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Certeau's landscapes: what can images do?

Le grand murmure and the multiplicity of form

What Michel de Certeau termed 'le grand murmure' can be equated both with the ungovernable, incalculable, unmappable, irreversible course of the everyday and, reflexively, with the forms that we can give to it.¹ This dual aspect of form, both anthropological and figurative, will be our main focus here.² Certeau's *L'Invention du quotidien* begins with an invocation of 'l'homme ordinaire', a self-conscious reinvention of the inaugural gesture of epic — and, by extension, an appeal to the immemorial agency of form (p. 11). His preoccupation with precarious environments and our uncertain access to them prompts him to have recourse to the category of form in several discrete but interrelated ways. Thus, for instance, the 'murmure' remains of undiminished ethnographic importance today, as Certeau insisted: 'Aujourd'hui, ces pratiques portant le secret de notre raison n'ont plus figure aussi lointaine. Avec le temps, elles se rapprochent'. And yet, though proximate, they assume a 'forme "ethnologique"', meaning that their otherness remains irreducible (pp. 101–02). Form is the salient aspect of this ethnographic reality in all of its urgency. How we conceptualize it is a matter of form too, in that a figure like metaphor, on which we may call in performing this task, is itself what Certeau terms a 'forme interrogative'.³ We see 'faire' and 'dire', the domains of agent and observer respectively, suddenly brought into relation, but the act of stating what is done is not to be conceived of simply as 'un rapport de contenant à contenu'. It is rather 'une articulation de termes différents', a mobilization, in other words, of forms that somehow disclose 'le silence immense de la pratique'.⁴ In such moments, 'le sol du réel manque'⁵ and the interaction of discrete forms, ethnological as well as figurative, permits a contact with practice that has an emancipatory as much as a cognitive impact.

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The issues in debate here — the performative role of form in connecting text to experience, or the postulation of alternatives to the real as currently or generally configured — are central to Certeau's project, so much so that it finds itself exposed to the risk of the failure of form. Hence his question to himself at the outset: 'De cette histoire muette, que dire?' (p. xxxiii). The image in particular may provide some remedy, even in contexts that tend more towards the anthropological than the literary, as we shall see in comparing Certeau to more recent writers, all of whom call upon us to think not only about the relationship between form and

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¹To quote Certeau's characterization of his object: 'la réalité, le réel, le grand murmure, ce qui se fait, des conflits', in an interview with Jacques Chancel on *Radioscopie*, 22 October 1975, <<https://www.ina.fr/audio/PHD95075218/>> [accessed 7 January 2016]. Certeau's object is to theorize and document the 'quotidien' as it manifests itself in 'les opérations des usagers', via a series of 'récits' centred on 'des pratiques communes', in *L'Invention du quotidien*, 1, *Arts de faire*, ed. L. Giard (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), pp. xxxv, xxxiii. All future references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

²Such a duality shaped Michel Foucault's thinking also: the 'murmure indéfini' of the written record was one dimension of his conception of the archive, alongside the 'bruit sourd' of lived experience, as Michael Sheringham shows, in 'Michel Foucault, Pierre Rivière and the Archival Imaginary', *Comparative Critical Studies* 8.2–3 (2011), pp. 235–57 (p. 236).

³Michel de Certeau, *La Faiblesse de croire*, ed. L. Giard (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 288. Compare Paul Rabinow, for whom writing, as distinct from fieldwork or participant observation, is the paramount 'practice of figuration' in an anthropology, like Certeau's, that is concerned with what is near at hand, in *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 77.

⁴Certeau, *La Faiblesse de croire*, pp. 220–22.

⁵Michel de Certeau, *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction*, ed. L. Giard (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p. 136.

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the agency of literature, but also about what ideas, arguments, theoretical interventions may owe to the agency of form. What, then, is Certeau doing as a cultural theorist when he does things with form? And what precisely is the context in which he and some others prompt the more specific question: what can images do?

Image and argument

What form can do in Certeau's writing is in part a matter of what images do, of how they contribute to 'bringing the contingencies of utterance to bear on sites otherwise monopolized by controlling discourses', to quote Michael Sheringham.⁶ But it is in part also, given the recurrent impetus that they give to theorizing, a matter of how images are represented. It is this twofold thread in *L'Invention du quotidien* that will be our concern now, before we turn to the issue of how the reception and the subsequent transformations of Certeau's images on the part of three anthropologists — Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola and Eduardo Kohn — have taken the matter of form and agency further.

Certeau's celebrated book, first published in 1980, juxtaposes a series of diverse theoretical investigations with some *récits* of the type through which he aims to reinvent a relation with the everyday. He presents the first two of five parts as a kind of 'conclusion prospective' (p. 11), and these will be our main focus. As well as being a site of risk, the book is liminal: it is purposefully addressed to creating new conditions for research in the future. From the start, Certeau emphasizes the subordinate position that the writing of this research occupies relative to the incalculable mass of its material. The 'chemins' that it will take are just that — indications of research questions pursued or to be pursued: 'je voudrais présenter le paysage d'une recherche et, par cette composition de lieu, indiquer les repères entre lesquels se déroule une action' (p. xxxiii). By the same token, the register is of necessity figurative: the wayward directions and temporalities of these *chemins* are to be inferred from the metaphor of the *sol* over which they will extend, and are at the limit untrackable.

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The imaginary is significant also because it keeps in play the variability and the unpredictability of everyday life, and specifically those features that might otherwise be lost to knowledge. Images, several of them recurrent, form a highly visible part of Certeau's initial exposition of his project, usually in connection with natural landscapes or human engagements with these. An instance that comes immediately to mind is the protean figure of the *marche* for which Certeau has become legendary, as when he refers to 'cet entrelacs de parcours', which, 'bien loin de constituer une clôture, prépare, je l'espère, un cheminement à se perdre dans la foule' (p. xxxiv). The figurative latency of the crowd, as multiform source of effective practices, is connoted by fluvial and maritime images with which it is linked: 'C'est une foule souple et continue, [...] une multitude de héros quantifiés qui perdent noms et visages en devenant le langage mobile de calculs et de rationalités n'appartenant à personne. Fleuves chiffrés de la rue' (p. 12). The maritime association is in turn brought to bear on the task of characterizing the kind of investigation that Certeau is poised to undertake: 'Même si elle est aspirée par la rumeur océanique de l'ordinaire, la tâche ne consiste pas à lui substituer une représentation [...] mais à montrer comment elle s'introduit dans nos techniques — à la façon dont la mer revient dans les creux des plages — et peut réorganiser la place d'où le discours se produit' (p. 19).⁷ It is only by conceiving of the investigation of so elusive an object as being situated in a nightscape that we can imagine it being realized, and even then only tentatively: 'Le but serait atteint si les pratiques ou "manières de faire" quotidiennes cessaient de figurer comme le fond nocturne de l'activité sociale, et si un ensemble de questions théoriques, de méthodes, de catégories et de vues, en traversant cette nuit, permettait de l'articuler'

⁶Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 212.

⁷The sea's edge is not the only site that can be assigned an emblematic and recurrent imaginary value, as a comparison with Yves Bonnefoy can show: 'Si les rivages m'attirent, plus encore l'idée d'un pays en profondeur, défendu par l'ampleur de ses montagnes, scellé comme l'inconscient', in *L'Arrière-pays* (Geneva: Skira, 1972), p. 15.

(p. xxxv). Here, it is as if the 'night' of occulted social practices might be breached, though not dispelled. The outcome of this thread is the identification of the imagined subject of the investigation with the successive figures that connote also the traces of his/her passage: 'Ce héros anonyme vient de très loin. C'est le murmure des sociétés' (p. 11).

The imaginary is a mode, not so much of access, as of a highly conditioned mediation of practices that are themselves understood as forms or, as Certeau puts it, 'poésies insues' (p. 141). The 'expérience' of space that results is layered: it has the potential to be all at once '“anthropologique”, poétique et mythique' (p. 142). And, in a conceptual move, what Certeau proposes as a translation of the image as mark of experience is precisely the figure of metaphor: 'Une ville *transhumante*, ou métaphorique, s'insinue ainsi dans le texte clair de la ville planifiée et lisible' (p. 142). As Certeau rehearses in a highly implicit way the premises of the investigation on which he is about to embark, he appeals almost unconsciously to images in the opening chapters of *L'Invention du quotidien*, so testifying to the scope of form to shed some light on the kind of *va-et-vient* that is taking place — in all of its nocturnal mystery.

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The object and the analysis, everyday practices and the landscape in which they are performed, converge notably on the basis of the repeated metaphor of exploratory transit on foot. And yet, the point of view of the agent is anything but given: 'Les pratiques de la consommation sont les fantômes de la société qui porte leur nom. Comme les “esprits” de jadis, elles constituent le postulat multiforme et occulte de l'activité productrice' (p. 58). Certeau first hints at a ghostly manifestation of the supposed *marcheurs*, as if to preempt any facile elaboration of a model through which to recount their practices. He proceeds instead by shifts and adjustments, insisting on the properly temporal, rather than spatial, character of action. But then, the model of the trajectory to which he appeals at first is very rapidly called into question: 'elle métamorphose l'articulation *temporelle* des lieux en une suite *spatiale* de points' (p. 59). It is through the revision of the image of the trace that the argument advances: practice is irreversible, but a putative trajectory is problematic because it supposes an enduring trace. In brief, no image can substitute for the moment, if the remainder of everyday 'performances' is not also to be 'le signe de leur effacement' (p. 59).

In response, Certeau goes on to propose the now proverbial distinction between strategy and tactics: 'j'appelle *tactique* l'action calculée que détermine l'absence d'un propre. [...] La tactique n'a pour lieu que celui de l'autre. Aussi doit-elle jouer avec le terrain qui lui est imposé tel que l'organise la loi d'une force étrangère' (p. 60). The logic of tactical moves is articulated not so much in images as in the concept per se of metaphor: the absence of the proper creates a void and, just as in metaphor, 'la tactique' comes into being by means of a displacement, by making its 'lieu' out of that of the other. Certeau's practice of arguing on the basis of images is overt, not only because of the cumulative impact of recurring tropes, but also because the image is fully and explicitly assumed in and of itself: 'Le flux est monté. [...] Dans ses eaux, il roule et disperse les œuvres, jadis insulaires, muées aujourd'hui en gouttes d'eau dans la mer, ou en métaphores d'une dissémination langagière qui n'a plus d'auteur mais devient le discours ou la citation indéfinie de l'autre' (p. 13). So, 'flux', a metaphor, is compared to metaphor and, in turn, literature — understood not as a canon, but a practice of intertextual dispersal, assuming the eclipse of the author and the erasure of proper nouns. It is worth noting that the model of the trajectory, which a few pages later Certeau will go on to rehearse and then reject, is metonymical. The liquid image before us is, by contrast, explicitly metaphorical: the limitless field of effective practices is the unspoken tenor, the 'flux', the vehicle. But the latter is then remobilized so as to represent the alternative conceptual space differently again — as if metaphor as such is the means by which the agency of form is extended to argument.

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Un paysage imaginaire: *what is an image?*

In brief, the turn to images is one condition of the enquiry whose focus, methods and figures Certeau rehearses on behalf of his collaborators.⁸ At the same time, he makes use of the terms 'image' and 'imaginaire' in theoretical contexts also. We come now to two pages of the work that demand closer attention for this reason. These open with an image that addresses not so much the elusive object as the landscape within which the emergent investigative *récit* might situate it: 'A scruter cette réalité fuyante et permanente, on a l'impression d'explorer la nuit des sociétés, une nuit plus longue que leurs jours' (p. 67). Though neither agent nor observer is mentioned at the outset, it is the latter's access to the point of view of the former within the unpredictable terrain of effective practices that is at issue.

What does the image say? The reality — to use Certeau's term — of effective social practices is one in perpetual flight, one that can never be exhaustively mapped: 'nappe obscure où se découpent des institutions successives, immensité maritime où les appareils socio-économiques et politiques feraient figure d'insularités éphémères' (p. 67). There is then a sharp change of direction, opening with the theoretical claim that '[l]e paysage imaginaire d'une recherche n'est pas sans valeur, même s'il n'a pas de rigueur' (p. 67). What the image does is keep in play the variability and unpredictability of the everyday, for these are features of life that would otherwise evade analysis: 'Il maintient donc présente la structure d'un imaginaire social d'où la question ne cesse de prendre des *formes* différentes et de repartir' (p. 67; my emphasis). But not all of this is fully spelt out; rather, it is to be inferred from the several distinct claims that he does make. Certeau's first move is the concessive claim, as we just saw. But if images do in some sense provide access to tactics and ruses in all their multiplicity, it is because they are ghosts: 'Il assure au moins leur présence à titre de revenants. Ce retour sur une autre scène rappelle ainsi le rapport que l'expérience de ces pratiques entretient avec ce qu'en expose une analyse' (p. 67). The image, as image, testifies to the impossibility of closing the gap between tactics and an analytical inquiry considered as a strategic intervention, and so, notwithstanding the opening qualification, proves to be an indispensable element of research.⁹

Certeau closes by making the crucial, albeit compressed, claim that this imaginary space extends to embrace the observer. In other words, the image is reflexive and so will have a critical impact on the investigation in which it arises. The image transforms the silent 'expert', no less than the agent under observation, into something ghostly: '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' (p. 68). The image, in conclusion, demands theoretical attention because it points to the limits of the anthropological investigation of which it forms part.

The putative 'landscape' of the investigation exists, then, in the mode of the imaginary and Certeau claims that, as such, it thus has a 'valeur de rectificatif' (p. 67). This compressed claim is an allusion to Gaston Bachelard, for whom rectification is the self-correcting activity of thought before the real: we 'approach' knowledge through the constant search for greater precision and certainty.¹⁰ Critical to Bachelard's adoption of this as an epistemological principle is the premise that scientific knowledge thus elaborated (or 'approached') absolutely prevails over ordinary beliefs. What is remarkable about Certeau's appropriation of this idea is that he substitutes, in effect, the other for the real with which Bachelard engages on the basis of a rationalist epistemology. The image, in other words, subjects scientific knowledge itself to rectification: the suspension of the objective point of view is a pre-emptive swerve that allows the investigation to remain attentive to 'manières de faire'. But no other avenue is open to us: this counter-rectification is consistent with what Certeau elsewhere calls the

⁸For an appraisal of the wider project undertaken with Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol of which the first volume of *L'Invention du quotidien* forms part, see Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, pp. 237–39.

⁹The connoted object has the power to modify the observer, as Certeau acknowledges in a further variant of the figure of the nocturnal seascape: 'cette nuit océanique me fascine et m'interroge', in Michel de Certeau, *La Culture au pluriel*, ed. L. Giard (Paris: Seuil, 1993), p. 211.

¹⁰Gaston Bachelard, *Essai sur la connaissance approchée* (Paris: Vrin, 1927), p. 16.

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‘vérification visible de l’invisible’.¹¹ In addition, it is informed by a holistic rationale of its own, amounting to a ‘thérapeutique globale’ that preempts a reductive ‘examen latéral’ (p. 67). To the extent that everyday practices imply a reappropriation of the social environment, they give rise to ‘une thérapeutique de socialités détériorées’ (p. liii), and Certeau here concludes that it is through the image that this effect is realized.

This extended commentary, which marks the end of Certeau’s initial exploration of the challenges of everyday practice, seems at once something improvised and, in the cryptic negotiation of its stance vis-à-vis a purportedly scientific point of view, something highly orchestrated. It is in its own way a liminal performance. It should also be noted that Certeau’s wider conception of the practice that he seeks here to elaborate displays the same liminality. Much later in *L’Invention du quotidien*, he comments to this effect on the projected exploratory narrative: ‘Les reliques verbales dont le récit est composé, liées à des histoires perdues et à des gestes opaques, sont juxtaposées dans un collage où leurs rapports ne sont pas pensés et forment, de ce fait, un ensemble symbolique. Elles s’articulent par des lacunes’ (p. 161). The ‘récit’ into which the imaginary landscape will eventually be incorporated conveys only what can be glimpsed in interstices, or in residual ‘lacunes’, like the image as sign of the gap between what happens and what comes to be written.

Certeau refers often in *L’Invention du quotidien* to Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant’s *Les Ruses de l’intelligence*, first published in 1974. The *mêtis* that Detienne and Vernant analyse is ‘une forme d’intelligence’ that is always embedded in practice and falls much more on the side of tactics than of strategy. Form is one of its aspects: ‘elle multiplie les masques et les métaphores: c’est une défection du lieu propre’ (p. 124). This is an instance of form that operates, like those we have already witnessed, on both sides of the relation between agent and observer, and for this reason has a notable theoretical import. It is this dimension that we shall now consider more closely, as we see how images derived directly or indirectly from Certeau recur in the work of other theorists writing today, among them Tim Ingold.

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Ingold in effect generalizes Certeau’s images to produce new representations of relations between persons and things. Like Certeau, he moves between the denotative and the connotative, and reinvents accordingly the imaginary register — extending it to lines, meshworks, knots: ‘When everything tangles with everything else, the result is what I call a *meshwork*. To describe the meshwork is to start from the premise that every living being is a line or, better, a bundle of lines’.¹² Ingold’s engagement with Certeau is explicit and draws on the key distinctions we have seen him elaborate: ‘the line is tactical rather than strategic: its paths are “wandering” or “errant”’.¹³ The models derived from him are considerably adapted — a version, in brief, of the as yet indeterminate future to which Certeau himself looked in what was an avowedly experimental venture on his part. Certeau’s abandoned notion of the trajectory is extended into further categories, that generate in turn discrete new relations and their dependent forms. These can be positioned between the referential and the figurative, and, like Certeau’s analyses, have an epistemological dimension, in that, here too, the claims of purely objective interventions are heavily qualified: ‘[Geometry and meteorology] are premised on the logical operation that I have called “inversion”, by which the pathways of growth and movement along which life is lived are converted into boundaries within which it is contained’.¹⁴ A modified landscape is the outcome, with a focus on environments, their uses and their contours: ‘In this zone of entanglement [...] there are no insides or outsides,

¹¹Certeau, *La Faiblesse de croire*, p. 226. Certeau’s allusion to Bachelard may well be indirect, in that elements of his epistemology are likely to have been mediated via the work of Foucault and Georges Canguilhem (on the latter, see *La Faiblesse de croire*, pp. 209–10). Certeau elsewhere aligns Bachelard’s thinking more or less directly with models that privilege unconscious archetypes or notions of the collective unconscious, of which he tends to be critical (see *L’Écriture de l’histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 33, 39, 51).

¹²Tim Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 3.

¹³Ingold, *The Life of Lines*, p. 59.

¹⁴Ingold, *The Life of Lines*, p. 53. Certeau too uses the term ‘inversion’, but rather to designate the tentative disclosure of an otherwise occluded element of practice (*L’Invention du quotidien*, p. 99), or, to adapt Ingold’s model, a ‘counter-inversion’.

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only openings and ways through. An ecology of life [...] must be one of threads and traces, not of nodes and connectors. [...] Ecology is the study of the life of lines'.¹⁵ The impact is felt not only in anthropology as a discipline, via a reconfiguration of the relationship between observers and participants, but also, Ingold claims, in ways of life: 'like people everywhere and at all times, we are both observers and participants [...] Participant observation [...] is a practice of correspondence [...] [anthropology] is to join *with* others in an ongoing exploration of what the possibilities and potentials of life might be'.¹⁶ What was for Certeau a critical gap is narrowed in ways that create new investigative options, that make all of us participant 'experts', that make the future possible. Thus, Ingold's main ambition converges with that of Certeau in *L'Invention du quotidien*, namely to sketch the ground of future practice, though it should be noted that in most cases what was for Certeau a metaphorical vehicle, like the *cheminement*, here becomes the ethnographic tenor to be understood and interpreted, via the image. At the same time, the issue of practice continues to call for a *rectification*, so as to expose and to counter the misplaced logic of inversion.

Form and thought: beyond the human?

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Certeau's example is decisive in that, in its pioneering engagements with the ordinary and the everyday, it compels us to acknowledge the existential vulnerability that the mediation of practice can disclose. Philippe Descola converges with Certeau in giving primacy above all other investigative considerations to what he terms 'le foisonnement des usages'. They both display a sense of the ecological urgency that results from a commitment to what each terms 'le grand murmure' — another way of referring to this *foisonnement*.¹⁷ Certeau and Descola seem, then, to share an approach to practice in which our engagement with an endangered world demands that we find ways to transmit our understanding of it to a future from which we may be excluded. Descola's concern is with the risk of environmental or human annihilation, or both, and in turn the heightened ephemerality of the usages that are the characteristic object of anthropology. Its task and its lesson are reinvented in the light of this sense of threat — so Descola repeatedly insists. Thus his call to expand its scope to encompass humans and non-humans alike. At the root of 'une universalité nouvelle' in which the distinction between nature and culture is dissolved, there is still the same 'grand murmure'.¹⁸ But, when it comes to sustainability, the scale of the ordinary is vastly expanded; likewise the import of the irreversibility of time. Under these conditions, the exploratory commitment to the 'foisonnement' to which Descola refers is at once everything and nothing.

Descola understands anthropology as a theoretical framework that draws on ethnographic fieldwork and then in turn on comparative analysis in ethnology, in order to produce a systematic account of discrete modes of identification and of relation. He extends its scope beyond 'l'*anthropos*' in isolation to embrace 'toute cette collectivité des existants liée à lui et reléguée à présent dans une fonction d'entourage'.¹⁹ Discrete forms of identification and relation then interact, meaning that exchanges among *existants* fall into one of four ontologies: animism, totemism, naturalism and analogy.²⁰ While his approach is quite different from that of Certeau, Descola nonetheless appeals to the same intimations of the incalculable mass of all usages, as we have seen. The 'quotidien' emerges as an ethnographic reality with its immediate interpretative challenges, which Descola addresses by adapting Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory of totemism. What Descola terms 'le grand murmure', by contrast, exists on

¹⁵Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 103. The concept of the meshwork is comparable to Certeau's definition of 'l'espace' as a 'lieu pratique', in *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 173.

¹⁶Ingold, *The Life of Lines*, p. 157.

¹⁷Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 203. Both writers use the same phrase in similar contexts, though Descola makes no reference to Certeau.

¹⁸Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, pp. 689, 203.

¹⁹Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, p. 19.

²⁰An ontology is a multidisciplinary 'science des êtres' and not least of 'relations encore à venir', as Descola observes, in *La Composition des mondes: entretiens avec Pierre Charbonnier* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), p. 245.

an anthropological scale and demands a comparative approach, drawing on ethnographic and ethnological work on different themes in different zones.²¹ The imaginary here is no more than latent in the mention of this figurative undercurrent of sound, though perhaps for that reason it retains some of its performative potential. As with Certeau, it is in the name of a commitment to the full expression of this *murmure* that the work is undertaken. It is a task that implicates ‘chacun d’entre nous’ and whose purpose is to ‘conjurer l’échéance lointaine à laquelle, avec l’extinction de notre espèce, le prix de la passivité serait payé d’une autre manière: en abandonnant au cosmos une nature devenue orpheline de ses rapporteurs parce qu’ils n’avaient pas su lui concéder de véritables moyens d’expression’.²²

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The threats that the world faces in the Anthropocene are not least those that an anthropology like Descola’s, with its stress on the ephemerality of cultural systems, might allow us to anticipate and — above all — to respond to.²³ ‘Le grand murmure’ is, for Descola, the insistent if remote clamour of a vulnerability that we characteristically fail to acknowledge. He is not alone in seeking to reorient anthropology in the light of this concern. Like Descola, Eduardo Kohn aims to expand the range of conceptual tools on which we can draw in understanding environments encompassing humans and non-humans. Kohn’s account of how forests can be said to think is comparable to Descola’s approach in its insistence on the urgency of an anthropology that, in working to embrace all *existants*, takes us beyond an exclusive conception of thought as distinctively human. But then, he claims, ‘[i]t is because thought extends beyond the human that we can think beyond the human’.²⁴ Kohn brings us full circle, in that we again find that an expressive preoccupation with form is a means of conceptualizing our access to objects and relations, on the one hand, and of acknowledging a heightened awareness of their fragility and vulnerability, on the other. The anthropological acceptance of ‘form’ is accordingly revised: the ‘relational logic’ of the forest can only be grasped when we realize that form is ‘a strange but nonetheless worldly process of pattern production and propagation’, whose ‘generative logic’ is harnessed by humans and non-humans alike.²⁵ In the process, both the vulnerability and the indeterminacy of the realities to which it relates come — just for a moment — into view. Form, thus, is itself no less ‘fragile and ephemeral’: ‘Like the vortices of the whirlpools that sometimes form in the swift-flowing Amazonian headwaters, it simply vanishes when the special geometry of constraints that sustains it disappears’.²⁶ For Kohn as for Certeau, these forms are typically hidden, and for both the image also entails the need to break with standard methods of analysis.

All of the images that we have encountered, because they are connotative much more than they are denotative, are themselves traces, fleeting forms of form.²⁷ If we follow Kohn, they matter because of the access to a holistic semiosis they seem to proffer. The distinctive move in his argument lies in the appeal to form as an instance of ‘linkages across disjuncture’. Thus, ‘language is connected to the semiosis of the living world, which extends beyond it’.²⁸ Form is — explicitly and recurrently — at issue, just as with Certeau, and some of its manifestations are likewise ghostly: ‘that spirits are a real part of an afterlife that extends beyond life tells

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²¹ Descola, *La Composition des mondes*, pp. 157–58.

²² Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, pp. 689–90.

²³ Descola comments that in the Amazon every event assumes ‘une dimension cosmique’: in the absence of seasonal variation, this becomes a closed system lacking temporal depth; see Philippe Descola, *Les Lances du crépuscule: relations jivaros. Haute-Amazone* (Paris: Plon, 1993), p. 85.

²⁴ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 22.

²⁵ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 20.

²⁶ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 20.

²⁷ Footprints represent a decisive though highly contingent trace. On the discovery of the oldest hominin prints outside Africa deposited at between 1 million and 0.78 million years ago (though they have since been obliterated by the tide), see Nick Ashton et al., ‘Hominin Footprints from Early Pleistocene Deposits at Happisburgh, UK’, *PLoS ONE*, 9.2 (February 2014), <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0088329>>.

²⁸ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 226.

us something about the continuity and generality of life itself'.²⁹ Form, then, is the impetus by which we can broach the task — all at once supremely difficult and supremely compelling — of connecting such traces to those that have preceded them in deep time.³⁰ It falls to us now to cultivate these as ways of thinking, if the practices to which we are committed are to survive beyond the Anthropocene: this is the explicit burden of his argument. Form is a medium in which we — as one kind of *existant* among innumerable others — may endure, if only as a residual murmur, alongside all the other *kinds* of life that are, precisely, *forms*. It is thus one of the better hopes for a continuation that will exceed us and — perhaps — will still envelop us in the semiosis, or the boundless 'thought', of the living world.³¹

Form: an art de la relation

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Certeau's preoccupation with form, and with the image as a kind of form, has endured and above all been transformed: for others too, it is as if the long 'night' of biosemiotic (following Descola and especially Kohn) as well as social practices might for a moment be suspended, if not definitively dispelled. As of today, his prime imperative goes some way to being vindicated: 'le grand murmure' has become the ground of an anthropology whose methods are open to the imaginary, following Ingold, or in which the theory of how we inhabit an endangered world finds its ultimate rationale in the effort to perpetuate our understandings of it, following Descola and Kohn. In this, we must all become experts.

The image, like the real practices of which it is the imaginary vehicle, is ephemeral, because liminal. This is what gives it its value and its theoretical significance, and makes it equal to the contingency of the occasion: it actualizes an occasion that exists 'only insofar as [it is] grasped', to quote Sheringham; by definition, it is an aspect of 'l'art de la relation'.³² But the *murmure* is ceaseless. What results is at root a paradoxical and highly equivocal agency of form, leading Certeau to characterize his book in the end as 'une fable indéterminée' whose value lies in its espousal of 'les pratiques métaphoriques' of the everyday (p. 296).

Certeau's nocturnal identification with the elusive forms of cultural practice is, then, a kind of *recherche*, a reinvention of the choice that Proust saw as fateful between the novel and the essay.³³ The mobility of the image, its oscillation between the registers of the literary and the anthropological, testifies to the overwhelming pressure of the problem of accommodation, compounded as it is by an awareness — just as Proustian — of the irreversibility of time, which motivates the search for a form that yields to its ceaseless movement without being submerged by it. What might be termed the form of the form — in other words, the set of formal relations in which a specific form, here the image, can be said to be embedded — is ultimately dialogical; indeed intertextual, on the grounds that neither Descola nor Kohn, unlike Ingold, refers explicitly to Certeau.

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The image is also a medium of critical thinking: it is an outlet for the pressing question of the sufficiency of the 'moyens d'expression' on which we depend, to quote Descola again. But it is perhaps its form that accounts for the survival of Certeau's work, even more than its real substantive claims. The recurrent image of the all too mobile observer, that "passant

²⁹Kohn, *How Forests Think*, p. 226. Certeau too connects habitation to afterlives: 'Il n'y a de lieu que hanté par des esprits multiples, tapis là en silence et qu'on peut "évoquer" ou non. On n'habite que des lieux hantés — schéma inverse de celui du *Panopticon*' (*L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 162).

³⁰See Jeremy Davies, who comments that the 'idea of the Anthropocene simply couples the present crisis to the rest of geohistory, identifying it as yet another sharp and dangerous twist in the drama of deep time', in *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), p. 134. Compare Rabinow's call for the human sciences to experiment with 'forms' that originate in mobility, and through which we can aspire 'to take better care of things, ourselves, and others', in *Anthropos Today*, pp. 136–37.

³¹In his preface to the French translation of Kohn's book, Philippe Descola extends the non-human to non-animate objects, on the basis that these too are to be viewed as agents that have a bearing on interactions, in Eduardo Kohn, *Comment pensent les forêts: vers une anthropologie au-delà de l'humain*, tr. G. Delaplace (Brussels, Zones sensibles, 2017), p. 17.

³²Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, pp. 220, 231.

³³Marcel Proust, *Carnets*, ed. F. Callu and A. Compagnon (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), pp. 49–50.

considérable”’,³⁴ is at once a concession to the book’s anticipated effacement and a timely reminder of the urgency of the questions that it seeks to address: ‘l’expérience scriptuaire’ that results ‘se déploie sur le mode du rapport entre l’acte d’avancer et le sol mortifère où se trace son itinérance’ (p. 287). It is in this mode that the work is drawn upon by others in reconstructing and reactualizing the relationship between participation and observation, and not just from the vantage point of the expert ethnographer. By its engagement with form, ethnography gives voice to these pressing issues, urging ‘chacun d’entre nous’ to take them on.

Certeau’s example, which lies in a now receding past, prompts us to ask how we might today conceive of a therapeutic practice of the image and of the discourses, both literary and anthropological, that it might sustain. The holism with which the image is identified, even in the sometimes residual form we find in the work of more recent writers, has become the unmistakable attribute of an anthropology of sustainability. The image is emancipatory in that, rather than claiming to represent the ordinary, it simply refers something of the *murmure* back to participant and observer alike, who find themselves altered as a result. The mobility of forms to which Certeau’s work is, as we have seen, an exemplary witness is compounded by the transmission and retransmission of ideas and images through time — that is where its significance is to be found today and from a Certalian point of view this is perhaps the most valuable outcome: that the image does come to be retransmitted, though in the process the intellectual missions with which it is so closely identified are carried forward too and adapted to new, no less urgent, ends. Certeau’s dream — that of conveying to the future some version of our ‘rapport’ with the ‘paysage imaginaire’ — is precariously though joyously reaffirmed and, through the revaluation of the relationship between participant and observer, object and ‘rapporteur’, his ghostly expert is rejuvenated, and newly brought into relation with each of us.

³⁴Certeau, *La Faiblesse de croire*, p. 297, drawing on a phrase of Mallarmé speaking of Rimbaud.