

As we walk the trail together,  
we discover vast galaxies  
of stories, which beg to be  
assembled, told, and shared.

# LESSON 3

## HOW TO TELL A METROPOLIS

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### SUB-CHAPTERS

Introduction: Local Stories

1) A Trail's Narrative Frame

2) Collecting Stories

3) Building Metropolitan  
Narratives

Bonus. Toward a  
“Metropolitan Culture”

Experience: The “Caravan”

Metropolises are connections that come together in stories. All of these stories are the lush material from which a city is made.

Yet most of our narratives at the scale of a metropolis—narratives belonging to the realms of tourism, politics, and the media—are truncated and lacking.

What narrative can encompass the vastness of a metropolis? How do trail routes and narratives intersect? How can we collect the stories of a trail? How should we assemble them? What types of narratives do we mean here? Forgotten grand narratives? Local narratives? Infrastructural narratives? The ordinary stories beneath our maps?

Discovering, assembling, producing narratives: that is what is at the heart of our Academy. Because these narratives document reality, act as learning techniques, and open paths for reinventing our ways of living on Earth.

### ASSIGNMENT

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#### Beginner

Recount a day of walking using images and/or texts, sound, videos, objects, etc.

#### Advanced

Send us the beginning of a narrative at the scale of a metropolis (texts, drawings, photos, videos, sounds, etc.).



# Introduction

## LOCAL STORIES

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### The Narrative Thread

According to French law, route creation is akin to creative production—on the same level as music or writing.

“Establishing hiking routes, though they are made from trail lines, [constitutes] creative output; their originality is drawn from the implementation of geographic, cultural, and human criteria to convey the personality of their author” (French Court of Cassation, June 30, 1998) [\[link\]](#)

Drawing a line in space is already proper to the act of narrative creation. And it gives birth to other narrative acts: travel narratives, stories of traversing a local area, and stories gathered along the way.

### True Stories

Searching for stories from the ecumene (inhabited space) resonates with an organizing principle known as “ecological humanities”.

“We do not need ‘new stories’. (...) The world already has its stories (...). It’s about extending our capacity to tell (...) ‘true stories’”. (Deborah Rose, *Vers des humanités écologiques*, 2004).

### Ordinary Narratives

At a time when grand narratives like “progress” and “nation” seem obsolete, walking is a way to address our questions “from the ground”—that is, from the places where communities live.

“What do you do when your world starts to fall apart? I go for a walk, and if I’m really lucky, I find mushrooms. [...] Then I know that there are still pleasures amidst the terrors of indeterminacy.”

(Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2015)

This investigation into our ordinary landscapes is also an inversion of Modern conceptions of investigation: instead of focusing our attention on alien “premodern” peoples, we turn our gaze onto our own societies in what could be called a “symmetrical anthropology”.

# I) THE TRAIL SHAPE: A NARRATIVE FRAME

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The trail—in its form, selected sites, continuous lines, sequence order—is itself a narrative.

As a narrative frame, the trail is not “thematic”; it does not adhere to a tradition or mode (e.g., the “industrial legacy”, “public housing projects”, “street art”, “water”, “farming”, etc.). All of these themes no doubt appear in the spaces along the trail. Together, they make up the entire world explored by metropolitan trails, which tell the stories of living spaces where things abut and intersect (see part 2).

## How to Build a Narrative Frame

The trail as narrative is necessarily anchored in geography (see lesson 1). It is a story that accounts for the physical shape of a metropolis. This narrative transforms the way we look at the map of a city. It is not univocal but generally ambiguous and polyphonic. This narrative is grounded in and territorializes a landscape. It is inextricably linked to the shape of the trail: it is the shape that tells a story. To the extent that it reflects the morphology of a city, it can be seen as a kind of a posteriori foundational narrative or retrospective manifesto [link to Christine Breton’s oppidum map].

By way of example: The city of Marseille and its motorways unfurl around two main unbuildable areas: the Etang de Berre (a lagoon) and the Etoile and Garlaban massif; Grand Paris reflects two main periods—the petite couronne (small ring) from the nineteenth century and modern cities (industrial suburbs accessible via tramway and, possibly in the future, a sky rail. And: London, a centrifugal spiral, revisits the imperial history of a centripetal monopolization of global resources. And: The network of Sentieri Metropolitaniani in Milan inverts the polarity of desire, unfurling in a centripetal direction (toward the central Duomo) toward the working-class suburbs of a polycentric metropolis.

## Another Narrative

Too fast. The speed at which cities have expanded beyond their walls, in just a few decades, has tended to create a situation in which our foundational urban narratives no longer cohere with the morphological reality—not to mention that local identities tend to emerge at the scale of districts, and the development of a foundational narrative encompassing an entire metropolis is generally neglected.

Too complex. It is difficult to sum up a metropolis. There are too many actors and memories. They form systems that are too complex and hete-

rogenous, embracing simultaneous and sedimented flows. This reality, illegible at first glance, tends to overwhelm us, particularly from the perspective of a motorway.

Attentive to the morphology of a metropolis, the shape of a trail reveals a dominant “narrative decision”. A trail that grasps an entire metropolis—including what goes on behind the scenes—reflecting both its larger scope and finer details, generally provides a counter narrative to the flattering story of the historic city center, which rarely includes aspects of the working class, industrial realities, social conflicts, relations with the surrounding countryside, or energy and logistics questions.

As in a family, a city can rest for years on just a handful of uncontroversial narratives that serve as the basis of its self-asserted identity (and the way it presents itself to the world—its “marketing” of itself). And though these narratives are not false, they are dangerously lacking: they exclude wide swaths of history, forms of urbanity, and communities (and, particularly in France, everything linked to the aftermath of decolonization).

Urban marketing typically showcases the folksy past and promising technological future of a city, foreclosing an honest and federative description of the present or of the legacies of the twentieth century, including the less savory parts, which generally take up a larger share of the urban map. By way of example: Marseille: the Phocaeen city and new Hollywood; Romantic Paris and Europe’s city of light; Boston: City of freedom and world laboratory of technological innovation. One consequence of these idealized narratives is to mask the present reality, exclude specific areas and communities, and alienate areas located outside of the tourist circuit.

Thus, metropolitan trails seek to account for all our shared realities, aiming, through a refusal to perpetuate half-truths and lies, to broker peace within the metropolitan family.

Insofar as it seeks to do justice to the reality of our metropolitan spaces, this narrative frame is a counter narrative. Not necessarily spectacular or ingenious, it should emerge as something obvious—a long-known but forgotten truth. In Marseille, the figure eight around the Mer de Berre and the Massif de l’Etoile tells of connections between the countryside and industry (previously formulated by Jean Renoir, Marcel Pagnol, and even Walter Benjamin in “Hashish in Marseilles” [\[link\]](#)); in Paris, the trilobe between the first couronne and the new cities conveys the demiurgic violence of urban planning and engineering to the area, the environment, and populations; in Athens, the walk through the urban fabric’s expansive ring speaks to a vernacular, polycentric, and densified intelligence, letting the site in all its specificities speak.

The trail’s larger narrative frame is not a summary of the stories gathered along the way. Rather, it is an initial postulate whose impact on the collection and ordering of stories is only relative. There is still considerable freedom when it comes to the types of stories the trail can tell.

## 2) COLLECTING STORIES

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Urban spaces are permeated with traces that become legible through walking. Attentive walking is an investigation. When walking a route, we are constantly confronted with information, landscapes, views, impressions, objects, conversations, local rumors, landmarks, surprises, interpretive signs for heritage sights, micro-events, etc.

Information and narrative gathering happen before, during, and after a day of walking. Before: to anticipate main points of interest. During: because experience always trumps one's initial expectations. And after: to bring depth to the experience or explain less obvious aspects of the trail, etc.

### Rules of Thumb for Collecting Stories

- Some leitmotifs in the relationships held by modern urban societies to space can be particularly interesting. The GR2013 topographical guide provides an example: waters (natural and canalized), industry, twentieth century architecture and infrastructure, biotopes (natural or human made). [[link to GR2013 topographical guide](#)].

- Story gathering tends to be particularly fruitful at the scale of towns. In Europe, this is a historically stable territorial and administrative unit with a robust social identity (even if it has been refracted into neighborhood identities). Stories can be oral and gathered from local sources. Look to city departments (archives) for written stories. [[Borruey link](#)]

- Stories can be gleaned from encounters in the field as well as: in libraries, archives, online.

- Mapping stories can be interesting, particularly to see the emergence of narrative peaks and valleys—areas either seeping or lacking in stories.

Some methods of story gathering can themselves generate or reinforce a city's dynamics. (see lesson 2)

### A Story Factory

To walk along a metropolitan trail is also to generate new stories. Drawing a line on a map, then traversing over the physical space: that is a story machine. This practice already exists in natural and rural areas, but it has disappeared from urban contexts.

Metropolitan trail walkers traverse an area, drawing a line each day that itself serves as a narrative from its point of departure to its destination. The narrative of each day's stage will be shared with the city dwellers whom the walker encounters along the way.

### 3) BUILDING METROPOLITAN NARRATIVES

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Once walkers return home, or perhaps a few days later, they will spontaneously want to recount their experiences in these known but unfamiliar places. They will start to string together different episodes. As with any successful journey, there is a spontaneous desire to recollect. Walkers will want to share what they have learned.

The phase preceding collection during the walks is a fairly free and potentially endless process. After a time, the quantity of information gathered will start to make the walker into something of an “authority”—someone who can become capable, not simply of recounting a handful of random anecdotes, but of developing an original and detailed account of vast territories that defy easy readings.

The act of synthesizing knowledge is something to be addressed within walking communities. The narrative frame and bevy of anecdotes gleaned along the trail can make it tempting to provide a new unified narrative of the metropolitan territory; at the same time, however, the shift to the scale of the metropolis runs the two-fold risk of being at once too generous and too debatable. Alternating between different narrative scales is important: from the micro-level (the sluice to an irrigation canal, a fetid millipede under a motorway deck, a bridge abutment that has disappeared, the trace left by plants pushed against a cement wall by the wind, a half-visible letter found at the foot of a prison, a park bench, the pattern of cobblestones on the ground, etc.) to the scale of large infrastructure (large rail equipment, canals, high-speed railways, aqueducts, airports, etc.), and including local narratives.

Efforts to shy away from the risk at stake in telling a metropolitan narrative would be to limit oneself to compiling an endless list of anecdotes. Like biographers who succeed in telling a life story from an infinite number of events, we can try to tell the story of a metropolis. Of course, a metropolitan narrative is always up for debate and can be juxtaposed with other narratives.

The art of the metropolitan narrative is to identify what, among the local landscape of narratives (particularly at the municipal level), can serve as narrative fodder (see lesson 5).

To encourage the emergence of “constellations” that can be used to organize larger metropolitan narratives [[1001 Nuits link](#)], the “short” form is often interesting [[Grande Caravane and Guide du Grand Paris links](#)].

To build a metropolitan narrative, you can also work within the constraints of a given medium (the shape and limits of a book, film, exhibit, or sound recording). This will help guide you in your efforts to constitute an honest and functional presentation of your body of narratives.

## Bonus

# TOWARD A “METROPOLITAN CULTURE”

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Metropolitan dwellers are rarely familiar with the entire urban territory in which they live. The experience of metropolitan walking is often described in terms of local “literacy building”.

Building a metropolitan narrative fosters a “metropolitan culture”—a tripartite kind of knowledge:

- the precise knowledge of a particular territory (metropolitan “local authority” type)
- a level of literacy in different knowledge domains and different sectors (history, geography, architecture, urbanism, landscape, botanical, ecological, heritage, modern art, etc.)
- a grasp of different metropolises as a means of seeing their shared traits and unique characteristics.

## Experience : the “Caravan”

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At the intersection between “walking conversations” (lesson 2) and polyphonic narratives (lesson 4), we can create a protocol for producing narratives to further support trail creation.

The “Caravan” is a way of organizing collective walks, with authorities (illustrators, journalists, photographers, sound producers) contributing to a series of meetings and providing in situ remarks throughout the day. This encourages 1) the emergence of walking communities, 2) the creation of binding ties with the places visited, 3) the direct and collective gathering of narratives, 4) the ability to recollect.

The person organizing these group expeditions is a kind of mediator or director whose task is to give voice to territories, local actors, visitors, and future story tellers along the trail and over the course of the day.

Another advantage of this type of tool is that it lends itself to a variety of communication outlets: radio, newspaper, books, exhibits, blogs, podcasts.

Ex. Caravan2013: an initiative to build a narrative for the opening of the GR2013 (under Alexandre Field’s leadership for CAUE13). La Grande Caravane: an initiative by AF, PHL, BL... for the Grand Paris trail scouting missions.

Ex. “Festival delle Metropoli” in Milan, 2017: attendees, musicians, artists, workers, architects, performers, and passersby gathered and shared stories along the metropolitan trails.