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Common cultural and creativity: forgetting and memory in the cultural theory of Michel de Certeau

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A symbolic revolution

For Michel de Certeau, May 68 represents both a point of crisis and the possibility of a new beginning. In both of these ways of construing May 68, culture is a central element in play. We shall see presently that these ideas of have a bearing on how Certeau conceives of memory both as a social force and as a feature of individual cultural practice. But, to begin with, we shall consider more closely the form which this new beginning itself might be said to take.

In the text with which we shall be mainly concerned, *La Culture au pluriel*, Certeau presents May 68 as an all-encompassing symbolic revolution: symbolic in the sense that it calls into question the relationship between a society and its own system of representation; and all-encompassing, in that this symbolic crisis affects social relations in their entirety.[1] While he concedes in an earlier essay on the same subject that May 68 was *symbolic* also in the sense that it *signified* more than it achieved, the argument that May 68 *mattered* is a constant feature of Certeau's account of *les événements*.[2] Although May 68 may be presented as not having survived the return to order (with the re-election in June of the government of the right), Certeau insists that a previously tacit system of values is no more: the 'revolution', so to speak, destroys these values, even as it brings them to the surface.

What Certeau presents as the most original theoretical contribution of these events is precisely the central place that they give to the symbol.[3] The primary place of the symbol is discourse: '*la culture aujourd'hui, ça consiste à parler*' [today, culture consists in speaking]. Speech is generally the domain of symbols (a '"lieu symbolique"'), but, in the moment of revolution, its function as such is particularized: it comes to be defined more specifically as a space according to the gap between 'les membres d'une société et les modalités de leur association' [the members of a society and the modalities of their association].[4] This sudden manifestation of speech as an instrument of disruption is the unmistakable sign of a cultural crisis: 'le ressassement de l'anonyme crée l'analogue d'un "bruit" où la parole a d'abord la forme d'une rupture, d'un trou, d'un blasphème' (*C.p.*, p. 80) [the recurring emphasis on anonymity creates the analogy of an 'interference' in which speech initially takes the form of a rupture, a gap, or a blasphemy] (34). Speaking is an action in the sense that the primary means which 'fait connaître ce qui se cachait dans l'opacité de la vie sociale' (*C.p.*, p. 222) [is able to bring forth what had been hidden in the opacity of social life] (146).

The search for a new beginning originates, then, in the crisis. Indeed, it is a means by which the revolutionary impetus is maintained. We can see more clearly how Certeau theorizes the relationship between culture and society by drawing on a number of essentially programmatic statements contained in the preface to *La Culture au pluriel*.[5] Certeau argues that culture may be defined in a traditional frame of reference according to a number of determinate reference-points: author, art-work, sphere of artistic production

1. *La Culture au pluriel* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), p. 141. All future references to this work, first published in 1974, will be given in parentheses in the text (with the abbreviation *C.p.*). All renderings into English of this text are taken from the translation published by Tom Conley, *Culture in the Plural* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), followed by a simple page reference.

2. *La Prise de parole* (Paris: Seuil 1994), p. 32 (first published in 1968 under the title *La Prise de parole: pour une nouvelle culture*).

3. *La Prise de parole*, pp. 31, 36.

4. *La Prise de parole*, p. 37.

5. The 1993 edition of this work, edited by Luce Giard, runs together the prefaces from the original edition of 1974 and the further edition which appeared in Certeau's lifetime, that of 1980.

— in brief, what we might term the characteristic features of the system of 'high' culture as a kind of cultural memory. But a fuller understanding of culture as a determinate kind of *travail*, a process of *working through* undertaken within the social space requires what Certeau terms a disappropriation of culture, a break with proper nouns in favour of an engagement with culture as a set of signifying practices (*C.p.*, p. 11). Why is this so? Certeau deprecates the closure of the traditional reference-points and insists that determinate structures of this sort will always leave an element of indeterminacy: every place, or *lieu*, represents a form of differentiation which cannot be dissociated from 'un travail de son autre' (*C.p.*, p. 11) [a labor of its other] (vii). This *travail* is the means by which we can identify culture as signifying practice. Culture is thus conditioned by places, rules, *données*, and represents the proliferation of inventions (those, say, of everyday life) in spaces that are socially constrained (*C.p.*, pp. 11, 13).

In sum, his commitment to the reappraisal of the existing symbolic space will lead Certeau to adopt a quasi-ethnographic, or 'culturalist', perspective on culture as a comprehensive set of social representations: 'plutôt qu'un ensemble de "valeurs" à défendre ou d'idées à promouvoir, la culture connote aujourd'hui un travail à entreprendre sur toute l'étendue de la vie sociale' (*C.p.*, p. 166) [today, rather than a sum of 'values' that need to be defended or of ideas to be promoted, culture connotes a labor to be undertaken over the entire expanse of social life] (102).

Certeau concludes that a crisis of authority emerges where institutions — social and political, as well as cultural — lose their credibility. This claim explains the urgency with which he writes: 'les mois à venir exigeront des choix. […] Cette exigence peut se mesurer au discrédit qui atteint nos "cadres de référence" officiels et atteste une mutation du "croyable"' (*C.p.*, p. 18) [the months to come will require hard choices […] This requirement can be measured by the discredit that infects our official 'frames of reference' and that attests to a mutation of the 'believable'] (3). A system of authority — at once latent and changeable — is the condition of any viable form of social organization. The prevailing set of authorities enables each person to articulate his or her relation both to others and to truth (*C.p.*, p. 19). A dual relation — to others and to truth — is the basis of Certeau's account of authority: thus, 'une vérité sans société n'est qu'un leurre. Une société sans vérité n'est qu'une tyrannie' (*C.p.*, p. 30) [a truth without a society is merely a lure. A society without a truth is merely a tyranny] (14). Culture is part of this system: it can be regarded as a 'langage social' and, as we have seen, a cultural crisis (or *schisme*) comes about where there is a dissociation 'entre un langage social et ceux qui renoncent à le parler' (*C.p.*, p. 23) [between a social language and those who refuse to speak it] (8). In a time of crisis, culture may be thought of as a social space of signification according to the possibilities for action that it contains, some of which may appear violent and may have a salutary impact on an existing tacit system of values. A 'violent' act of refusal is magnified precisely because of its singularity: it is an act which 'traverse d'une protestation un univers saturé' (*C.p.*, p. 80) [cries out in protest against a saturated universe] (34). The act of 'making' truth represents, then, a tentative form of agency: it corresponds to the attempt to discover 'les voies de la lucidité et de l'action' (*C.p.*, p. 19) [the issues of lucidity and action] (4).[6] Symbolic violence is important it that it signals a necessary change. But Certeau insists that an act of this sort remains only a protest, unless it is assumed into a political project. A political project is the context in which this violence can be oriented as a 'travail' that defines its objectives according to the existing state of forces within society (*C.p.*, pp. 81–82).

6. Following Husserl, Certeau goes on to argue — more strongly — that action consists in the attempt to 'fonder une société sur des raisons de vivre propres à *tous* et à *chacun*' (*C.p.*, p. 31) [[base] a society on reasons for living that belong both to *all* and to *each*] (14). He cites Paul Ricœur's translation of *La Crise de l'humanité européenne et la philosophie* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1977), which contains elements of Husserl's late unfinished work of the mid-1930s, *Die Krisis der europäische Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie. Eine Einteilung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*.

Now, if canonical reference-points are in doubt, memory is inevitably affected. Any attempt to preserve the values and institutions of the past runs the risk of sacrificing the commitment to truth — where these values and institutions have become diminished memories of the past — to their residual utility as means of keeping a social system in place (*C.p.*, p. 20). A further indication of the denial of a crisis is the ritualized perpetuation of memory: 'nous avons trop d'anniversaires et pas assez de présent. Le pays fête des grandeurs et des célébrités qui étaient, hier, des signes de ralliement, mais qui ne le sont plus' (*C.p.*, p. 22) [we have too many commemorations and not enough of the present. The country celebrates the grandeur and the celebrities that used to be rallying points, but that are no more] (7).[7] The dynamics of memory will have some bearing also on how new forms of cultural activity come to emerge and be recognized. Firstly, memory can be closely linked to agency. Thus, the multiple *manières de faire*, or creative ruses practiced by individuals within the vast social space, are of decisive cultural significance, and occupy a particular place within any system of memory: they are presented by Certeau as passing manifestations of an enduring 'mémoire sans langage' [a memory without language].[8] Secondly, the observer can at best apprehend the innumerable mobile sets of tactics that exist in the present only by means of a kind of investigative fiction: the framework in which a given research mission is carried out is the effect of an imaginary projection (for it is impossible to grasp the social space in its entirety), within which any written analytical record captures only fragments of the phenomena under observation. Recorded memories, in any form, are no more than the manifestation of difference: 'de ce que chacun fait, qu'est-ce qui s'écrit? Entre les deux, l'image, fantôme du corps expert et muet, préserve la différence' [of all the things that everyone does, how much gets written down? Between the two, the image, the phantom of the expert but mute body, preserves the difference].[9] What matters most, then, is the constant negotiation of our access to culture, the endless process of working through culture that is a constant feature of everyday life; not, in other words, the forms in which culture may happen to be preserved, recorded or transmitted.[10] Memory, as a social force, becomes open to contestation, yet, considered as an element of individual cultural practice, it emerges as a space in which both traces of past events and possibilities of future action may be discerned.

'Popular culture'

Preservation, recording and transmission are central features of any attempt to describe or to recover popular culture, and the longest chapter in *La Culture au pluriel* is devoted to an operation of this sort. Written in common with Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, it

7. See Marc Augé, who extends this line of argument to the accumulation of artefacts of memory, stating that the contemporary interest in former ways of life derives from the sense that they convey something of a past that is in fact lost, in *Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 37.

8. See *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, *Arts de faire*, second edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 65 (English version: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. by Steven F. Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 40). Compare the 'mémoire silencieuse et repliée' [silent and withdrawn memory] of the walkers, the *Wandersmänner*, in the city (I, 158; English version, p. 105).

9. See *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, 67–68 (English version: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 42). Certeau draws an important and influential distinction between strategy and tactics, the former being based on the appraisal from a position of relative autonomy of the balance of forces, the latter being a feature of day-to-day social practice, based on the fortuitous exploitation of ephemeral opportunities within a space which remains that of the other (see *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, xlvi–xlvii, and also 'Qu'est-ce qu'un séminaire?', *Esprit*, n.s. 11–12 (1978), 176–81 (pp. 179–80)). On the acute problem of how to capture and understand the actions of the individual agent (and, in particular, the difficulty of maintaining a distinction between the actions of a number of agents and the composite behaviours ascribable to the average), see Augé, *Non-lieux*, pp. 52–53.

10. On this distinction, and on resourcefulness and creativity as features of our access to common life, see Michael Sheringham, 'Attending to the everyday: Blanchot, Lefebvre, Certeau, Perec', *French Studies*, 54 (2000), 187–99 (pp. 191–92).

was first published in 1970.[11] The essay is in some part polemical: thus, Certeau, Julia and Revel state in an initial note that what they have in view is the *concept* of popular culture (*C.p.*, p. 45). Their critique is framed accordingly: 'ce qui est donc en cause, ce ne sont pas des idéologies, ni des options, mais les relations qu'un objet et des méthodes scientifiques entretiennent avec la société qui les permet' (*C.p.*, p. 47) [the question, then, is not one of ideologies, or of options, but that of the relations of an object and its associated scientific methods to the society that sanctions them] (*H.*, p. 121). Certeau himself does not explicitly establish a relationship between the notion of a symbolic revolution (the act, as we have seen, of bringing what remains unthought — the *impensé* — to the surface) and the act of stating what is at stake in establishing 'popular culture' as an object; but a relationship along these lines can clearly be established. For, as he and his co-authors argue at the outset, what the establishment of 'popular culture' as an object involves is a *tacit* act of censure: 'la "culture populaire" suppose une opération qui ne s'avoue pas. Il a fallu qu'elle fût censurée pour être étudiée' (*C.p.*, p. 45) ['popular culture' presupposes an unavowed operation. Before being studied, it had to be censored] (*H.*, p. 119). Popular culture illustrates a disruption of memory that is the effect of relations of power.

There are four main points that I wish to highlight: the identity of *patrimoine* as a kind of memory; the interaction of memory and forgetting; self-contradiction as a feature of the description of 'popular' culture, and its converse, namely the avowal of interest as an act of memory; and the bracketing of memory in the recovery of popular culture (or of the past, more generally).[12]

First, it is clear, in this context, that any claim of a scientific folklore to recover a cultural *patrimoine* will be controversial. Certeau, Julia and Revel also describe the important folklore movement of the mid-nineteenth century and beyond. The *souci folkloriste* represents an attempt to record and to preserve what is under threat from modernization: 'il veut situer, rattacher, garantir' [its intent was to situate, reconnect, guarantee]. Thus, for Certeau, Julia and Revel, it is inescapably subject to a wider social set of interests: 'son intérêt est comme l'envers d'une censure: une intégration raisonnée' (*C.p.*, p. 53) [what it was interested in was almost the opposite of censorship: reasoned integration] (*H.*, p. 124). Because it is extensible into the present (and can thus represent a fabricated sort of memory), a *patrimoine* may amount in the end to a sanitized version of a distinctively national repertoire, defined historically (according to the establishment of a set of popular themes which contribute to the fabrication of a community within history) and geographically (the cohesion of a given physical space is attested by the dissemination of popular culture) (*C.p.*, p. 53). It may amount, in other words, to a kind of *mentalité*.[13]

Second, the domain of popular culture is of interest to Certeau, Julia and Revel in part because it is inescapably subject to forgetting. In dealing with a number of works

11. Julia and Revel also collaborated with Certeau on a further book: *Une politique de la langue: la Révolution française et les patois* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). Conley's translation excludes this chapter, which is here quoted according to the translation by Brian Massumi published in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, ed. by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 119–36, abbreviated as *H*.

12. It is worth noting that these points all converge also on the problem of the relationship between a branch of knowledge and the *pouvoir* that brings it into being, a topic that connects this essay to Certeau's own other works on historical method and epistemology. Thus, the critique feeds into the attempt by Certeau, Julia and Revel to characterize history as the discourse whose purpose is to reveal how an act of violence may effectively be at the base of any act of recovery or of memory: 'l'histoire est en cela, même si elle n'est que cela, le lieu privilégié où le regard s'inquiète' (*C.p.*, p. 71) [history is the privileged place where the gaze becomes unsettled, even if it is only that] (*H.*, p. 136). See also *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), in particular chs 1 and 2. For the historian, the forgotten is a remainder which can be used to disrupt prevailing representations of the past (see *L'Écriture de l'histoire*, pp. 80–81 and 91–92).

13. See G. E. R. Lloyd, who comments extensively on the tendency of mentalities to confer a false impression of coherence with regard to systems of belief and modes of reasoning that coexist within a given culture, community or individual, in *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

published in France during the 1960s devoted to aspects of historical popular culture of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, they conclude that any work of erudition will inevitably contain substantial omissions (the examples of childhood, sexuality and violence are cited).[14] In other words, the areas of life over which these works pass in silence represent a 'géographie de l'*oublié*' (*C.p.*, p. 63) [a geography of the *forgotten*] (*H.*, p. 131), a ghostly residue of the culture which historical work can never fully recover. The knowledge and assumptions of the historian are distinct from the object on which he or she works. Thus, the historian cannot receive the popular in itself — or least, he/she must guard against concluding that popular culture manifests itself *other than* in a form that allows it to circulate on the margins of a social system which is primarily organized according to the demands of elite culture. Accordingly, 'la culture populaire ne se saisit que sur le mode de la disparition parce que notre savoir nous impose [...] de ne plus l'entendre et de ne plus savoir en parler' (*C.p.*, p. 63) [popular culture can only be grasped in the process of vanishing because [...] our knowledge requires us to cease hearing it, to no longer know how to discuss it] (*H.*, p. 131). The presence of the observer effectively annihilates what is under observation, leading to the abstraction of determinate cultural practices from the historical circumstances of the agents who performed them.

Third, Certeau, Julia and Revel go on to argue that scholarly descriptions of popular culture will tend to lapse into self-contradiction. These contradictions illustrate the tendency of the folklorist or the historian to occult, or to forget, their complicity with the drive to control or to eliminate popular culture. The search for the origins of popular culture exposes the methods of folklore or cultural history to this risk, if we allow the claim that folklore comes into being only because its objects are threatened by extinction. Thus, more recent studies of popular culture, which work within the framework provided by the cultural movement of the nineteenth century, are prone to circular arguments: they 'se donnent pour objet *leur* propre origine' [take as their object *their own* origin]; they 'poursuivent à la surface des textes [...] ce qui est en réalité leur propre condition de possibilité: l'élimination d'une menace populaire' (*C.p.*, p. 59) [they pursue across the surface of texts [...] what is actually their own condition of possibility — the elimination of a popular menace] (*H.*, p. 128). The same problem affects the explanation of the social functions of popular culture: 'est "populaire" ce qui *reflète* immédiatement la situation historique du peuple sous l'Ancien Régime' (*C.p.*, p. 62) [anything that directly '*reflects*' the historical situation of the people under the *ancien régime* is 'popular'] (*H.*, p. 130). In other words, the supposition of an origin *within* popular culture is taken to validate the descriptions of specific practices which are themselves taken to be popular: 'la culture populaire est supposée là à tous les instants de la démarche qu'elle vient cautionner' (*C.p.*, p. 62) [the presence, out there, of popular culture is presupposed at each stage of the process for which it stands as guarantor] (*H.*, p. 130).

Fourth, Certeau, Julia and Revel repeatedly argue that the description of popular culture is inevitably bound up with the act of 'violence', the annihilation of precisely this culture, that brings such an enquiry about: this is what is '"oublié" ou dénié' (*C.p.*, p. 59) ['forgotten' or denied] (*H.*, p. 128). In fact, what must be kept in the memory is the act of violence, not the culture which it claims as its object, which remain unrecoverable: 'on ne saurait [...] reprocher à une littérature de s'articuler sur une violence (puisque c'est toujours le cas), mais de ne pas l'avouer' (*C.p.*, p. 68) [we cannot reproach a literature for grafting itself upon a prior violence (for that is always the case); but we can reproach it for not admitting it] (*H.*, p. 134). Thus, how culture is documented and interpreted is a question of current political as well as intellectual interest. The case of 'popular' culture suggests that a claim to continuity with the past may be forged paradoxically by exclusion of the past and, further, that the problem of forgetting extends to the discourse

14. The main contemporary works in question are: Robert Mandrou, *De la culture populaire en France aux XVII^e^ et XVIII^e^ siècles* (Paris: Stock, 1964); Geneviève Bollème, *Les Almanachs populaires aux XVII^e^ et XVIII^e^ siècles* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969); Marc Soriano, *Les Contes de Perrault* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

of knowledge that makes this outcome possible.[15] What is at stake in the process is the perpetuation of cultural memory; but the process itself reveals how the elaboration of any such memory can itself be the effect of powerful forms of forgetting.

Memory and creativity

Popular culture can be taken to illustrate a feature of culture generally, namely the manifestation of remainders. Certeau writes, for instance, that 'la gestion d'une société laisse un énorme "reste"' [the management of a society leaves in its midst an enormous 'remainder'], and he goes on precisely to identify the remainder with the notion of culture: 'Sur nos cartes, *ça* s'appelle culture, flux et reflux de rumeurs sur les plages avancées de la planification' (*C.p.*, p. 206) [on our maps, *that* is what is called culture. It is the ebb and flow of muffled voices on the architects' blueprints in their advanced stages of drafting] (134). Popular culture is — at best — the remainder of an act of recovery that proceeds from within elite culture and that may well be blind to the circularity of its procedures. It is this concern with what lies beyond any or all grids, maps, schemas, that informs Certeau's account of creativity, within which he sketches an account of memory relative to the dynamics of time and of action, which we shall now go on to consider.

The loss of tradition as a local binding force accentuates the proliferation of heterogeneous signifying practices. At the same time, the social space comes to be more and more minutely mapped, such that there exists no space external to it: 'il n'y a plus d'ailleurs' [there is no longer an elsewhere].[16] What risks being lost, or forgotten, is the sense that signifying practices allow the individual to situate him or herself with reference to a stable local frame of reference. The conviction that the social space is heavily constrained leads Certeau to theorize memory with reference to time. Thus, memory is defined as 'une présence à la pluralité des temps et [qui] ne se limite donc pas au passé' [designates a presence to the plurality of times and is thus not limited to the past].[17] Memory becomes available as a sudden recapitulation which coincides, if only for a moment, with the infinity of lived experience. In mediating the invisible resources of time, memory allows us to transgress for a moment 'la loi du lieu' [the law of the place].[18] This memory, in substituting for tradition, operates in a place which is not proper to it, and which it does not seek to possess. It is above all an unpredictable means of responding to the state of things at any given moment.

The predicament of the individual cultural agent flows in part from the existence of powerful agencies (for instance, the system of education, bureaucracies, the media) which fundamentally influence and constrain our cultural activity (even though these entities themselves will become exposed to crises of credibility and of authority if they no longer benefit from the *adhésion* of individual subjects) (*C.p.*, pp. 23, 29). Certeau also claims that culture must be understood within the framework of an anthropology of what is taken to be believable (*une anthropologie de la crédibilité*), that is, the context within which beliefs assume a social significance, and, further, that cultural practices cannot be dissociated from a tactical science bearing on the innumerable range of individual, everyday *manières de faire* (*C.p.*, p. 12). What Certeau terms creativity thus presupposes a break with 'la culture au singulier': 'la culture au singulier est devenue une mystification politique. Bien plus, elle est mortifère' (*C.p.*, p. 122) [culture in the singular has become a political mystification. Furthermore, it is deadly] (67). Culture in the singular represents a denial of creativity. By contrast, culture as creative work tends to oscillate between what Certeau terms two 'forme': 'd'un côté, elle est ce qui "permane"; de l'autre, ce qui s'invente'

15. As Jeremy Ahearne comments, what is at issue is a strategic operation, one 'which substitutes for the effective practices of the vast majority of the population a stable set of representations', in *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and its Other* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 136.

16. See again *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, 65–66 (English version: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 40).

17. *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, 320, n. 7 (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 218, n. 7).

18. *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, 129 (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 85).

(*C.p.*, p. 211) [on the one side is what 'permanates'; on the other, what is invented] (137). The interplay of these forces is a matter of the social *conjoncture*. At a given moment, the pull of each forces is such that it leads us to forget the existence of the other — and further, past and future alike are contained in this cultural oscillation, themselves like half-forgotten rituals, or emergent manifestations that *will* themselves become the object of the characteristically fraught work which is that of memory.

Against the background of this theorization of cultural plurality, it is forgetting, rather than memory, that may serve as a sign of incipient cultural activity. The manifestation of culture produces a momentary break in the prevailing system of culture. Culture is a kind of variant that introduces a disturbance, an element of play, into a system. It manifests itself a 'un oubli fugitif à l'intérieur des grandes orthodoxies de la mémoire' (*C.p.*, p. 216) [a fugacious oblivion within the great orthodoxies of memory] (141). Certeau mentions forgetting only in passing, as one of the forms which cultural variation might take. But the essential point is that fleeting forgetfulness is one means by which we can detect the tremor of culture as something unpredictable, disruptive, ephemeral. And forgetting *remains* part of the process, in that these cultural acts are not recuperated so as to become part of a regulated collective memory: 'la création est périssable. Elle passe, car elle est acte' (*C.p.*, p. 214) [creation is perishable: it passes because it is an act] (140).[19] Under conditions of cultural heteronomy, there may be no activity without forgetting: the *oubli* is only fleeting, but as such is the royal road not simply to provisionality, but to risk. The space of creativity owes its existence to the agent's self-abstraction from memory as a form of social constraint. It is this exclusion of memory that is the means by which Certeau seeks to identify the secret rationale of the innovations of the individual agent: 'l'analyse et la pratique de l'innovation dans nos espaces construits ne touchent pas à l'essentiel, qui est aussi le plus fragile: un désir de vivre en perdant les assurances que multiplie chaque société — une folie d'être' (*C.p.*, p. 222) [the analysis and practice of innovation in our constructed spaces do not touch on the essential point, which is also the most fragile: a desire to live while losing the assurances that every society multiplies — a madness of being] (147).[20]

If memory and forgetting are significant in Certeau's work, it is in part because they point to the ambiguity of what is common. Memory is inescapably subject to social pressures that have a bearing both on the control of meaning (for instance, those meanings ascribed to the past) and on the regulation of social 'spaces' (as one process among many in the naturalization of a given set of social relations). Forgetting is no less complex a phenomenon: it deprives memory of its lustre, but can also signify an unacknowledged complicity in processes of fabrication and repression. It is within common life that tensions of this sort are played out: *both* memory and forgetting can be a sign of the stultifying power of the culture of the singular, *or* of the emergence of plurality. Tracking memory and forgetting alike enables us to glimpse something of the ambiguity of Certeau's theorization of culture — as a place of agency and creativity, on the one hand, and of contestation and conflict, on the other.

19. Cf. *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, 286–87, on recognition, as distinct from appropriation, as the characteristic mode of a desiring engagement with the *périssable* as a manifestation of otherness.

20. See Edgar Morin, who comments on the intensity of Certeau's focus on the existential dimension of culture, within which the activity of the agent comes to be grasped as 'la façon dont est vécu un problème global' [the way in which some all-encompassing problem is lived], in *Sociologie*, second edition (Paris: Fayard, 1994), p. 158.