"Narrate, Speculate, Fabulate"

Zitouni, Benedikte ; Debase, Didier ; Doucet, Isabelle

ABSTRACT

The article results from an interview by Isabelle Doucet: On Monday, 25 September 2017, I convened a conversation with philosopher Didier Debase and social scientist Benedikte Zitouni in Brussels, and meandered between French and English discussing the ways in which we study and research the world. This "world" is, for Benedikte, a world of activist urban practices, nineteenth-century urban planning in Brussels, urban agriculture, and eco-feminism, whilst Didier studies, as a philosopher, the concepts, ideas, and regimes of thought through which philosophers have guided us to study reality, nature, and science. Their work is relevant for architectural studies in that it inspires modes of inquiry, emphasises the importance of narration and story-telling, and helps in discussing reservations about making truth claims in architectural discourse. Their work resists developing generalisations from specific and situated problems, and encourages us to resist the conceptual taxonomies, comparative approaches, and projected abstractions through which theory all too often pretends to study the world and, worse, justify its findings. Instead, I find in Benedikte and Didier's writings companions for my own quest for situated accounts of architecture, and a welcome sense of hope that such accounts carry the potential of resistance and of imagining other possible futures. This imagination, exercised not in a distant future but in and through the thickness of the present, seems to me a task that demands our attention in a world of environmental collapse wherein we are yet to lea...

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NARRATE, SPECULATE, FABULATE: DIDIER DEBAISE AND BENEDIKTE ZITOUNI IN CONVERSATION WITH ISABELLE DOUCET

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On Monday, 25 September 2017, I convened a conversation with philosopher Didier Debaise and social scientist Benedikte Zitouni in Brussels, and meandered between French and English discussing the ways in which we study and research the world. This “world” is, for Benedikte, a world of activist urban practices, nineteenth-century urban planning in Brussels, urban agriculture, and eco-feminism, whilst Didier studies, as a philosopher, the concepts, ideas, and regimes of thought through which philosophers have guided us to study reality, nature, and science. Their work is relevant for architectural studies in that it inspires modes of inquiry, emphasises the importance of narration and story-telling, and helps in discussing reservations about making truth claims in architectural discourse. Their work resists developing generalisations from specific and situated problems, and encourages us to resist the conceptual taxonomies, comparative approaches, and projected abstractions through which theory all too often pretends to study the world and, worse, justify its findings. Instead, I find in Benedikte and Didier’s writings companions for my own quest for situated accounts of architecture, and a welcome sense of hope that such accounts carry the potential of resistance and of imagining other possible futures. This imagination, exercised not in a distant future but in and through the thickness of the present, seems to me a task that demands our attention in a world of environmental collapse wherein we are yet to learn how to inhabit the knowledge that we are about to hit the wall, as Isabelle Stengers powerfully argues in In Catastrophic Times.1 I believe that architects have a role to play in healing our relationship with and care for Gaia, provided they relearn to celebrate the wildly imaginative nature of the world and of their own training as well as developing instrumentalised “solutions” (e.g. sustainability, green roofs, solar panels).
I. Doucet

Isabelle: Let us start from the “situation” within which we are having this conversation today. In your writings, I have always appreciated your refusal to move beyond the situatedness and radical relationality of the things you study, whether these are, as with Benedikte, activist practices, eco-feminism, or urban agriculture, or, in Didier’s work, concepts, thoughts, and the claims made by science. I am particularly intrigued by the “speculative narration” you propose as an approach to reality. It offers a form of story-telling that is speculative, imaginative—Didier, for example, speaks of the “imaginative historian”—and thus allows for other possible stories. Such stories are considered “other” not necessarily because they are peripheral or marginal, but in that they are already present in the realities and situations you study though not articulated (yet). Shall we begin with “speculative narration”, which seems an approach that is also very relevant for architectural studies?

Didier: The idea of “speculative narration” originates, at least for me, in the reactualisation of speculative thought, so we have to resituate ourselves in that moment. Isabelle Stengers, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Nathalie Trussart, and I officially created the Groupe d’Etudes Constructivistes (GECo) in 2002—though it could claim to have existed already for some time—at the University of Brussels. We were inspired by philosophers as different as Henri Bergson, William James, Gilles Deleuze, and Bruno Latour, who aimed at enlarging the concept of experience in order to escape from a purely anthropological definition, but who did so in opposition to speculative thought. We would have defined ourselves at that time as pragmatists and constructivists, and certainly not as speculative thinkers.

It is important to understand that speculation was still considered too abstract, too detached, too theoretical, and disconnected from experience. It would have been absurd to reclaim speculation, as our ambition was mainly pragmatist: to enrich the concept of experience, to reject the power of abstractions and knowledge to set the norm for all relations to experience. So, even though Isabelle Stengers published a book on Whitehead’s philosophy in 2002, and was already inspired by him in her earlier works [see, with Ilya Prigogine, Order Out of Chaos and Cosmopolitics], the wider interest in speculation was still marginal. The position of Whitehead was particularly counterintuitive. On the one hand, Whitehead refers all the time to Bergson, James, and the modern empiricists (Locke and Hume) as his main sources of thought. But, on the other hand, he defines himself as a “speculative thinker”, which at that time referred to a very different tradition, even opposite to empiricism and the pragmatism that was coming from German Idealism (mainly Schelling and Hegel).

As for myself, I decided to focus my research on the reasons why, when coming from the imperative of a radical empiricism, it became so necessary to reclaim the demands of speculative thought. Speculation appealed to me as an invitation to ask how we could articulate human and non-human beings in different ways, and which position to take vis-à-vis experiences that are not purely human. I published my book on speculative empiricism in 2006. From there on, our stance slowly changed. Together with other members of GECo, we decided to rethink, in
different fields (anthropology, sociology, history of sciences, etc.), what the speculative claim might produce. In 2010, we began preparations for an important meeting in Cerisy-la-Salle on “Gestes spéculatifs”, which was an extraordinary opportunity to rethink our collective experience and to reformulate our own history as a centre of research; it was also the moment when the “speculative” was for the first time collectively embraced.

The question of “narration” came from a very different place. It is connected to Gilles Deleuze’s work on cinema where he sees in fiction and narration the capacity to respond to, and to resist, a discourse based on truth. Deleuze resisted a discourse of truth, as it is often also a discourse of colonisation, of domestication. In contrast to truth discourses, Deleuze proposes fabulation, which he considers the “art of the poor” because it is a way they can invent something other than the set of conditions offered to them by the situation they find themselves in. Through teaching at the Graphic Design Department at Saint Luc in Brussels, which offers a Master’s in Narration, I discovered the possibility of an articulation between the speculative demand and the status of narration. Questions such as how to address beings? how do we tell the story about living creatures? how to live with other beings? are also very much part of the recent writings of Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and Thom Van Dooren on questions about nature.

Benedikte: I am positioned in the social sciences where I would define myself as a craftsman and writer of empirical tales. Narration was there from the very start. In the 1990s, with all its modern/post-modern debate, it was very difficult to not be aware of issues around narration and description. I also studied anthropology, where I learned that to write is to demonstrate, and vice versa. I mean to say that field descriptions in and of themselves must make the point one wants to get across; no theoretical adding will make up for poorly written empirical field renderings. The theory emerges in and through the story (at least that is what one aims for). An anthropologist’s core craft is narration. So, to understand and show what is going on (in the world) you needed a good tale, based on empirical details and “thick descriptions”, as suggested by Clifford Geertz. Also, geographers at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, such as Jean-Michel Decroly, taught issues related to territory, power, and resistance through presentations of concrete cases. For example, he spoke of the Vietnam war and how US military forces undermined state structures from within through knowing exactly where the irrigation networks, the forests, the rice plantations, and so on were and bombing them. It was political ecology at its best, provided through very detailed accounts and mappings of specific situations. So you could not come out of social science studies without being aware that narration is part of your craft, and that it is very important to think about how you will tell a story, how you will make your case.

Speculation, as part of a turn to pragmatism, came much later, in the 2000s, when I joined the doctoral writing seminar of the Centre de Sociologie de l’Innovation, led by Bruno Latour at l’Ecole des Mines in Paris, and the GECo that was just mentioned. In the first group, I learned, among other things, through Latour’s readings of John Dewey and the various empirical writing exercises, to ask how one can make tales matter to such an extent that the topic at hand becomes
an issue and will trigger debate. We learned how to turn matters of fact into matters of concern, so to speak. At the GECO, I discovered, particularly through Didier’s and Isabelle Stengers’ work on Whitehead and our collective reading of William James’ *The Will to Belief*, that what matters is what your stories are contributing to, in terms of world-making. What world are you helping to become possible through the ways in which you formulate and problematise things?

**Isabelle:** I find the notion of the interstitial central to this. I think of Didier’s discussion of the interstice not as a space or moment that can be claimed, but a condition that allows for events to emerge. Narration is one way to allow for interstices to unfold or become articulate. I deliberately say “articulate” instead of “visible” because it is not a matter of rendering visible what was previously hidden, but rather that interstices may go unnoticed because we cannot read or notice them—due to our training, preconceptions, and histories, due to the conceptual and historical categories and taxonomies through which we are accustomed to think. Narration can disrupt and challenge these kinds of taxonomies.

**Didier:** The interstice is indeed important, and connected to the very recent realisation that narration is ontological. That is to say, there is no untouchable “essence” of beings that cannot be touched by narration. Historians of nature, working within the heritage of Whitehead, were the first to argue that we cannot understand living beings without listening to the stories they tell us. Beings tell loads of stories, but these stories are not linear, they go in all directions, and are therefore difficult to decipher. So the question becomes how can researchers make them speak.

**Benedikte:** Donna Haraway, in approaching the world as a Coyote, a trickster, refused to see the worlds we observe as passive, or as what we project our own imaginations, codes, and language onto. Instead, she sees the world as active, telling its own stories, and therefore it eludes you, because it’s more diverse and dynamic than you think.

**Didier:** This is actually very much connected to the interstice because we tend to see interstices as “empty spaces”, something passive that is waiting to be filled up. I think of interstices alongside Anna Tsing’s beautiful concept of precarity, namely that interstices are in a situation of dependency, on their way to disappearing, to capsizing, to being claimed; they are between two states, neither full nor empty. And this makes the interstice fragile because it is always prey to appropriation. I really do see a link between interstice and precarity. Precarious beings, precarious situations, are always situations at the verge of tipping; they are beings and situations that very nearly might not have happened. So, through our stories, we can ask: What would be the situation if a claim, a place, a building, a decision, had not happened?

**Benedikte:** Tsing, and others such as Thom Van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, make us see the precarious: it is indeterminate, unfinished. This means not just that a situation could have been different, but also that we do not know yet what it will be. So our stories do make a
difference! Cultural historian and activist Rebecca Solnit, for example, notes in her book, *Hope in the Dark*, that Virginia Woolf wrote, “The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be”, meaning the future is “in the dark”, not yet known, indeterminate, and thus much is possible, and thus requires our engagement. And those are our best chances (indeterminate, unfinished), actually, to make—through our stories—some worlds happen and not others.

**Isabelle:** What if we read the world, as Didier suggests, as an accumulation of interstices rather than a series of stabilities? Stability is only temporary. The interstitial is for me a resistance to stability, and a resistance to reading history and the present as a series of stable processes that were from time to time interrupted by interstices. The interstice is not the negative of stability, the periphery to a centre.

**Didier:** Exactly, the interstitial cannot be understood without that to which it is interstitial. So we cannot speak positively about interstices without looking at the situation in and from which it sprouts or escapes. There is always an element of escape, of flight. Even stability, or robustness, needs to be exercised, practised, and maintained by many, and therefore it always leaves plenty of interstitial zones.

**Benedikte:** Yes, I really think we need to revisit factuality, and what are called facts. What is at hand, what is at stake.

**Didier:** I agree. What matters are situations, not facts. And situations are stuffed with different realities and potentialities. And that is the material we should be working with.

**Isabelle:** Another key question I would like to bring up is this. If our stories can trigger forms of resistance, then how can we resist generalisation and remain situated, i.e. connected to what we study whilst at the same time aiming for some wider impact or relevance of our findings?

**Didier:** When Bruno Latour published his survey, *Modes of Existence*, some readers saw this as a work on modes of existence, whilst it is, as the subtitle suggests, an anthropology of the moderns. And that changes everything! Because it offers a work of problematisation, showing situations in their multiple dimensions, their processes towards robustness, stabilisation, and so on.

**Isabelle:** I see a connection here with Benedikte’s work on The Young Lords in New York, where you show us, quite powerfully and somewhat surprisingly, how the institution can be seen as an interstitial event. And this messes with how we usually look at institutions, that is to say, we would not usually associate institutions with activism at all. Similarly, in your project on urban agriculture, you present us with the gardener as not a fringe figure, a rediscovered figure of otherness; instead, you force us to place the “new” urban gardeners of today back into the
centre of thinking-city, i.e. what a city could do, what it means to develop, how it should grow, questions concerning density, and so on. And in doing so, you allow for greater rather than lesser critical engagement and discussion than if we had kept the urban gardener as something special, something other, something exceptional, and thus safely outside thinking-city.

Benedikte: Let me bring in an anecdote that is telling for the idea you raise around placing things back into the centre. I have written a Preface to a book, *Greenham Women Everywhere*, by Alice Cook and Gwyn Kirk (1983) that has just been translated into French. The book is about the protest led by dozens to thousands of women against the storage of nuclear weapons at a military site near Newbury, Berkshire, in the United Kingdom, from the early 1980s till the dismantling and closure of the base in 2000. The publisher of the French edition, Isabelle Cambourakis, told me she went to Newbury, where she was excited to learn that her visit coincided with a commemoration of Greenham Common [the name of the land]. But then she realised that the whole commemorative ceremony would be on the military base of the same name, and very little would be on the Greenham Women. So, for the people of Newbury, it is only an anecdote in association with the whole story, and—who knows?—they may feel even more connected to the military base than to the protest. So, as a “normal” social scientist, you would probably feel a bit awkward, thinking that you may have exaggerated the significance of the event. But I think you are right, Isabelle [Doucet], that we have the opportunity here, through our empirical tales, to force this legacy to the centre of attention. The worlds we observe are layered and contain numerous stories, territories, and practices that you do not even notice because of your positioning and perspective. So, what we can do with our tales, as you say, is put certain stories back in the centre and show that “we”, that is myself, Cambourakis, and other ecofeminists, women, activists, researchers, people, care about this struggle, in this particular place.

Isabelle: You took a similar approach with the Young Lords?

Benedikte: Yes, the Young Lords was a Black Panthers-inspired and -affiliated group, part of which became a political party in the early 1970s. In New York, their action is short-lived: only two years of intense activism in the neighbourhoods, and only four years of the group’s existence, so why should we even care? Well, because the Young Lords can teach us something. And that connects to the other point you raised around intensifying stories. Putting something back at the centre of our attention is not just about saying it is important, but you also need to find something that matters and connects to the situation today. In this case, the Young Lords of New York are teaching us something very valuable about institutions, namely that institutions, if taken care of, can expand a community’s power to act, thus nourishing a network of solidarity. Also, what we can learn is that the zones of contact change over time. For instance, the urban gardeners of Brussels “matter” differently today than they perhaps would have done ten years ago. So, the question to ask is what does it mean to talk about urban gardeners today? About
the Young Lords? And what does it mean to speak about these from our current situation? And what are the consequences and further effects of these writings we produce?

**Isabelle:** Placing something back in the centre is for me a matter of seeking attachment and resisting autonomy. Didier also uses the word “infected”, which I find very apt. Allowing oneself, as a researcher, to be infected and to have that attachment with what we research. When seeking attachment, rather than adopting an autonomous position as a researcher, you can acknowledge your vulnerability and allow yourself to be affected by the stories you study from up close.

**Didier:** Yes, and it is precisely here that the question of pragmatism is essential. That is to say, you do not know what something means or how it works until you have carefully studied the effects that it will produce. And this is what utopias refuse to do, namely follow through, and thus understand how a case, a proposal, an idea intrudes into another milieu. Pragmatism, as in those definitions offered by Jacques Derrida and Michel Serres, is thus also an art of pharmakon, an art of poisons and remedies. How does exactly the same proposition, the same remedy, produce something entirely different when transferred from one milieu into another? The very same theory, idea, or proposition can, as we know, lead to liberation in one milieu and oppression in another. So, for activism, this has important consequences because when a success story of activists in a specific milieu—where that milieu is interested in their cause—gets transplanted to another milieu, it can have devastating effects! We have to return to precarity here because precarity means that something is precarious when it survives dependent on interventions by others. For example, one is in a socially precarious situation if one depends on welfare provisions such as council housing, free health care…so stories of precarity, such as the one described by Tsing, are stories of dependency. What we should be telling is not stories of success of a being or a thing, but stories about networks of dependency.

**Isabelle:** This is similar to buildings, where we can choose to tell the story of the many networks of engagement—whether political, social, economic, technological, or symbolic. And because these networks are multiple and complex, the successful workings of a building cannot be transplanted. This approach is thus a rejection of the “best practices” approach that purports to translate success formulas for urban regeneration, for sustainability, and so on, into different milieus, expecting the same effect!

**Didier:** Yes, one needs to pay attention to all the networks of connection when evaluating the success of a being, a story, a building….

**Isabelle:** I find this a very powerful statement because I do wonder sometimes whether we critical theorists tend to criticise the use of best practices for urban regeneration, such as the so-called Bilbao Effect, but when it comes to activist practices, we’re somewhat more at ease with “learning” about success formulas and copy-pasting them elsewhere!
Didier: The best-practices attitude certainly encourages a rapid translation from one setting to another without taking into account the milieu from which these successes emerge. Pragmatism has an important contribution here in that it invites us to pay attention to what an idea “does” rather than what it means, promises, or intends. Composition is everything! So also with the urban gardeners: we should not make moral distinctions between so-called pioneer gardeners (at the origins of the movement) and those who follow after them, who might be accused of not adhering to the original model. Aren’t they simply operating in different situations?

Isabelle: Does this mean that when we transplant things such as successful formulas into other contexts, we have to imagine how these things will seek [different] attachments in these other circumstances? So, imagination here is part of the pragmatist approach—not imagining something else, a distant or transcendental utopia, but reimagining the present so as to allow for other possible futures, and in terms of imagining the effects of things?

Benedikte: Absolutely. If I’m not mistaken, Whitehead states that there is always more in reality. This means that even the best of imaginations would not have thought of what you actually find in reality, if you just have some inventiveness when looking at the matter at hand. That makes the craft of empirical tale-telling so fascinating. This is what we mean by “speculating”, i.e. unravelling the unforeseen and intriguing dimensions of reality.

Isabelle: What then is our responsibility when we bring in stories? If we cannot master the effects of our stories, then how can we build in some sense of care for their possible effects? Can our stories also cause harm? Which brings us back to the question of scale and translation into other contexts. Benedikte, you speak for example of collective narratives and co-production, not just by different researchers, but collective narratives developed with your interlocutors.

Benedikte: When Isabelle Cambourakis returns from Newbury saying that the people there have forgotten, we can say that we have not. It matters that some people continue telling that story. Each struggle or each empirical world I am talking about is already being talked about. With others, I am continuing this work, this relay, because as long as it is talked about, it is there, alive and present. Our present reverberates with past ingenuity and accomplishments.

Isabelle: But then I wonder—and here I refer to how I used J. L. Austin’s work on “performance”—how words actively take part in the shaping and reshaping of the world, not just through their meaning, but through how they act, what they do. Why didn’t you include “institution” in the title of the Young Lords paper? Wouldn’t it allow for the text to have a different agency, to travel to different audiences where bringing this story up would be important? Or would that be too much of a manipulation of the agency of our writing?
**Benedikte:** Indeed, how to appeal to an audience...? I am probably always, perhaps overly, cautious about disconnecting the more abstract and general discussion, on institutions as is the case here, from the actual empirical case, i.e. the struggle and the difficult situation in which the Young Lords were living at that point. The Young Lords’ connection and attachment to the institutions only arises and makes sense in that particular situation of extreme environmental racism. The risk of disconnecting the two (discussion on institutions / the situation of environmental racism) is inherent to our academic practice for we often use situations as mere illustrative cases for the more general theoretical statement we want to make, and thereby we fail to see that thinking, the thinking process, is part of and rises from an actual situation. People think because they have to. So I tell the story of their resistance, their revolt, and try to make the reader feel how, bit by bit, in the midst of the struggle, another definition emerges, an incredibly interesting one, of what institutions such as hospitals, schools, urban cleaning and transportation systems are or could be about. It was an unforeseen dimension of that story, one that needed a little of our—and of their—speculative powers in order to emerge. I think that’s why I did not mention the institutions in the title, not to “unground” the notion.

**Isabelle:** I can see that, and I always feel that the craft of writing, including titles, choosing keywords, and so on, is part of that challenge. A similar danger resides in the work of abstraction. Didier, you suggest that abstraction is not a problem in itself as long as it does not make claims without showing the production processes of that abstraction, how it has emerged from a specific situation.

**Didier:** Indeed, we are trained to expect those who generate knowledge from a specific terrain to find ways to generalise their observations so as to make them more widely relevant. As soon as we start telling stories of precarity, and thus of attachment, such as in ecology, the story of an animal that is threatened by extinction, we allow an opportunity for addressing questions about certain plants, flowers that serve as food or breeding grounds, and thus also production processes in agriculture…and all these actors have different priorities. All this, not just the animal, is part of the “terrain” we are studying. And showing our terrains in such a way, presenting the problem in such a way, is a political gesture because it shows that these heterogeneous interests come together in a situation. Collaboration thus also means to think through the multiple voices of the world.

**Isabelle:** This forces us, as researchers, to not be obsessed with how we, as individuals, can develop better understandings of the situations we research, and instead to become more sensitive to the complexity of these situations. But the real challenge is to develop forms of collective knowledge, of co-production with the terrain, and to become radically open-minded about who gets involved in discussing a situation.
Didier: Yes, and this has enormous consequences in that the situation is not something that is bounded geographically thematically, but is what is at stake at that specific moment. And once we start unfolding, we do not know where a situation begins or ends. I liked that you brought in Austin because he shows the importance of becoming sensitive to how things travel and transform their environments in doing so. So if our stories help collectives to become attentive to all these chains of transformations and the chains of dependency that constitute the precarity of their situation, that is a political gesture.

Isabelle: As is the case in Benedikte’s work on urban agriculture, where you ask how we can, as researchers, understand these situations as part of a wider collective that composes the situation.

Benedikte: I have to say that I like the turn we are taking here because I had not thought about the beyondness of specific tales in terms of how these tales travel in chains of dependency and precariousness. This horizontality in a way means you are partaking in a territory. And the territory (or what you have called the situation) also says what is at stake, who and what is at play. And your tale is partaking in that. I suddenly realise that the alliances you do not yet know about, the territories in the making, are perhaps all a kind of beyondness about which we should talk…the travelling of the tales.

Isabelle: Our discussion directs us towards questions concerning how we are implicated in the terrains or the situations we study. Didier, doesn’t this also resonate with your discussion of the “imaginative historian”? I read in the “imaginative historian” a figure who does not just “learn” from the past, but also is prepared to relive history. In Nature as Event, Didier sees the role of the “imaginative historian” as taking part in a creative process of reliving and reimagining history. And this is what Benedikte does when she revisits feminist practices as a way of understanding how their activism was theorised, and potentially reduced, into eco-feminism. Why were these embodied actions taking place in a specific place and time theorised in this way? What can we learn from revisiting the embodied histories that precede the moment of abstraction and theorisation? So, is the “imaginative historian” then not also, to some extent, a figure of resistance?

Didier: Yes, and I would also like to connect this to what you raised earlier around abstraction. In continental philosophy, abstraction has provoked much suspicion and resistance because it often means taking one part of reality and generalising it, as though it were an act of intelligence that would create a travesty through its own categories. Abstraction is seen as something that would deform. I think, however, we should re-appropriate abstraction, which we can do if we return to its original significance, namely “to abstract” meaning to extract something from its milieu. And, in fact, all living beings extract something from their milieu, whether it is food, nutrition…. So all beings interpret their environment in a way because they extract from their milieu according to what they are capable of extracting, what they think is good for them.
Whitehead says that when we extract, we leave traces of that process of extraction. When we see abstraction in such a way, that is to say not in terms of a loss of reality, or abusive generalisation, but as being at work everywhere, all the time….

**Isabelle:** …then it becomes paramount that we give abstractions due attention!

**Didier:** Exactly. Abstraction is the sense that everything that could have been taken into account was not taken into account. And thus it hints at other possibilities. Beings tell stories about what they are, where they come from, but also about what they could have been, what they did, and could have done.

**Benedikte:** If the imaginative historian abstracts whilst respecting the milieu from which she extracts—e.g. talks about the institutions without forgetting how the Young Lords saw this and talked about it, i.e. without un-grounding the abstraction—then how exactly do we present traces of this groundedness? I think it is key to recognise that we do not know what is at stake. And so we need to be imaginative historians, taking seriously certain signs and voices that come through and tell us something about what, in that situation, was at stake. Something intriguing, something unforeseen. For example, the Young Lords did not develop or offer full-fledged political programs on the matter of institutions (contrary to what they did on the question of racism, for instance), and thus institutions were not immediately at stake. But, at the same time, institutions figured so often in their actions, and they wove so many different relations with the institutions (and some allies therein), that I felt that they indeed were saying something about institutions: through what they were doing, even if they themselves would probably not, at that time, see it or formulate it that way. So one needs to tell the story to keep the abstraction grounded. Also, for example, when I sent one of my writings back to one of the actors in the urban agriculture project, she said that she would never have told the story in such a way, but that it nevertheless speaks to her. That is the kind of co-production I believe in, namely a way of keeping traces of the milieu. It is not about having the actors validate what we say. We do bring in different stories, we do abstract something, and what is at stake for us is not necessarily what is at stake for them. But that is not a problem. We thicken their action.

**Isabelle:** Donna Haraway, Stengers, and Starhawk speak of digesting and reclaiming history, rather than seeking validation. Co-production is not about who is most entitled to speak about what is happening or about what is at stake, but about collective digesting, or what was thought to be at stake at the time.

**Benedikt:** I get the sense that abstraction is at the core of many things we talk about here, which is rather unexpected when talking about narration, and which I had not really anticipated for this interview, but which is so important. Reclaiming goes through processes of abstraction that are then relived and re-embodied. Starhawk's witches smelling the burning in the nostrils again is very concrete, as much as it is an act of abstraction.
Didier: Abstraction is not necessarily narration. Narration is composition and reconnecting—a way to articulate an ensemble of beings. The appearance, now, in the US, of “alternative facts” is troubling our thoughts on narration because it shows that there is a limit to the liberty of narration. Not all narrations are necessarily “good” gestures!

Isabelle: I really struggle there. Because if abstraction is fine as long as we are honest about the processes and traces of abstraction, doesn't that imply that “alternative facts” are fine as long as we keep the traces of how they came into being?

Benedikte: No, because you still need to be able to prove that your descriptions, your accounts give enough traces and detail to make them pass the test of being a good tale. Following Stengers, science is a collective enterprise with debate and validation processes. We crafters of empirical tales know when a tale is constructed well, when it is convincing in that it supplies enough proof, traces and details that are well connected to one another. So I do not feel threatened by [the debate on] alternative facts because our tales are so different...

Isabelle: My concern comes from my own positioning in architecture and urban design where our stories risk being used or misused, as justifications, for projective purposes (design).

Didier: “Alternative facts” show the problem that emerges when events are presented as facts. For example, one can say “Julius Caesar existed” with equal conviction and power to someone saying that Caesar did not exist. And it is the disconnection of such statements from the stories that compose them that makes them equally believable, and equally problematic. But we have to ask, if Caesar did not exist, what are the consequences for all our histories, our stories, and traces about the past? You can always say that Caesar did not exist, but proving that by questioning and countering all the traces that seem to lead to the observation that Caesar did exist, questioning all the books written about him, all the experts who worked on him…that would be the challenge.

Isabelle: This is very interesting. In a public event recently organised at the CIVA Foundation in Brussels, we had a presentation by Freek Persyn from 51N4E who explained how in a certain project, they could offer a solution that was much cheaper, and thus that they did not need the large budget the commissioner had available. And I felt that this was noble but also suicidal because architects are paid a percentage of the total building cost. If you really want to propose a cheaper solution, you should revise and recompose the whole mechanism through which budgeting works, fees are paid, and so on. So this office started to imagine negotiating other ways of being paid for doing work, paid as researchers, as consultants…that would, for me, also be a resistant practice. When an architect suggests a cheaper solution that lets a client keep their money for something else, a solution they can offer because they have a different fee structure, now that is resistance from within for me.
Didier: Yes, I agree, but that is already a very different way of describing the workings of architecture than is usually the case! It is already a very different way of telling stories about architecture.

Isabelle: And on that note, our “situation” ends here because our attention and time is now required elsewhere (laughs). Many thanks, it was a pleasure to have this conversation.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Benedikte Zitouni is a lecturer in sociology at Saint-Louis University of Brussels and, since 2003, member of the GECo—Groupe d'études constructivistes (Université Libre de Bruxelles). In 2015, she co-initiated the group Brussels Ecologies / Ecologies de Bruxelles which gathers researchers, activists, and others for whom present environmental problems and engagement with them require both theoretical and political imagination. Her own work consists of empirical tales, based on archival work, conveying people’s ingenuity and societal changes at work. In the past, this has led her to delve into matters of urban planning, state power, and spatial policies as well as investigate various struggles that took place in France, the US, and the UK in the late twentieth century. She has recently prefaced Des femmes contre des missiles / Greenham Women Everywhere (éditions Cambourakis, 2016, by Cook and Kirk). Her forthcoming book is a collective one, on urban gardening, and tackles issues such as political ecology, “thick” presents, activists’ territories, and popular histories (éditions de l'éclat, 2018).
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NOTES


6. Benedikte here notes that there were of course other fields where descriptions were central. In history, for example, it seemed obvious that you could not write history and understand so-called epochs, zeitgeists, and so on, without thick descriptions.


9. Whitehead spoke of the “bifurcation of nature”—namely that it is all too often accepted that there is the domain of facts and the domain of narrations and language that has a place, but should not be exaggerated. The big change came with the realisation that beings tell their own stories.

10. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, New York: Routledge, 1991, 183–201. On the world as a coyote or trickster, which, according to Haraway, is a Native American legacy actively taken on by American ecofeminists of the 1980s, see the last part of the text on “Situated Knowledges”.


15. I here refer to Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s work on Care, e.g. Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.


