02: Why Poach When You Can Wander?

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Abstract

The powerful metaphor of reading-as-poaching was proposed by Michel de Certeau as an alternative to the writing-reading dichotomy. The metaphor points to the appropriation of the text by the reader in opposition to the author, if necessary, by force. While the concept has proven highly inspiring, it bears today connotations that are hard to ignore. However, rather than discard is as a whole, we seek and explore a range of alternative ideas and metaphors both found in de Certeau's writings and proposed by us.

Michel de Certeau's Concept of Reading-as-Poaching Revisited

poach (verb, with object): illegally hunt or catch (game or fish) on land that is not one's own or in contravention of official protection: 20 tigers are thought to have been poached from national parks. | poaching (noun): he might arrest you for poaching. (OED)

Alongside a handy definition, the Oxford Dictionary of English (OED) provides two exemplary sentences of how to correctly use the verb poach and its gerund poaching. The first describes a situation in which 20 tigers were illegally killed on the grounds of a protected natural reservoir (which, if true, would signify a decline in total population by over 0.5% given that less than 3900 of the striped carnivore cats remain alive in the wild as of today). The other warns the alleged killer that they might face justice for their criminal action. In fact, while existing penalties for poaching differ between countries, they range from monetary fines to imprisonment. And while not every act of hunting constitutes poaching, these brief examples show that the word is now definitely tainted by association with hunters exterminating endangered species in Africa, South America and Asia for fun or questionable glory.

However, for us at READCHINA—given that we are a research project related to the social history and politics of reading—poaching came up in a very different context. First published in French in 1980 as *L'Invention du quotidien* and subsequently in its English translation in 1984, Michel de Certeau's formative *The Practice of Everyday Life* is now recognized as a key contribution to the

ever-growing body of literature concerned with a critical approach to research of everyday life. Describing and analyzing a wide range of everyday activities from cooking and sleeping to walking and praying, *The Practice* introduced the sociological concepts of "trajectories,""strategies,"and "tactics"which shape everyday practices. Moreover, and most importantly for us, de Certeau spends a full chapter on the exploration of the practice of reading. The title of the chapter? "Reading as Poaching."

Let us approach this step by step. In this defense of the consumerist subaltern, de Certeau points out how the late-capitalist reality of the twentieth century puts producers over receivers—but how those who tend to be seen as receivers-only are in fact producers by legion. Similarly, the activity of reading is commonly set as the binary opposite to writing: while to write is to produce a text, to read is nothing but to receive. De Certeau disagrees strongly. The continued existence of the writing-reading dichotomy, as widely understood and cultivated by the socio-economic superstructure, symbolizes for him an attempt at a direct continuation of the relation between enlightened intellectuals and obedient masses: the latter are set to silently follow the lead of the former. But, de Certeau points out that

> in reality, the activity of reading has on the contrary all the characteristics of a silent production: the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance. (2013, p. xxi)

Arguing that texts obtain their meaning only in the moment when they are read, de Certeau joins other scholars in shifting the focus of production of meaning to the readers who are understood as consumers of texts. He does so to criticize the fact that social hierarchization distorts the reality of an infinite plurality of meanings of texts for the sake of imposing rules and guides of one correct meaning that the elites accept and the public must thus take as their own. In opposition, de Certeau argues that reading is one among a range of "tactics of operating"or "modes of behavior"through which common people who are reduced to be consumers by the "dominant economic order"create their own "network of anti-discipline"that undermines this very drive (de Certeau 2013, pp xi-xiii, xv-xvii).

To describe his rebellious stance, de Certeau makes use of the reading-as-poaching metaphor. Where texts are seen as a "private hunting reserve"of the author—as authority over the text, if you will—readers behave like poachers, freely taking from texts whatever meanings they desire to take (de Certeau 2013, p. 171). De Certeau's deliberations were written in the context of the debate about the death of the author (Barthes 1968) and as part of his writing about subaltern practices and their power over agency. The vocabulary employed thus metaphorically points to the appropriation of the reader vis-à-vis the author, if necessary, by force. Poaching works as a powerful metaphor—and, likely, particularly powerful, as it is not explicitly discussed in the text,

but, rather, inscribed into it, as it only appears in the title of the chapter.

In sum, to describe a highly useful and impactful reclaiming of the act of reading, the ordained social intellectual chose a word which for him, presumably, foremost related to hunting beyond the grounds of the monastery without permissions, i.e., a form of social disobedience that presumably did not approve of or glorify the slaughter of endangered species. Yet, from today's perspective, to continue referring to reading-as-poaching creates two dangers. First is the very real possibility of overshadowing the importance of the discovery of the subversive nature of reading by the immediate connection to unapproved hunters. Second is the equally problematic potential of downplaying the present-day connotations of the word by assuming its bloody connotation was not what de Certeau had in mind.

What to do? Should we cancel Michel de Certeau and his contributions to sociology of reading? Surely that would be too easy a move, especially given that he evades simple classifications. As neatly summarized in a New York Review of Books essay by Natalie Zemon Davis, he was an academic "celebrity, viewed as a major cultural critic, an innovative historian of early modern religion, and a religious thinker"who "developed a distinctive way of interpreting social and personal relations"(2008). Thus, rather than discard the very insightful work as a whole, we seek and explore a range of alternative concepts and metaphors to frame it with—both found in de Certeau as well as proposed by us. The goal is not as much as to find one key term to replace the reading-as-poaching in all uses and cases; rather, it is to present a selection of substitutes, each with their own limitations but also with their very own advantages. It is up to you, our readers, to choose among them freely.

We therefore suggest to explore the semantic field of wandering as metaphor for reading further in that we discuss briefly how the act of reading could be seen on par with jay-walking and trespassing. We then also broaden the scope to explore commonalities between reading and remixing, deserting and commoning. The text then ends with a proposition to treat reading as everyman's right.

Reading-as-Wandering

wander (verb, no object): [with adverbial of direction] walk or move in a leisurely or aimless way: I wandered through the narrow streets. • (verb, with object): travel aimlessly through or over (an area): he found her wandering the streets. (OED)

First, we would like to point out that de Certeau himself provided an alternative to poaching in the very same chapter under that title. An alternative that is not only not tainted in bloody-red but is, perhaps, even more useful in describing what the philosopher had in mind in the first place. This alternative is wandering. De Certeau writes:

> What has to be put in question is unfortunately not this division of

> labor (it is only too real), but the assimilation of reading to passivity. In fact, to read is to wander through an imposed system (that of the text, analogous to the constructed order of the city or of a supermarket). Recent analyses show that "every reading modifies the object,"… "one literature differs from another less by its text than by the way in which it is read,"… The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position. He invents in texts something different from what they intended. He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings. … To read is to be elsewhere, where they are not, in another world; it is to constitute a secret scene, a place one can enter and leave when one wishes… Indeed, reading has no place… [it] is not here or there, one or the other, but neither the one nor the other, simultaneously inside and outside… Readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else… (2013, pp. 169, 173, 174)

To recognize readers as wanderers in the landscapes of texts does not stand in opposition to the significance of de Certeau's assertion that ordinary readers are the real creators of meanings of texts and that these creations take place outside of the expected and controlled grid. Much to the opposite—it underlines and strengthens the argument. For where we had the negative, we now have a positive: to once again return to the OED, to wander is to "walk or move in a leisurely or aimless way"—while poaching is the act of ending something, wandering is the act of starting it. Where we had a limit, now we have no boundaries. And where there was a controversial detachment, now there is a welcoming invitation.

But still, what should we do about the appropriation that is captured by the poaching metaphor and which is somehow lost in wandering? For, wandering —even when done on lands that belong to someone else—relates foremost to a detached, distracted appreciation. As an active verb, poaching is stronger because of the mortal potential and the fact that the reader thus not only questions that the author owns the text but, potentially, metaphorically ends the authority of the author in the very act of reading. Thus, we also believe that de Certeau employed the poaching metaphor to point to the disruptive potential of reading acts. In their textual tactics, readers create meaning, they are creative and question (or ignore) the meanings imposed on them by authors or educational institutions. Yet, how exactly does this appropriation look like? Readers appropriate a text for their own use, without destroying it, they leave it to the next reader, or, rather, to generations of readers to similarly read, create meaning and appropriate it for themselves, and so on. Other than the tiger from the OED example at the start—and much other than a real tiger living in the wild—a text may have sheer endless lives, as long as it is being read (yet only then!). While the materiality of reading matters influences whether and how a text is being read, it is clear that, at least in most cases, a text will live

on after an act of reading. To go even further: the reading act may preserve the text in readers'memories or in discussions among readers, thus extending its live or granting it afterlives.

That being said, wandering as a metaphor for reading also resounds well with another well-known text of de Certeau, "Walking the City,"in which he describes "pedestrian speech acts"as tactics countering (or ignoring) the tactics of city-planners. It may be possible to trace the routes that pedestrians cover, yet, this tracing alone does not grasp the meaning of "walking the city":

> It is true that the operations of walking on can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths (here well-trodden, there very faint) and their trajectories (going this way and not that). But these thick or thin curves only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by. Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by. The operation of walking, wandering, or "window shopping,"that is, the activity of passers-by, is transformed into points that draw a totalizing and reversible line on the map. … The trace left behind is substituted for the practice. (de Certeau 2013, p. 97)

Reading-as-Jay-walking

jay-walker (noun): A pedestrian who crosses a street without regard to traffic regulations: She jay-walked through the traffic-jam of St. Giles, vaguely hoping to be run over. | Although there are penalties for jay-walking they do not seem to be much needed. (OED)

To act as a reader-turned-jay-walker is to approach a text without much regard to how it is expected to be read by the author and/or publisher. One example could be the very common practice of reading a newspaper or magazine from the last page, rather than from the first. Another example is to skip chapters (or the footnotes) in academic books or to read only the introduction and conclusion, or, even, to only skim through a table of contents and a few pages that spark one's interest and then forget about the rest of the book (she/he who is without this sin be the first to throw a stone!). Yet, the penalties of real-life jay-walking are usually only symbolic. Thus, by extension, reading-as-jay-walking is also not such a dangerous act against the author and text as poaching. Still, and here is a significant difference, by the fact that there are some penalties for it, the reader-turned-jay-walker acts out the reading with a slight possibility of danger. This danger, perhaps, is in the end what motivates and provokes the action to some extent in the first place too. Or, as in jay-walking on the streets, it is the easiness in reaching the destination when compared to taking the prescribed route.

Reading-as-Trespassing

trespass (verb): to enter unlawfully on the land of another, or on that which is the property or right of another. | (figurative, with on or upon): To make an improper or uninvited inroad on (a person's time, attention, patience, etc.); to intrude on or upon the rights or domain of; to encroach on, infringe. (OED)

Reading-as-trespassing is the logical yet also much more dangerous next step to reading-as-jay-walking, in that here the reader not only entirely disregards the intentions of the author and/or text but also actively reads against them. Fully challenging the basic assumptions of a text, the trespasser breaks all rules and roams on the textual sites fully at will. One, perhaps not so problematic example, is when a young reader reaches for the forbidden 'adult-only'book in their parents'collection. While this act is a trespassing only in regards to the ownership and allowance over the text, to then only read the erotic images in the given book—or: to rip them out to covertly show to peers—directly acts as trespassing on the text too. Another widespread example is when students add obscene drawings into academic books, write secret messages or otherwise alter the textual construct of books borrowed from a library when learning or preparing for exams. Here, the potential penalty (fine) is outweighed by the mere fun of the action. If to read is to engage with the meanings of texts (compare with Lena Henningsen's READCHINA Intervention 01 "What is a Reading Act?"), such alterations also constitute reading.

Reading-as-Remixing

remix (verb): To mix again (in various senses). | (spec. sound recording): To create a new version of (a recording) by rebalancing or recombining the separate instrumental or vocal tracks; (now also) to reinterpret or rework (an existing music recording), typically by altering the rhythm or instrumentation, often in a radical way. (OED)

While reading-as-trespassing is fairly straightforward, reading-as-remixing is its symbolic opposite: to remix a text is to engage with it so deeply that new, unintended meanings appear; or, to engage with it only in the shallowest way —as an object to rip apart and reconstruct—and then to take it and make something entirely new out of it. Especially the Dadaist cut-up technique later also popularized by the Beatniks is a vivid example: here, readers would take examples of written materials at random, cut them in pieces constituted by single sentences or words, mix them up and see what new meanings emerge when put back together. Given that most of the texts created in this way are far from reasonable, reading-as-remixing can end in a full departure from traditionally understood concepts of meaning and interpretation. Sampling of texts read-out-loud or of political speeches or fragments of films common to DJing in the hip-hop culture is an example of how reading-as-remixing might also create entirely new meanings. Here, as in fan cultures such as fan-fiction writing, the clear demarcation between readers and authors of texts vanishes,

illustrating the complicities and complexities of the role attributed to readers—a role that clearly is not reduced to passive reception of texts and their meanings.

Reading-as-Deserting

desert (verb): To abandon, forsake, relinquish, give up (a thing); to depart from (a place or position). | (spec. of a soldier or sailor): To quit without permission, run away from (the service, ship, post of duty, commander, or comrades). (OED)

Leaving the authorial intention and the text itself, the reader-who-deserts abandons the text entirely. She or he throws the book away, not to think or engage with it anymore. Here, the example of students who refuse to engage with a text deemed important for an exam comes to one's mind immediately. If the text in question is an assigned reading, the act of desertion gains on weight: like the soldier who quits her or his post without permission, such readers make themselves liable to face consequences for their actions. Yet, adding a mutinous dimension to the act of desertion, the decision to not engage with reading might also arise from ideology, say, when the given author was a racist or sexist, or when the content of the text goes against what the reader believes in. In such cases, to extend the military service metaphor, the insubordinate readers act like a conscientious objector: they recognize their right to refuse to read the text on the ground of freedom of thought, conscience, or religion.

Reading-as-Commoning

commoning (as verb): Sharing or participating, communion; Exercise of common rights over pasture, etc. | (as noun) common: The common body of the people of any place; the community or commonalty; sometimes, the commonwealth or state, as a collective entity. (OED)

Reading is not always an individual activity of a lone reader engaging with a single text. More often than one might assume—think about schools, libraries, or reading groups—we tend to read with others. In most cases such collective reading not only follows the exact same order of the text and its logical reasoning as intended by the author; it also reinforces it. Pupils in class are being taught what a 'good'interpretation of a text is just as participants in most official reading groups in are guided toward a 'correct'reading of a given text. However, what happens when a group of readers engages with a text against the intentions of the author (or the authorities) and, by doing so, strives to meet collective goals such as enrichening their shared knowledge, social or political boundary-crossing, or even dissidence? To describe such modes of reading, we propose the long obsolete term commoning which is making its comeback in the recent years in progressive politics. Meaning as much as making something common out of something individual, or, collectively making use of something, reading-as-commoning hence refers to such situations in which a collective reader takes up the reading against the prescribed norms and expectations with focus and

intentions of re-claiming the given text in unexpected ways as their own. The reader-as-poacher enters the forbidden zone of a text to leave destruction. The reader-as-commoner, as if in direct opposition, enters the forbidden zone of a text to create something new. Yet this new creation, other than in the examples discussed above, is not for her or his own use only; it is something that benefits a larger group, community or collective entity of readers.

Reading-as-Everyman's Right

roam (verb): to walk, move about, or travel aimlessly or unsystematically | (fig. esp. of thought, the mind, etc.): to drift aimlessly or randomly; to move about without dwelling on anything in particular

Navigating a text, interpreting it and creatively appropriating it for their own purposes, readers make use of (seize?) what is commonly referred to as the freedom to roam or "everyman's right."This civil privilege is particularly rooted in some of the mountainous European countries, where it is known as "allemansrätt"(Sweden, Norway) or "jokamiehenoikeus"(Finland). The law serves to assure every man and every woman access to public and private lands for recreational and exercise purposes and defines the conditions under which this is allowed. While particular rules vary from country to country, everyman's right allows the general public to move freely across the country, to have access to rivers, lakes and forests, to put up a tent for a night or two and to pick wild fruit. While this allows "public"access and the possibility to participate, it also sets limits: the owners of the property are not to be disturbed, property, plants and animals are not to be vandalized. "Everyman"thus can roam about freely, provided that he leaves no lasting traces on the land.

The freedom to roam, or "everyman's right"is somewhat similar to how readers wander through a text: they are free to move across the page in whichever speed they wish to, pausing and resuming their reading at their own space–or taking a shortcut into the next section, passing by a river. They may put up their tent for a while at a particularly beautiful vista in the narrative, get some water from the river and pick a few sweet wild berries. After this immersion into the text, they move on into the next valley or another text, leaving landscape and text in good order, but taking with them their own creative interpretation of the text and, hopefully, a treasured memory of a meaningful and pleasant literary and intellectual outing. By extension, we argue that all readers (including you) are free to do so with all texts (including this text); and when they do, they thus appropriate it—yet without destroying or preventing later readers from having access to it. (As part of an everyman's right to a text, readers might take a text to produce their own, as happens in fan culture, fan edits, or the rewriting of Cultural Revolution manuscript fiction when readers turn into secondary authors or full-fledged authors themselves. But this is yet another story to tell…)

References

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