



Caribbean Technopoetics: Episode 00

Yulcef

Merhi



CARIBBEAN TECHNOPOETICS
EPISODE 00

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The following year, the Department decided to support the second phase of the project, which focused

on post-production of the interviews, subtitling, and the development of a web archive hosted on GitHub. The archive provides access to the complete bilingual episodes (English-Spanish), the posters designed to establish the visual identity of the video capsules, PDF editions in both English and Spanish, and links to access the podcast on YouTube and Spotify.

The publication and archive are part of an ongoing research project on Caribbean techno-poetics and seek to contribute to the documentation, circulation, and preservation of these artistic and literary practices.



CARIBBEAN TECHNOPOETICS THE PODCAST

Translation by Nicolás Gerardi Rousset

CARIBBEAN *TECHNOPOETICS*
EPISODE 00

YUCEF MERHI
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CARIBBEAN TECHNOPOETICS EPI- SODE 00_YUCEF MERHI

Conventions: titles of works and publications, personal names, and historical movements or events are set in italics; dates are set in bold. Speaker turns are marked NGR (Nicolás Gerardi Rousset) and YM (Yucef Merhi). The text has been edited from the episode transcript: fillers, repetitions and false starts were removed, and names and facts corrected, while preserving the meaning and the voice of each speaker.

NGR. *Welcome: this is Caribbean Technopoetics, a bilingual podcast devoted to studying that space where poetry, technology and art meet. Today we have a very special guest, Yucef Merhi.*

Yucef Merhi was born in Caracas, Venezuela —on our only spaceship, planet Earth— and since the mid-1980s he has explored the possibility of using computers and digital technologies to generate ideas, language and poetry, and, through that poetry, to reach a kind of intelligence. His work is defined by a constant search for a correlation —a balance— between the medium, the message and the symbol; that search is part of a series called Perfect Language.

YUCEF MERHI

Over the years, Yucef has built a body of work in which writing and poetic procedures shape the relationship he establishes with digital devices, producing texts that are at once works of art and, in a way, oracles.

With that introduction, let's begin.

Thank you so much for giving your time to this space, Yucef. The first thing I want to ask is how you came to poetry and how you came to technology. See if you can give us some markers in time: at what age, how the relationship began, how you first ventured into the exploration of techno-poetics.

YM. They are almost simultaneous

processes, and they happen at a very early age. I must have been seven or eight when I began to dig deeply —through play, through experimentation— into both creative spaces.

In the case of technology, I grew up surrounded by electronic components and toys. My father was the person who designed the telecommunications system of the Caracas metro, and I had the experience of being with him at the operations center, watching him use the *mainframes* with magnetic tapes, the punch cards, watching him solder. Seeing him in action inevitably had

an effect on my perception. At the same time, I wanted to communicate with the machines: watching them, I thought they were responding to the stimulus, the *input* I was feeding in. I wasn't interested only in playing with them, but in establishing a communication.

With poetry it was parallel: in the house library there were volumes by authors such as *Andrés Bello* and *Vicente Gerbasi*, among others. Those two currents came together and gave rise to ideas and concepts; from there, installations and devices began to appear that opened up another way of thinking

about technology and another way of thinking about literature. At seven, I was lucky enough to receive an *Atari 2600* as a birthday gift from an uncle. From that moment I began not just to play endlessly, but to experiment with it. And I discovered it could be programmed, using a keyboard I had built myself—handmade, homemade—that I could connect to the console. Once I started programming, a series of projects emerged: I developed programmed films in which geometric characters appear that, when they meet, produce music, texts, binary code. From there a

group of works took shape, focused on visualizing and transforming natural language, programming language and visual language into one another.

The *Atari* also gave me a frame of reference for what real time is: everything being produced in that moment was being processed in that moment. It wasn't a recording, nor code defined in advance inside the machine; I was activating processes that transformed precisely as the viewer watched them. That relationship with real time —which *Paul Virilio* has also described, speaking of the impact real time has on

contemporary life— gave me a basis for working with literature, with language, and with the understanding of what language can be in another way.

NGR. *At what point do you begin to use the Atari as a blank page? I'm especially interested in two experiences I find key to understanding this digital writing, this techno-writing: the project Justicia and then Super Atari Poetry—the piece acquired by the MoMA—, with its capacity to mix thousands of phrases, colors and poems to generate thousands of meanings. To return to the question: at seven you are forming new*

connections, realizing that the word turns into light, electricity and image, and that there is a real, living time inside the electronic process that generates those words in space. At what point do you decide that the Atari will be one of the cornerstones of your writing?

YM. It wasn't a conscious decision, but an unconscious, organic, intuitive one. It's not something I set out to do: it happened, it emerged. What I did was follow the current I was already in and explore it to see how far it went. I still haven't finished that exploration. I feel that by 1985, with those expe-

riences, a path had become clear. Since then I've been working it out, consciously and unconsciously, understanding in greater depth the languages needed to sustain more complex experiences, experiences that could hold up over time. And that also gave me the chance to explore the history of that technology, which is largely bound up with the history of all technology.

NGR. *Coming back to that continuity of projects that runs from Binatari and Netatari, made in the 1980s, toward Justicia and Super Atari Poetry...*

YM. Between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s I take part in other processes, other interests, other technologies, which gave me a perhaps more complete view of what the relationship with programming and with writing can be. During that time I work developing *bulletin board systems*, systems that predate the internet, in which people could connect to a machine, have email, download files: a kind of mini-internet. That leads me to consult and work for companies like *Ericsson* and *AT&T*.

At the same time I was going deeper into writing. At fifteen I enter

the creative-writing workshops of the *Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos Rómulo Gallegos* (CELARG), by way of the Casa de la Poesía. By the 1990s I begin to find my way, thanks to the support of people like *Yolanda Pantin* —a great Venezuelan poet who was my teacher, someone I love and deeply respect—. These are Venezuelan poets who are still alive, still active: we're not talking about a lost history, but about a country in exile whose poetry is still alive.

Through *Yolanda* I come into contact with a world of living poets who took part in that first formal

creative-writing workshop at CELARG: Blanca Strepponi, Martha Kornblith, and the imprint of Eugenio Montejo, Rafael Cadenas, Armando Rojas Guardia... many poets of her generation. But I also come into contact with a universal poetry that spoke of another reality, one I felt very present, because Venezuelan poetry always sustained that communication with the poetry of other places.

All of this can be linked to the movement of the literary magazines. *Juan Liscano*, with whom I had a very close relationship, was a great promoter through a magazine

called *Zona Franca*; or *Juan Calzadilla*, with the magazine *Imagen*. Bonds and connections I felt very close to, very akin to my own, and that enriched the act of writing and of reading —because to be a writer you have to be a very good reader— and that also spoke of geographies, of latitudes I kept integrating into my practice. That gradually led me toward more experimental poets, toward a history of literature I found fascinating: that of a non-linear writing, which set the tone for an artistic production —not only personal, but universal— in which the act of creation is not rigidly

directed, but fluid.

NGR. *I want to dwell on an experience like Justicia, because there a political use of language already appears. I feel your work sometimes takes on political shades —poetry taking a stance before a specific historical situation— and other times pursues an absolute, total language in which everything is homogenized. I want to understand what moves you from one side of the techno-poetic operation to the other: how you begin to explore the political, how you come to understand that techno-poetic writing can have a political becoming, and how you divide your time between those two*

kinds of writing.

And, for the listeners: Yucef's website is *cybernetic.com*. Do visit it, because, alongside theorizing about how to keep poetry alive and carry it into the age of telecommunications, Yucef has another body of work, less theoretical and more defiant, tied to intercepting confidential information, hacking databases, creating installations—in public space, in private space, in galleries—out of information that should not be read, that should not inhabit those spaces. Over time he has developed a series he calls the datagramas. We have, then, on one side the theoretical techno-poetics around language, and on the other the

datagramas. When do you start working on them? When do you discover that other power of techno-writing?

YM. The *datagramas* —*datagrams*, in English— are data-visualization systems, generally using data obtained from private, non-public contexts, confidential in many cases. For me, obtaining that data was already a poetic act. I perceive hacking as a poetic action. And in studying how hacking occurs —not only in the computing realm, but in the human, biological, ethnographic, sociological ones— I found that throughout history there have been

hackers in art and in science: people who go beyond the limits set by paradigms and canons. Obtaining data that way was, for me, going beyond those limits; therefore, it was also a poetic act.

To take that data —the usernames, the passwords, the addresses of the people in the database of CAN-TV, Venezuela's largest national telecommunications company, or the emails of *Hugo Chávez*— and make it public was, for me, a poetic action. There is the work of poetic writing, but there is also the poetic deed, the poetic experience. Using natural languages and program-

ming languages, I understood that I could reach a much fuller view of poetry, not limited to writing, but open to lived experience.

That allowed me to arrive at works like the *Poetic Clock*, a clock that turns time into poetry: every second, every minute and every hour, a new poem manifests. And from there to pieces like *Justicia*, where the word “justice” is shown on nineteen television sets, each one representing a person who died on **April 11, 2002**, when *Chávez* gives the order to fire on the demonstrators —millions of people— who that

day were demanding his departure from power. And they succeeded, because *Chávez* leaves power that **April 11**: the military high command, which in the end is the one that controls the country —and probably every country—, orders him to step down.

That also gives us a view of the architecture of power. From within democratic systems, one believes it is civilians who define a country's processes, but in reality there is a military structure that decides, in the end, who stays and who does not. In that moment we saw the depth of these processes, which are

not simply democratic, which are not sustained solely by words or by legislation, but which have beneath them a military machinery that decides over our lives. That is the machinery that removes *Chávez*, mediated too by other actors. But I carry out that piece not only because *Chávez* leaves power, but because a relative of mine, a first cousin, was killed that day.

NGR. *Just to clarify and place ourselves on the timeline: we're talking about the piece Justicia, which is from...*

YM. That piece is from 2003.

NGR. *And the events took place on April 11, 2002.*

YM. In 2003 I develop this piece, *Justicia*, using the *Atari*. What I do —after a period of reflection, of internalizing, an initially very painful process— is try to understand what this means, how I carry it into my psyche. How that experience, emotionally so turbid, can manifest in something that exorcizes it, that becomes a cathartic experience of an event that was tragic for me, for my family and for the country. Because this has an impact not only on the country, but on the

region: from that moment on there is a before and an after in *Chávez's* government and in Latin American leadership. I believe we are still living with the consequences of that **April 11, 2002**.

I transform that experience into an installation where I show the site plan: the place where the people killed by snipers died, near the *Palacio de Miraflores*, the seat of government in Venezuela. I translate each of those people into a television set—cathode-ray tube sets, of different sizes, which in **2003** was still what was used in Venezuela—. They are connected in a network, across a

large space, by an electrical installation that runs toward a point functioning as the brain from which the signal is emitted. And the signal of the word “justice” —changing color, pulsing in each set— comes from an *Atari 2600 Junior* that belonged to my cousin *Jesús*, killed that day. He had given me that console months earlier, to use within a series called *Atari Poetry*, but I hadn’t incorporated it, precisely because it was an *Atari 2600 Junior*: I had been working with the classic *Atari 2600* and didn’t know what to do with that device. When what happened to my cousin happens

and I see that I have his console, I understand that I had to make this work. *Justicia* is not only a tribute to *Jesús* and to the fallen: it also takes on a universal dimension, because the word “justice,” the cry for justice, is universal and timeless, and applies to any context where power falls out of balance, where there is an excess of power. In this case, *Chávez*’s order for the snipers to fire on more than two million demonstrators.

NGR. *And to add another layer: the site plan also turns into a data visualization. The work Justicia thus has an*

upper patina that lends it a very interesting documentary value. Something similar happens in Maximum Security, the hack of Chávez, another very interesting point. For how many years were you intercepting the communications of his email?

YM. Six years.

NGR. And you have exhibited that installation. If we drew a timeline of the installations about the dynamics and flows of power, we could start with the CANTV one, a slightly less political installation –or political, but not in the sense of an activism aimed at a

specific person, institution or party—.

YM. CANTV is an institution, and what's interesting is that, when Chávez takes office as president of Venezuela, in early 1999, it was a private telecommunications company. Originally private, then public, then private again; and then Chávez nationalizes it: one of his projects, on coming to power, is to nationalize CANTV. The moment he does, something very interesting happens: communications begin to be intercepted by the government. There are reports about this, and to this day it continues. The promise

was “we’re going to give everyone internet,” but beneath that promise lay control and surveillance.

Over the last twenty-five years we have seen how this has been used for the exclusive benefit of sustaining power in Venezuela: not only to carry out surveillance and persecution, but because one has to understand that elections and the transmission of data take place within that platform.

NGR. *Right: it’s the medium, the surface, the page where everything happens, where everything is written.*

YM. Yes. From the outset they knew they had to seize that infrastructure to centralize power. So the hacking or interception of that CANTV data was already, in a way, contextualized within a political sphere. And in parallel comes the Chávez matter: the interception of the data in his email also begins.

NGR. *We could call it a kind of asymmetrical relationship with technology: you have a government with all the power to control, and you have an individual who, with technical knowledge, makes a reverse incursion and accesses personal, sensitive information. And*

the other interesting part is that you represent it in public space. So we already have two lines of work: one, poetic action, the interception of data and the datagrama as a way of giving it an outlet; the other, the theorizing around language, technique and images. But there is a third facet, perhaps the least known, that I find important: Yucef as a teacher. You teach at the Universidad de los Andes, in Mérida, and also in Ecuador.

YM. *Yes, at the Universidad del Azuay.*

NGR. *There is, then, a part of you*

committed to training new techno-editors, to communicating these ideas in academic contexts and forming new generations. And that teaching experience is bound up, moreover, with forced displacement and diaspora, a trait shared perhaps by all the authors who inhabit the dimension of techno-poetics: the great majority have been or are university professors, are part of a diaspora or a migration, and work on the relationship between technology and poetics. When do you begin to teach? At which institutions?

YM. *My relationship with teaching probably begins with invitations to*

give lectures and talks. By 1995 or 1996 I was already taking part in conferences—in my case, philosophy conferences—where I addressed the relationship between ethics and technology.

NGR. *Let's recap: you were trained in...*

YM. I studied philosophy, mathematics and physics. I don't finish the physics degree at the *Universidad Central de Venezuela* and continue with philosophy. While studying philosophy I was also taking part in the creative-writing works-

hops at CELARG. Philosophy gave me a much fuller structure of thought than I had at the time. It can be very limited in its practice—and it is, in many respects—, but at the same time it is very open, because it has ramifications: it leads you toward the political through praxis, toward the existential through ontology, toward language through logic, toward science through the philosophy of science. In those processes I realized there were people around the world connecting all of this with computational neural networks, exploring the field of computing from philosophy.

NGR. *Since we're speaking of that journey—the same one you make with your students in the classroom, tracing the points where logic, mathematics, philosophy, art history and poetry intersect—, let's now trace the journey of your own diaspora. At first, Venezuela and New York; then, different countries. When you decide to leave Venezuela for good, which country do you go to, and in what year?*

YM. Another preamble: I am the son of immigrants, and until I was five I was traveling. Then we settle in Venezuela, where I stay until I'm nineteen or twenty. Then I marry

and move to New York. We return to Venezuela, I think in 2004, with the intention of “building the country,” because by then it was already terrorized. Those calamities had occurred, and the Venezuela I lived in as a teenager was already fading; the institutions and the museums had already been seized by the government.

On that return we arrive first in Caracas, where I establish a foundation called *Canal – Proyecto de Producción Cultural*, in which I put into practice this whole way of relating to culture. My partner at the time took on the psychological,

therapeutic side of that correlation. It was devoted not only to poetry, literature and art, but also to dance. Many people from the cultural world took part, from different fields: psychologists, philosophers, kabbalists who gave workshops on Kabbalah and psychoanalysis, graffiti artists. It was a very active space, running seven days a week; we gave ourselves no rest. In that context, a young man then devoted to computing, *Elías Crespín*, has his first solo exhibition: in fact, we designed the space to hold that first show of his. In a way, that was his point of departure toward what

we know today.

After a year of intense work, I find that there was a much deeper crisis, an insurmountable one.

From there we go to France, to Paris, where we stay almost a year. And from Paris we feel the call of Mérida —a very intuitive call—. In Mérida we go into a mountain, and there another kind of relationships begin to unfold, not only cultural but also biological. Many personal and cultural events took place that gave me the chance to relate to the diversity of the Andes, to the city and, finally, to the country, because from there I define the *Bienal Inter-*

nacional de Arte Contemporáneo.

At the same time a very grave political movement was underway: land was being expropriated, kidnappings were happening, people's homes were being raided, people were being killed in the very place where I was. That was decisive in saying "we have to leave." At the ULA, in my classes, we also did work of historical activism: we not only studied the history of the country and of culture, but got involved with political life through very specific actions. It was a way of giving history continuity, of activating it. I didn't feel like a pedago-

gue, nor did I have the pretensions of an academic —nor do I think I could have them—, but academia gave me the chance to converse, to share and to activate that history: in Mérida, in Cuenca, in Miami, in New York or anywhere else in the world.

NGR. *And you decide to leave for good. We're talking about leaving Venezuela around 2010 or 2011.*

YM. Formally, in early 2011.

NGR. *From there you continue your career in Cuenca and then move to the*

United States.

YM. Yes, though I spend stretches of time in other places. Before going to Ecuador I spend a year in Guatemala, which was interesting, because I come into contact with the Mayan glyphs, with the first pictographic systems of writing. I go wanting to understand Mayan culture and language, and then I realize there is no single Mayan language, but a set of Mayan languages. That gives me the chance to delve into that region and into that history of America, which is fundamental, foundational within

the constitution of a non-Western, non-colonial culture. That is where we come from.

NGR. *That interests me greatly, because another trait common to those I identify as techno-poets is that they are trying to return to a kind of non-Western wisdom in order to articulate it within the technological world. Perhaps that is the closing question: what elements, what knowledge have you found in the pre-Hispanic, pre-colonial cultures, and how have you articulated it in your own work with technology? Why do you think it is important to think about technology from that vantage point?*

YM. It is another cosmogony. And starting from there —to situate, understand and experience oneself from another cosmogony, and from parameters other than the linear ones, those of science as we know it, or the ways in which we organize and systematize reality— changes everything. There, for instance, myths, rites, communication with plants and with animals, the presence of symbols and signs in nature are markers for relating to the world.

I believe that if one situates oneself within that cosmogony —structures that have followed a millenary or-

der, that did not appear overnight, but have had a presence over centuries— one finds in those cultural systems a bond and a respect for nature and for natural phenomena that to the West are superstitious, but that to non-Western cultures are as valuable as the discovery of a scientifically measurable phenomenon.

Being in those mountains, that contact with the celestial vault, with natural processes, experiencing oneself on the Earth, is for me one of the richest experiences a human being can have —and one anyone should have, whoever they

are— in order to truly establish that connection with the Earth, to respect it and celebrate it out of fascination, because what one witnesses and experiences there is fascinating. That communication with plants is no superstition: it exists, and it is an experience that reveals itself naturally when one lives with them constantly and respects them. That is what led me to become a vegetarian and later a vegan: the connection with the cows, seeing them, which then manifested as compassion; and the same with insects and with other beings, because there is a value for

life that goes beyond my life and beyond human life.

I believe the West is very centered on man, on the human being, to the point that we forget that a mosquito, a fox, a panther or any other organic form of life is as valuable as our own. And if we want to put it in theological terms, we can say that any other living being has a soul, and that this soul is equal to ours. In the same way that data reduce to bits, and the bits are equal. There is here a respect for life that in Western culture is perhaps specialized, minimized or disconnected.

NGR. It is a very Western thing. One would have to look more closely, all the way down to who exactly it was: whether the Anglo-Saxons, whether the Franks... But it is a beautiful reflection: a technology for living on planet Earth and for respecting life.

We close this conversation. Thank you so much, Yucef, for these conversations and for the knowledge you have shared. I am left very glad, and I greatly like the idea of imagining a technology that, using poetic procedures, is put to use for living connected with the Earth and for respecting life. I believe that is an important challenge that technology – and now more than ever, with artificial

intelligence— will have to face. We, the operators of technology, will have to choose a trench and know from where and how we exercise our technocracy: whether we will think the interface is the beginning and the end, and stay in the cave, or whether we will face the light, which may blind us at first, but to which we will grow accustomed. Thank you, Yucef.

YUCEF MERHI