

VOICES OF A FORGOTTEN NETWORK: English Transcript

Podpoems by Nadim Mishlawi

PODPOEM 01: THE RIVER (Listen [here](#))

Featuring voices by George Tohme (botanist), Adib Dada (architect, forest-maker and environmental activist), Vatche Boulghourian (filmmaker reading an excerpt from Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness), including sound recordings in the Beirut River

Vatche Boulghourian

(filmmaker reading an excerpt from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*):

"Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings."

George Tohme (botanist), translated from Arabic:

Are plants intelligent? I gave a lecture with that title. A lot of newspapers wrote about it. It was December 2013. They used to grow olive trees and apple trees in our village. Apple trees were cheaper. We then had to vaccinate them. But before that we noticed a kind of worm infecting the trees which stunted their growth. There were about ten apple trees, two of which had these worms in them. We got a specific tool to extract the worms. The other trees continued growing. But the two infected trees produced apples in three years instead of four years like the rest. This is a kind of self-defense. The weaker trees couldn't grow but they needed to bear fruit before they died. I gave different examples with images I had taken myself...

Vatche Boulghourian

(filmmaker reading an excerpt from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*):

"An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sand-banks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps."

Adib Dada (architect, forest-maker & environmental activist), translated from Arabic:

In 1962 the river of Beirut was encased in concrete. According to my research, in the 60's the Abu Ali river in Tripoli would flood and there were more than a hundred casualties as a result. They encased the river in concrete and then did the same thing to the Beirut River, based on the studies of the Abu Ali River in Tripoli.

In my personal view, these projects of infrastructure generate a lot of profit. They make the projects bigger even if it's unnecessary. It's like the dam project which is known to be ineffective. In the end, the river was encased in concrete, but the problem wasn't solved. I don't know if I'm

right, but it's like all the projects here, the construction of new roads for example. They are never studied well.

They now dump garbage and toxic industrial waste into the river. There is also the Beit Meri dump which is now going into the river. We have around 30 municipalities dumping their garbage. Even in the natural parts of the river. At some point you hear the sound of a waterfall. The closer you get, the stronger the smell. And then you see a black waterfall pouring into the river, untreated sewage which reaches the river.

The mouth of the river is usually very fertile because the ecological systems of the river and the sea meet. The sea water and fresh water meet and create a very fertile area with its own plants and animals. This has obviously disappeared. There is another problem. Some years ago, the river flooded above the concrete because of the bottleneck that the concrete causes at the bottom.

George Tohme (botanist), translated from Arabic:

The planting of Eucalyptus trees was popular in the 19th century to prevent malaria. Specifically in areas near water. They said the trees would absorb the water preventing the mosquitoes from laying eggs and becoming dangerous. They started calling the Eucalyptus *Keena*, which is a kind of medicine used to treat malaria. In 1961, there was not one case of malaria in Lebanon.

Vatche Boulghourian

(filmmaker reading an excerpt from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*):

"There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare for yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect."

PODPOEM 02: MUSHROOMS (Listen [here](#))

Featuring voices by Romy Azar (biologist), Rana Eid (sound designer), Muriel Kahwagi (writer) and Greg Burris (writer)

Romy Azar (biologist):

A mushroom is the reproductive structure of fungi. So people tend to intertwine the definition between fungi and mushrooms. And this fruiting body or fruit, the mushroom, will produce millions of spores, not seeds as fruit does. Ok, and those spores are present in gills or pores in an undercap or inside the mushroom. When those spores land on a certain substrate like wood or soil, they will germinate and they will form an underground network of microscopic roots that we call hyphae in the scientific world, but we mostly call it mycelium. We can see the mushroom above the ground, this is the only entity that we can actually see, but underground we have a huge web that we call the mycelium, which is the bigger body that we cannot actually see. So we might be walking everywhere not seeing anything, but we have a whole world under our feet without even knowing. But we know that they exist, just by seeing the fruiting of it, which is the mushroom.

Rana Eid (sound designer), translated from Arabic:

There is an expression in Arabic I really like which is, “Why are you digging up graves?” For example, if you and I are arguing and I say, “Remember a year ago...” You would say, “Why are you digging? What’s wrong? It’s in the past.” So today people are asking, “Why are you digging?” It’s taboo. It’s forbidden. But I say, “Yes we need to dig up the graves in order to understand and to solve our problems.” You have to exhume the dead and rebury them justly and correctly. We now have the “culture of the underground.” People want to hide things. And if you go underground it’s taboo. Because the dignity of the dead is in their burial. You’re digging because the martyrs are underground. But you have to dig in order to solve the problem.

Muriel Kahwagi (writer), translated from Arabic:

I remember that day very well because there was an exhibit opening at the Sursouk Museum, where I worked at the time. I remember we were working late. My friend and I, and a lot of other people. And then we heard that something was going on but we didn’t understand what. Then we heard that people were closing the roads and that we should probably leave because we didn’t know exactly what was going to happen. I had parked my car close by, but we couldn’t find a taxi to drop us off. There was an atmosphere of tension. Eventually we found a taxi to drop everyone home.

Then the next day we woke up and found the country in chaos. They sent us a message from work telling us to stay home because the roads were closed and we wouldn’t be able to get to work. I didn’t end up going to Beirut for several days. The first four or five days, I didn’t take part in any protests because I was home due to the roads being closed, and I was scared of going without knowing how or if I could get back. And then, one day, I finally decided that I wanted to take part. We weren’t the ones closing the roads. We weren’t at “The Ring Road.” This was during the first week. At the beginning people were protesting against corruption and the system. We knew what was happening but not the details. We just wanted to be part of it. We

didn't really know too much and that's why we were able to take part. If we knew from the beginning that there was going to be so much violence from the army and security forces, or that no one was going to listen to us, we might not have protested. But because we didn't know, there was such motivation and everyone wanted to be there to protest.

Greg Burris (writer):

I don't know that we can give a sociological definition to revolution. We pretend that we can, like it's some scientific thing. But every revolution is so radically different that I think it's unfair to say "this is a revolution, this is not a revolution". I mean, even the Arab Spring or whatever you wanna call it, at this point we've critiqued it to death, but there, even if you disagreed with some of the class element or disagreed with some of the paths they took and some of the strategies, there was something underground that mushroomed, this revolutionary kind of consciousness that "hey, we've spent our life, and parents' lives and our grandparents' lives being told that the status quo is the only option; and out of nowhere, people are saying "no, it's not the only option, we're gonna fight it". Now did it go in different directions that we criticize? Sure. But there is a revolutionary impulse there that I don't think we should throw out. And that's true across the board. That's true whether we're talking about Haitian revolution, or whether we're talking about Beirut's attempt at a revolution in 2019.

Romy Azar (biologist):

Fungi are usually associated with negative emotions or a certain negativity because they are associated to decay and death, and that's why people, when we say fungi or when we say there is mould growing [mould is a kind of fungi] in my house, it has a bad connotation. If we did not have fungi here that would decompose dead material we would not be able to continue our life because we would have lots of organic material just staying here on earth without being degraded, and without going back to the mineral state.

Rana Eid (sound designer), translated from Arabic:

In my view, what's happening in the Arab World today is not a revolution or protest or anything like that. I consider it as part of the system which needs a good cop and bad cop. It's the same system that decides when and where to create uprisings. This is no longer the 1960s. And I was one of the people who thought that revolutions can change things in the world. Of course I don't want to delegitimize revolutions around the world. But I'm talking about the Arab World today in which the greater system needs to change, a system that they are all part of. This is a repositioning of the things they do. So let the people protest and then we will change things the way we want to later. It's like brainwashing by keeping people in a state of euphoria. You let people believe that they are doing something useful by using social media which lets people feel like they are succeeding. You think you've liberated the world by pressing "like." This is the stupidity of today. And this is why we can't create new regimes. If you accept that this is the situation, you *might* be able to change things.

Greg Burris (writer):

My experience in going down and watching the Beirut protests in 2019, it was the closest thing I ever felt to an acid trip or a mushroom trip, while not being on psychedelics; I was completely

sober. But you just look around and just this collective enthusiasm is a revolution in the air, and that jubilation, that experiment, that free thinking it just kind of bleeds into everything, that everything is possible. Old forms of what is acceptable, what's polite, what kind of behaviour you should have in certain circumstances falls apart, just as we overthrow the authority of our dictators, we also overthrow the authority of daily behaviour.

Muriel Kahwagi (writer), translated from Arabic:

These things take time and it's important for us to remain defiant. The problem is you can't continue being defiant if nothing is improving or changing, or if our perception isn't changing. I think what affected people was how much violence there was from the army and security forces. I know a lot of people who were injured because of the rubber bullets. It was no joke. It didn't bother us at the beginning, but then we find our bodies themselves in danger. If you want a public movement you need a lot of bodies to be present. But our bodies were in danger. I too was injured. Everyone I know was affected. When you know that it's dangerous, you think twice before joining the protests. When you know there will be shooting and fighting. There were reports from MSF about the kinds of bullets being used. And these things should not have been used. They were trying to kill us.

Romy Azar (biologist):

Everyone knows that we have bacteria living on our skin, but we also have fungi that live in our body, on our skin, etc, in our lungs. Mostly those species that live on us, they come from species that were present before or are still present in our environment, but they just developed more genetically so that they can actually live on us. They need to feed on something, so they will feed on something that we secrete or that we have.

So when we ingest those psychedelics those compounds enter our body and they interact without our body in a certain way that makes us, you know, feel the air and see things that we don't usually see or feel things that we don't usually feel. Those compounds that are contained in such mushrooms, they're exactly like when we take a certain drug. Some species are used to heal you or to make you feel things, like psychedelics, or see things differently. And lately, in America for example, they're using psychedelics in medical research to heal certain people, heal anxiety, reduce stuttering, etc. So it's really interesting to discover and not fear any subject that we don't know.

Greg Burris (writer):

What psychedelics do is that they allow you to see the world with fresh eyes. And so all the structures and institutions and just, habit, social habits that we have been taught and that we've come to accept as truth, they dissipate. You look at the world with fresh eyes when you're on psychedelics, mushrooms or acid. You look at the stars and they're beautiful like never before, but you also look at institutions, nationalism, the family, the church, the universe, everything, as a result of this kind of eye-opening, inner eye-opening of psychedelics. It can lead, quite naturally I think or quite easily, to things like the countercultural revolution, overthrowing the military, rethinking gender conformity and gender roles, rethinking race relations, rethinking

imperialism. It's not an automatic link nor do you have to be on psychedelics to make those connections, but there is a way in which they can exist hand in hand.

Muriel Kahwagi (writer), translated from Arabic:

You don't have authorities dealing with anything. All the efforts are bottom-up, in reverse. They all start with the people trying to improve things. Like after the explosion. It was the people themselves. There was no help. It's like we are a society that knows how to keep things moving. We've gotten used to it because there was never another option. If you want to live, you have to be self-reliant, find solutions, and find people to collaborate with. And then things work.

Rana Eid (sound designer), translated from Arabic:

With a successful revolution, you have to consider years ahead. What did we do? The problem is we don't know how to progress. I don't want to sound like a Marxist, but the only thing that is progressing is capitalism. You went home and changed your clothes. But did you really change the way you present yourself to society? No. Where did the Bolshevik Revolution end up?

Greg Burris (writer):

Revolution is just people rejecting the script that's been written for them, and acting in ways other than they've been told to act. An act of defiance or an act of imagination, you know showing that there are different ways of conceiving the world and different ways of behaving in the world. And that's true of political revolution, that's true for the revolution of language and revolutions of consciousness, in which we learn to act, behave and imagine in ways that previously had never been allowed or even, you know, thought possible.

PODPOEM 03: BORJ HAMMOUD (Listen [here](#))

Featuring voices by Nadim Mishlawi (composer and filmmaker), Vatche Boulghourian (filmmaker) and Edward Said (writer)

Vatche Boulghourian (filmmaker):

I heard this story from my eldest uncle, accidentally, while he was telling another story. This was the part that stood out for me. It involved my grandfather and his mother. They were the only survivors of their family after the Armenian Genocide of 1915. They'd marched from their home in central Anatolia to Aleppo, Syria. After spending a few years there, they were told to board a crowded train operated by the French Army transporting Armenians to Beirut. Nearly half a day later they finally arrived at this nondescript location by the coast and were told to pile out in what seemed like the middle of nowhere, with not a soul in sight, no one to greet them or tell them where to go or what to do. And in a place where they didn't speak the language. They were all from a mountainous region in Anatolia and spoke Turkish or a dialect of Armenian. Some, including my grandfather, had never seen the sea until then. So this group of people stood there, completely bewildered, by the train tracks, hour upon hour, not knowing what to do, unable to decide what step to take next, and terrified of what fate may yet have in store for them. Beyond the tracks there was a vast swamp land. And in the other direction, between them and the sea, a few structures, what looked like barracks. It was actually the quarantine area, primarily for livestock, sometimes for people. In this case no one was telling them to go there either. It was from there that this group of refugees slowly began moving to that swamp land across from the train tracks. Apparently at the time, that area was called Jisr Mourad, or "Mourad's Bridge," after the old bridge that linked the two banks of the Beirut River. But later it was later to be called Borj Hammoud, where most Armenians ended up in the early 20th century.

Huddled there by the train tracks, quietly waiting for a sign or instructions, too afraid to venture anywhere themselves, they finally see something. A Model-T Ford, puttering down the road parallel to the trains tracks. The distinguished looking driver, upon seeing this group of people, stops his car and gets out. He asks them a few questions, but switches to Turkish when he realizes they don't understand a word of Arabic. Of course he spoke Turkish because it was the lingua franca in the Middle East at the time. Realizing that they were refugees and genocide survivors, he takes pity. He gives them directions to a location where he could help and tells them not to be afraid. So my grandfather and his mother marched with hundreds of other people to this location in Beirut – an open field with a few large hangars. It turned out that this man was the representative of the newly established Ford company office in the region. He had instructed his employees to empty one of the hangars so that he could offer it to the refugees. He told the refugees that that they could stay there, on his property, until they could find their footing in the new land.

Edward Said (writer):

Well you know, I think what was implied was that there really aren't any conditions for laying down one's spear. One goes on till it's no longer possible. But I'm an aficionado of lost causes. And I think no cause is lost until one loses consciousness. And I really believe that, that it's all in

the mind. I think a lot of it, if not all, is in the mind. And that the conditions for struggle are always right and always there so long as one can think. And thinking itself is an act of resistance, properly speaking. So that's what I take out of that, the final passage of Moby Dick. And in a way it seems to me to be symbolic of these relictuals' vocation, not to rest when you reach the promised land, because there isn't a promised land really, there's just another phase in the struggle.

Vatche Boulgourian (filmmaker):

My grandparents from the other side of my family, from my father's side, had travelled all across cities in the Middle East trying to find a place to settle until they finally arrived to Borj Hammoud. But with the rise of Malaria in the swamps, my grandmother lost three children. So they decided to move to the mountains nearby and that's where they lived for the rest of their lives. The French Army later planted Eucalyptus trees all around the area to absorb the swamp water, and therefore the reduce the number of illnesses. It actually worked. Many of those towering trees still stand to this day, but they're invisible to most inhabitants of the city. They've grown accustomed to seeing these trees as part of their urban jungle. Usually no matter how tragic the circumstances, my family, my extended family of aunts and uncles would tell and retell stories in a way that would make them laugh. By laugh, I mean loud bouts of collective laughter that made you feel like the walls were trembling. So it;s no wonder that I'd never heard this story. There was nothing particularly eventful about it, nothing funny or that could be made funny. It was just a transitional incident. Nothing spectacular. Nothing they could weave into a tale of endless entertainment for themselves. But somehow it struck me. But my grandfather and his mother stayed in Borj Hammoud, eventually built a home there, and started a family. The very same family of boisterous storytellers. My mother was born there. After having lost their family, their land, and years of wandering, they were content to have made a new home in a community where they felt safe, safe enough to settle and build a future. My grandfather remained indebted to the man in the Model-T Ford, who, in a moment of pure compassion, responded with an act of kindness that saved hundreds of lives. He didn't have to do anything. I doubt he expected any recognition. But a few survivors never forgot, and three generations later this "unspectacular" story can still be told.