded: first one documented with words on paper; later, one documented with photographs and a film crew. Interestingly, the verb would get used this way, too: "to construct or produce (as a movie or a novel) with authentic situations or events," and "to portray realistically." Here the creative or imaginative life is tempered by words such as "authentic" or "realistically," which, are