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A conversation with
Lauren Bastide (La Poudre)
about women

My phone rings. The name of Lauren Bastide appears on the screen. It seems surreal. It's quite unusual to interview a journalist. This woman is incredibly inspiring and her dedicated battle necessary. Stress appears. I pick up the phone to hear the friendly voice I usually listen to in podcasts: «Bonjour, c'est Lauren».

- TM Before we delve into the heart of the interview, could you briefly introduce «La Poudre» (the powder) to our audience? When and why did you start this podcast?
- LB I started «La Poudre» two years ago. I was searching to create a space where women's voice could be raised and spread without being interrupted, cut off or stereotyped. I needed to create a real space of free speech—into the public space. As a journalist, I understood that it was not an easy thing for women to speak up in the traditional media. So the podcast was a really good tool for that. «La Poudre» in French can have many different meanings. That was what I wanted with this title. It had to be very intriguing. I wanted to show that there isn't such a thing as «the» woman. There are women. In my case, it could be the powder you use for makeup but it could also be the one you use for war. I like to think I am somewhere in the middle of these two.
- TM In a speech you gave during the celebration of the two years of «La Poudre», you said that the more radical you were, the more your guests were, and the more people listened to your podcasts. What does it actually mean to be radical? And what kind of audience are you targeting with this discourse?
- LB When you ask which public I am targeting, I want to answer no specific one. I think that's one of the reasons why «La Poudre» worked so well. I was just trying to create a journalistic object that was authentic, that I wanted to hear and see, that I thought needed to exist. I didn't pay attention to trends and I didn't expect it to reach and be heard by so many people. When I started the podcast I was also deepening my interests in feminism. It has been a journey for me, too. During those two years I met so many people, read so many books, and went back to university, where I graduated in Gender Studies. My own ideas about feminism became more and more precise and I felt the urge to put forward activists who share the same vision as I do. I wanted those ideas to spread. So maybe there are some guests I invited in my program that would never have such an audience in the traditional media. For instance, if you invite someone that is anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist in a TV show in France, you would probably have a person who is a nationalist and a capitalist on the other side of the table, in order to balance. So maybe what I mean by radical is this. It's that I am not afraid to give an hour of speech to someone who—I guess—carries ideas that are revolutionary.
- TM You also describe yourself as a feminist activist. For some people the understanding of those words might be biased. What does this mean to you?
- LB I guess an activist is a person who dedicates her life to political ideas and fights. An activist is also a kind of idealist because it's someone who means to change the world. I think it's a beautiful word. I don't believe it's scary at all. It just proves that some people are still full of hope.
- TM And what do you aim for?
- LB I aim for an equality of rights for men and women. My main concern is probably an equal sharing of the public space, may it be the physical one, like in the city where women and men don't and can't occupy space the same way, or the immaterial one, which is art, media, culture, and knowledge. I really want women to be able to spread their thoughts, their work, and their writings as easily as men.
- TM During a round table you organized with some peers at the «Podcast Festival» in la Gaîté Lyrique, the tool of podcast was mentioned as a safe space to express yourselves. Why is it important to have this kind of space, mentally and physically?
- LB When you look at the history of the feminist movement, you understand that a clear feminist idea cannot be expressed if you are not in a safe space of only women. In the seventies, the first ideas came up after women gathered and talked about contraception, abortion, rape, sexual freedom and so on. A safe space is necessary for ideas to be shared and expressed. But it is very hard to do it, if you have someone

- in the room constantly looking for confrontation. It has some likeness to the feature of the TV show. There should be some debates in society, I totally agree. But there should also be moments where spaces are created for ideas to be raised.
- TM So actually the physically safe space creates the mental one.
- LB Yes, exactly.
- TM To continue with this topic, at the end of your interviews in «La Poudre», referring to Virginia Woolf, you always ask your guests if they have «A Room of their Own». Could you explain this concept to us?
- LB This book—«A Room of One's Own»—has really been an important turn for me. Virginia Woolf is making this link you were talking about between physical and mental space. She starts with the acknowledgment that when you go to a library and look at the books, you are going to see that so many are written by men but so few by women. She tries to figure out why, and then understands that it's impossible for anyone to write a book, if you don't have time, space and money. So she arrives at the conclusion that the reason why women didn't write as many books as men is because they were never given this space, this time and this money. For a woman to be able to produce knowledge, to be heard and to give something that is going to live on in history, she really needs to have a room of her own. A room of her own is also a place where she isn't bothered by a husband or kids coming to ask for dinner. It's about «charge mentale». It's this invisible mental workload that a woman gets within the household. It's a concept that has been developed lately, thanks to the work of French cartoonist Emma whom I interviewed in «La Poudre». Her work also helped me understand what I was going through as a woman.
- TM And do you have yours?
- LB I think «La Poudre» is really my «Room of One's Own». It's the space I created for myself, where I could do my work as a journalist in the very exact way I want it to be done.
- TM Your work is very inspiring. You are collecting fragments of knowledge and experience coming from a multitude of great women. With that, you give birth to a collective powerful voice. This living archive of role models you created is having a strong impact on your audience, especially on young women. Are you aware of that?
- LB I am becoming more and more aware of that and it's actually very overwhelming. I receive so many testimonies of young women writing me e-mails or messages on the social media. They would even stop me in the street to thank me for the podcast. It makes me so happy, because what I want is to spread knowledge and I think that the empowerment everybody is feeling is just knowledge and understanding. It only comes from that. I feel really humbled too, because it's not my work that gives this feeling. I am just shining the light on the work of other women, whose incredible books and movies empowered me as well. But yes I am very proud to know that it's working. It's amazing to know that many women have felt the urge to create their own space, their own room, their own narrative. That I inspired them to do so, is really heart-warming. But it's also a very big responsibility. Sometimes it can even be a bit tiring, because I don't want to disappoint people. It makes me feel like not being authorized to quit. I have to go on.
- TM In the architectural department of our university they recently started to compile a list of women experts. The idea is to have names to refer to. Because otherwise we tend to only contact men. No names of women—although they do exist—come to our minds naturally. It made me think of your radio program «Les Savantes».
- LB Yes it is indeed harder to have a woman expert to talk in the media. It is one of my main battles as a journalist. When you try to interview women experts, very often they are beginning by saying: «Oh, are you sure I am the right person? Don't you think you should maybe call my boss or this other male colleague who worked on this, too?». There is a sense of depreciation. It's always harder for a woman to trust herself and to speak out loud. I am the first one to do that. I am very often invited to participate in debates in radio or TV shows and I always say no, which I actually shouldn't be doing. I always think that someone else would be better than me to talk. That's a feeling men experts don't really experience. When you ask for their opinion, they just give it. Moreover, women experts are often moms, and as I was telling you with the mental workload, it's more complicated to get them to come for a TV show at night, for example, because they might have to take care of the kids. They are also often less paid and have to deal with more precariousness, so it's more complicated to ask them to do something for free. Getting a woman expert to contribute to an article, take part in a panel or in a conference requires for a bit more efforts. You have to convince

her. You have to make sure the conditions are favourable for her. I think it's also part of the job as a journalist or an event-planner. We should take those elements into consideration before saying: «Oh, there were no women available».

TM To come back to the topic of the podcast, do you think that this will be the new platform able to revolutionize the world?

LB Oh, I wish! I wish it was, I am not sure it's going to be enough. Our decision makers have to do something. I am not really comfortable with the idea that we have to change the world ourselves as citizens. There has to be public policies. Anyway, I think that podcasts still are really powerful, because they are probably the best way to spread knowledge right now. When you listen to a podcast, you always end up following someone you never heard of before on the social media, you end up buying a book you didn't know, or reading something on the internet you want to find out more about. I think that's the power of the podcast. There are very few media that give you the urge to learn more, know more, search more, and this is power. Knowledge is power. I didn't invent that one, but I think it's really key, especially when you talk about feminism. There is this sentence from feminist artist called Judy Chicago, who said that every time a woman begins something, a new work, she has the feeling that she has to build everything from the start. She is not aware that women before her have done something similar, but that their work got erased, just like a sandcastle by the waves. I think that when you put the knowledge into people's minds, or in an archive, as you said this podcast is, you make sure that it is not going to be lost and that women are going to build on it, instead of starting over and over again. That could be a good start for a revolution.

TM You said that a change would need public policies. Do you have an example?

LB Well, there are so many things the government could act on. Violence against women, for instance, is still a huge issue. There is no money to fight this, even though it's possible. If the government decided to put, I don't know, 300 million euros into fighting against rape and women violence, that would really change things. Instead of that, they let the associations struggle with their very small means. Basically, it's just about money.

TM What could money bring?

LB Money could be used to train public servants at the police station, in the hospital, or in the

social-worker spaces to detect violence, give an appropriate answer to it and transform these places into safe spaces for women. Someone who's trained is going to be able—for example—to notice that a woman is a victim of violence. They are going to tell her the right words and give her the right answers. Instead of that, when a woman goes to a police station because she has been a victim of rape or domestic violence, the answers she is getting are not helping. Most of the time it's the opposite. You know, there is this example given by the French feminist activist Caroline de Haas who started the #Noustoutes movement. At some point, when the government wanted to fight for safety on roads, there was a lot of money invested to run campaigns, raise the number of controls, have better lighting and so on. It takes an investment. Society is not going to change by itself. There has to be a very strong political effort to make a real difference.

TM How did you get empowered yourself? What were the important moments on your journey?

LB I think age helps, you know (laughing). When I was 25 or even 30 I had no self-confidence and was always searching for other people's approbation. I believe that the knowledge coming from maturity and time helps a lot. Failure does, too. After working 10 years for «ELLE», I had to leave because things were not going right with the direction of the magazine. I was not understood. I could not do my work as I wanted to and I failed to convince. It was hard. Then I went on television for a year and it was another failure. I wasn't good at this exercise, I was really unhappy. I created «La Poudre» out of this. I created it at some point where I was like: «Ok, no one is going to help me, so I will have to help myself». I guess it's a good lesson to learn. Sometimes when you feel alone, angry and powerless, the strength comes from deep inside yourself and not from the outside.

TM Is there something that always accompanies you along the way?

LB I guess I always take my decisions according to my values. I think it is really important. It makes me say no most of the time, much more than I say yes. But it's the way I work and behave. That's how I have done things for the last two years. If I have this tiniest feeling that the offer I am made is not exactly aligned with my values, I don't do it.

TM At the beginning of your interviews, you always ask your guests what their childhood was like. How important do you think is the state of youth, in the formation of one's identity?

LB What I am trying to show in «La Poudre» is also that anything can come out from any path. Some women I interviewed have backgrounds, family histories and an education that are fundamentally different, and still, they all became those major artists, creators or activists. I don't believe in determination, but I think it's always fascinating to remember that the woman you have in front of you was a little girl at some point. Maybe the thing you were asking me earlier about why all those young women feel so empowered with «La Poudre», is linked to the fact that talking about someone's childhood is like turning anyone into a human. It's making them accessible.

TM Do you actually have a role model?

LB I am very inspired by this journalist from the beginning of the 20th century, called Marguerite Durand. She was quite a woman. She is not really a role model, but I identify a lot with her. You know... She was blonde. She started as an actress. She was probably perceived as a superficial person when she was a young woman. But she was extremely clever. She met very important people, started reading many books, and got to understand a lot about feminism. At some point in 1916 she decided to create a newspaper called «La Fronde». It was a feminist daily. She ran it for six years. She struggled all the time to get the money to do it, but it worked. She only had women working with her. I actually created «La Poudre» exactly one-hundred years after she created «La Fronde». At that time I had never heard of her. I only found out about her later and it was quite a shock for me. I was like: «Oh my God, that's old me! That's 100-year-old me!»

TM Did you meet her in person?

LB No, she died a long time ago. She gave her name to a library. It's the only feminist library in France, a very important place in Paris where they keep all the documentation about women and feminism. There you can find the letters that were written by Colette, or the thesis of the very first women who went to university. Last year it was about to close. Paris City Hall wanted to move it and put it somewhere else. When I found out about this I got really scared, so I helped organise a demonstration to protect the library. That's how I discovered that Marguerite Durand existed.

TM Is the library still open?

LB Yes, we managed to protect it. Actually, there is an episode of «La Poudre» about this. I love history and nothing makes me feel better than knowing that some women have done what I am doing today, before my time. It helps me a lot to find strength in the past.

Lauren Bastide is a journalist and feminist activist based in Paris. After graduating in political science and journalism, she worked at French «ELLE» magazine for ten years, as a reporter and as a news chief editor. In 2016, after a year as a columnist on a daily national TV show, she launched the pioneer podcast studio «Nouvelles Écoutes», co-founded with Julien Neuville, and her own podcast «La Poudre». She also hosts a public radio show «Les Savantes», in which she interviews women scientists about their research. In 2018 she graduated in Gender Studies and was named the spokesperson of women journalist association «Prenons la Une».