

## Speculative Fabulation: A Median Voice to Care for the Dead

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The main thread I will follow today is speculative fabulation, one of the SF practices. And, more specifically, I am interested in speculative fabulation as a mode of writing and thinking for the Chthulucene, for a thick present. Two main reasons have led me to investigate speculative fabulation.

First of all, speculative fabulation is everywhere in *Staying with the Trouble*, from the chapter about Ursula LeGuin and Octavia Butler to the Camille Stories that end the book. But speculative fabulation is not only a subject or a kind of writing. The book talks about “companion species whose job in living and dying is not to end the storying, the worlding.”<sup>1</sup> Here, “storying” and “worlding” are used as synonyms: storytelling seems to be a condition for the ongoingness of the Chthulucene, of a thick present. The book is written about and with enmeshed stories, thickening a present that, without those stories, cannot exist, cannot persist in its worldings. Can we say that stories are the very fabric of the Chthulucene, that stories are a way of crafting and sustaining relations between beings and species, and that without those stories a thick present cannot persist?

Second of all, I’m interested in the term “speculative fabulation” itself, as it conveys a generative friction between the speculative (concepts and ideas) and the narrative (storytelling and fiction). *Staying with the Trouble* goes toward the path of fiction-writing, but I’m also interested in what “speculative fabulation” can mean for the writing of philosophy – or, more broadly, of the humanities and social sciences. How can we entertain a living and persistent connection between the theoretical practice of speculation and the practice of inventing stories? The dictionary tells us that the most common use of the adjective “speculative” refers to an abstract kind of reasoning that is not concerned with practical consequences.<sup>2</sup> The understanding of the term speculation we have here at the GECO, pushed forward by Isabelle Stengers and Didier Debaise, can help go beyond that: if thinking on a speculative mode means developing a specific mode of attention to the potentialities and virtualities of a situation in the making,<sup>3</sup> if it means being the speculator (the Roman “spy” who looks

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 40. From now on, I will refer to *Staying with the Trouble* as SwT.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Littré*, “spéculatif, ive.”

<sup>3</sup> See D. Debaise & I. Stengers, “Introduction,” to *Gestes spéculatifs*, les Presses du réel, 2015, p. 4: “Speaking of ‘speculative gestures,’ for us, is thinking with an engagement by and for a potentiality that has to be activated and made perceptible in the present. Such an engagement, because it requires an attention to the virtualities of a situation in the making, is strangely close to the forms of William James’s pragmatism.” (my translation)

for signs of potential changes),<sup>4</sup> then we can better understand why storytelling can be a helpful component of the task, as stories modify our mode of attention and make us sensible to potential dangers and opportunities.

Now, why and how turn to speculative fabulation as a tool for the making of a thick present?

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing suggests we consider storytelling as a method and as a full part of the production of knowledge: “To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a *method*. And why not make a strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> A few pages later, Tsing quotes philosopher Walter Benjamin, saying “the past we grasp, as philosopher Walter Benjamin puts it, is a memory ‘that flashes in a moment of danger.’”<sup>6</sup> To understand why stories and history are connected to “a moment of danger,” it’s worth going back to the section 6 of Benjamin’s text “On the Concept of History,” written in 1940, while Europe is about to succumb to Nazism, only a few months before Benjamin’s suicide.

**Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was.” It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.** Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. **The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.** Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. **The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.**<sup>7</sup>

There are two elements of Benjamin’s paragraph I’d like to comment on.

First off, what is the danger in the face of which history must be grasped? It turns out this danger is a matter of storytelling. When Benjamin writes about “the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling class,” what he is talking about is a danger inside the way we think of, study and write history itself. The danger is that a conformist, positivist account of history become the only history we can

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<sup>4</sup> Didier Debaise & Isabelle Stengers, “L’insistance des possibles. Pour un pragmatisme spéculatif,” *Multitudes*, vol. 65, 2017: “A reminder is needed here: etymologically, the *speculator* is the one who observes, watches out, cultivates the signs of a change of situation, making oneself sensible to what, in this situation, might matter.” (my translation)

<sup>5</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938-1940, ed. H. Eiland and N. W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 391, §6; my emphasis.

recognize: there would be only one history, written once and for all, a mere mirror of the past – and then, we lose all the virtualities, all the potentialities of a speculative mode. And so, Benjamin suggests that other versions of history must be nurtured by the sense of this danger and in the face of it. Could the SF mode developed in *Staying with the Trouble* be considered as a way of nurturing diverse, pluralist, feminist, and interspecist versions of history? One endnote in the book defines the SF mode as follows: “a mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding” that pays attention to the “conceivable, possible, inexorable, and logical.”<sup>8</sup> In context, this passage could lead to think that the “SF mode” mainly regards science fiction. But what if it isn’t enough to engage with science fiction OR speculative fabulation OR science facts OR speculative feminism? The beginning of the book states it numerous times: “Science fact and speculative fabulation need each other, and both need speculative feminism.”<sup>9</sup> That is one of the most fundamental claim of *Staying with the Trouble*: we need to think of the SF practices as radically enmeshed – and I would add we need to think of them this way in order to counterattack reductionist accounts of history. It means that in writing, in the production of knowledge, we should not isolate science fiction from science fact, speculative fabulation from socialist/speculative feminism: producing diverse versions of history would imply to learn how to articulate all of them on a speculative mode.

Now, the second aspect of Benjamin’s text that I’m interested in revolves around the very material, very real consequences of this danger. Benjamin’s question is not a purely abstract, epistemological one. He writes: “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious.” If a conformist account of history succeeds, the dead will not be safe – their modes of life, modes of thought, and ways of transmitting knowledge, all the potentialities they worked for will be sacrificed. So it is certainly not a mere coincidence if the question of caring for the dead, past and future, is at the heart of the Camille stories, which revolve around species about to go extinct but also around human souls, questions of intercultural practices of transmission, and practices of mourning.

Those connections between speculative fabulation and the invention of ways to care for the dead lead me to the last author I would like to mention today: Gilles Deleuze and his own concept of fabulation, which implies the question of the missing peoples that can populate the Earth. Deleuze refers to fabulation as the practice, the speech-act of a people inventing itself when different parameters make it disappear. What makes the people disappear? Basically, all kinds of imperialist dominance that aims to impose one truth, one version of history, thus preventing the people from existing. Deleuze writes about people doubly colonized, and I quote: “colonized by stories that have

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<sup>8</sup> SwT, p. 230 ; in reference to LaBare.

<sup>9</sup> SwT, p. 3.

come from elsewhere, but also by their own myths become impersonal entities at the service of the colonizer.” But fabulation, a collective storying of and by the people itself, escaping the war-machine that is the imposition of the truth of the powerful, disturbs this colonial attempt. I quote: “The moment the master, or the colonizer, proclaims ‘There has never been a people here’, the missing people is a becoming, it invents itself, in shanti towns and camps, or in ghettos [...].”<sup>10</sup> And so, through fabulation, a disfranchised people can invent itself, make its life a life worth living and telling, and invent the decolonized Earth it can inhabit.

Now, there is something that I find very thought-worthy here: in Donna Haraway’s work, “speculative fabulation” comes up in the face of a similar kind of problem, the one of the Earth and its peoples. To the best of my knowledge, “speculative fabulation” becomes a front and center concept in her work with the publication, in 2011, of the booklet entitled *SF: Speculative Fabulation and String Figures*. There, she writes about the people of Terrapolis, made of com-post rather than post-human, made of humusities rather than humanities.<sup>11</sup> That the same term, “fabulation,” come up in the face of similar questions and concerns in two different approaches and traditions is something at the very least worth noticing.

And I would like to add another dimension of Deleuze’s characterization of fabulation that echoes, in my opinion, the Camille Stories. Fabulation, Deleuze says, occurs through a kind of median voice, a “collective enunciation”: it’s neither the singular voice of an author, nor the already defined voice of purely fictional characters. “Fabulation,” Deleuze writes, “is not an impersonal myth, but neither is it a personal fiction: it is a word in act, a speech-act through which the character continually crosses the boundary which would separate its private business from politics, and which itself produces collective enunciations.”<sup>12</sup> Fabulation happens in between; it doesn’t occur as the myth of a past people, and it certainly doesn’t occur as a positivist assessment. Fabulation refuses both fatalism and escapism in pure fiction. Fabulation is an addition to the reality it deals with – it makes potentialities appear and gives strength to the potentialities it develops. In that regard, I’m wondering if one could say that the Camille Stories are a double fabulation: not only is the text itself a fabulation, but the experiments the five Camilles engage in are also fabulations in their own rights, inventing a median voice between humans and nonhumans, between genders, between peoples, between the living and the dead.

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<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, Trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta, London: Continuum, 1989, p. 217 (Fr: 283); translation modified.

<sup>11</sup> Donna Haraway, *SF: Speculative Fabulation and String Figures*, Kassel, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, p. 222.

And so, as a very short conclusion to my initial question regarding speculative fabulation as a way of thinking and writing for a thick present, I will say this: maybe fabulation as an addition to reality through those median voices is the best way to care for the dead, past and to come, at individual and species levels. Maybe the in-betweenness of that kind of voice is the interstice where the production of knowledge, and the writing of philosophy, can insert itself to contribute to the making of a thick present.