

## **Space, Reason and Chaos: Walking in the City versus Hiking through the Wilderness**

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In “Walking in the City,” Michel de Certeau characterizes a purposeful walk through a well-developed, heavily structured, and urbanized city as a rather bland, “idle” and dream-like event (de Certeau 265,267). Furthermore, De Certeau outlines what he calls a “Pedestrian Speech Act” (267) or a “Walking Rhetoric” (269), two ways of characterizing the act of ‘free walking’ through a city as “a spatial acting-out of the place (just as speech act is an acoustic acting out of language)” (267). As a result, it is therefore “possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation” (268). Thus, an act of free walking, like free speech, would be where one walks around a structured city without consciously following the structure or having a purpose. By being aware of the bland structure one can become an active walker and no longer be subject to the gaze of the city , nor stuck in the act of producing ‘idle footsteps” (271,267). An active walker imposes their free will on the grid-like structure of the city and uses the streets and buildings as mere points of reference for the production of one’s own space.

Being situated in a small Northern city I was led to ask whether this same reasoning can be applied to one who walks or, more appropriately, hikes through the wilderness.

Upon first inspection free walking through an urbanized city and hiking through the wild appear to be two opposing ideas from the perspective provided by De Certeau’s text. For example, the act of hiking in the bush often represents one’s desire to escape the strict rules, laws and restrictions placed on them by living in a society and more particularly in an urbanized city. In a sense this is an act of De Certeauian free speech as one is asserting the power of their free will by denying the gaze of the city structure and choosing to create one’s own space in a foreign territory. This would seem to place the urbanized city in opposition to the unrestricted nature of the wilderness, making the wilderness a symbol for freedom or a space where freedom can be found. However, upon deeper inspection it becomes evident that there is actually a reversal of the logic that De Certeau applies to free walking in the city when one analyses the act of hiking through the wilderness. Thus, these seemingly opposing situations relate to one another in the sense that they both pose as a challenge to the assertion and imposition of one’s free will in one’s quest to create personal space. The notion of a dichotomous relationship may only remain in the fact that the approach to the same situation is reversed. Free walking in the city and escaping to the bush are both methods of creating space while asserting to oneself the power and ability of the free will; however, when one reaches the ‘entrance’ to the wilderness (‘entrance’ implying structure which at the moment contradicts the idea of a chaotic wilderness), it is the same lack of structure that one was hoping to find in the wild which then becomes the greatest challenge to one’s free will and the biggest obstacle one must overcome in order to create a personalized space.

While appearing to allow for the free imposition of one’s will, the inherently chaotic

nature of the wilderness challenges the power and ability of the free will by being a space which lacks any easily recognizable structure (like that found in large urbanized cities), forcing one to create their own rational structure and impose it on the unfamiliar chaos of the wild. By imposing a rational structure onto at least a specific section of the wilderness, one is creating an area which becomes ordered and recognizable. It provides one with a desired sense of comfort and a feeling of consistency in an area which is dynamic and chaotic. In a city there are structured areas of nature including parks and trails which are merely simulations of the untamed wilderness. The pre-existing structure behind developed areas of nature prevents them from being true areas of perceived potential escape and from posing the same unique challenge as the mystified wilderness. Nevertheless, there are also examples of humankind's attempts at imposing a generalized structure on completely undeveloped areas of nature including tools like maps, compasses and basic ideas of direction. These tools and concepts can help one make their way through the wild assuming one has a destination in mind. The final destination or purpose behind one's trip into the wilderness becomes the most significant piece of information in the taming of the wild because it serves as the center or foundation of the logic that one must impose on the wilderness. The importance of having a direction or purpose in the wild is a clear reversal of De Certeau's idea that to impose one's free will on the order of a city one must engage in "pedestrian speech acts" (267) which run on a lack of direction or purpose. In the bush one avoids acting-out or free walking because it is dangerous and has no real benefit for the hiker who desires a controlled and ordered escape. Evidently, a number of tools and concepts are readily available for use by those seeking the inverted challenge that the wilderness offers. More importantly, however, is that the mere existence of these tools and concepts serves as evidence for the idea that the true challenge of the wilderness is in creating and applying a logical structure to the wild, a direct inversion of the idea behind De Certeau's concept of free walking in the city.

The specific challenges and obstacles of each situation illustrate this inversion further. For example, in the city there are issues of private and public property or space, and other issues concerning moral and legal norms which potentially restrict one's access to rather interesting areas. The 'Walk,' 'Don't Walk' and 'Do Not Enter' signs are literal examples of the strict order that is imposed on one who goes walking through the city streets. The crowded streets of New York or Toronto are examples of possible space restrictions as one must constantly be aware that they are on the verge of infringing on another being's personal space. These are examples of the structure and order that an active walker engaging in a pedestrian speech act must invert and undo. However, these issues of restricted access and limited space are of little or no concern to the person who must hike through the wilderness to accomplish the same goal. The wilderness contains its own variations of these challenges. For example, the lack of a supremely distinct centerpiece in the wild (like a large skyscraper which can be seen from almost anywhere in the city) leaves one with the challenge of creating a center or foundation on which to build the rest of their structure. Furthermore, the preservation of one's life becomes most evident to oneself when in the wild as many luxuries of life disappear and threats to one's life from other beings and instances of starvation, psychological instability, and pure lack of knowledge are constantly presenting themselves. Pure instinct becomes a favourable justification for acts done or believed to be done out of complete fear for one's life.

Thus, it can be concluded that in the wild civilized humans are in a position of

disadvantage and can easily become subject to the powerful gaze of the wild, leaving one in an idle and dream-like state, similar to that exerted by a large urbanized city (271). To avoid entering this state of mind, hikers must (among other things) build campsites and mark trails which become acts completed out of necessity, because in the wild a sense of order and structure is added to the list of food, clothing and shelter as essential needs for survival. These physical acts are the material representations of the logical order that one is attempting to impose on the wild and without these physical and mental acts of order one will become engulfed by the mystique of the wild and remain an idle being, essentially going nowhere.

The inversion of De Certeau's free walking concept is clearly illustrated by the ideas that going nowhere in the bush leaves one with the same empty, powerless and idle feeling as does going somewhere in the city and that a lack of structure in the wild poses a mental and physical challenge to one's free will in the quest to create space as does the overwhelming presence of order in the city. One final distinction exemplifying the reversal of the nature of these two situations is found in the concepts underlying the terms used to describe the distinct physical acts. Simply put, the term 'walk' is more commonly used when describing a passive, leisurely stroll through an ordered area of society, and the term 'hike' is more commonly used when describing a more demanding trek through a disordered and chaotic area. A hike implies a more demanding task in both a physical and intellectual sense. The terrain is more rugged and too inconvenient for one to simply walk through, and the lack of structure and familiarity forces one's intellect to be constantly at work creating order and sense out of the chaotic environment. Although the De Certeauian active walker is attempting to break with the idle, passive walkers of the large urbanized cities, they remain passive in the sense that they are not forced to bring anything to the challenge like the hiker in the bush must in order to achieve the same goal. This is not to deny that a high level of awareness is needed for the active walker to remove oneself from feeling the influence and power of the structures and restrictions imposed on them; however, the end goal or state of mind is to essentially become ignorant of the structures of the city (as one inevitably remains limited and restricted by the imposed order and cannot truly escape without actually leaving the city limits) and to be guided by one's thoughts, emotions and desires. Thus, while the active walker is fighting to break association with the limiting and controlling aspects of a large urbanized city, we see the inverted situation with the case of the hiker. The hiker works to take an unrestricted and disordered area and create limitations, boundaries, structures and order. The ultimate goal of the hiker is to tame the wild and make it an area for one's own subjection and directed use.

Although these two events are distinct (occurring in different settings and using different approaches), in the end they both exemplify ways of creating or producing space. One is a method which can be used in more restricted areas and the other is a method which can be used in areas of complete chaos and unfamiliarity. As De Certeau outlines, when too much order and structure is felt in one's life (exemplified by the urbanized city) one can engage in acts of free speech and make the act of walking an event for physical and literary acting out, essentially creating more free space and chaos. On the other hand, when an overwhelming presence of chaos is felt one should look to reason to create order and a space of familiarity and comfort. The reversal of the approach in the varying situations is evident; however, it should also be clear that the

desired outcome remains the same. The creation or production of a more personal space from a public area is the ultimate conquest of a free walker in the city and a rational hiker in the wild. Whether the personal space desired is physical or intellectual, the successful completion of this act gives oneself a sense of security while also serving as a reassurance of the power and ability of the individual's free will.

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#### Works Cited

De Certeau, Michel. "Walking in the City." *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy. United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Pg 264-273.