Vignettes - Season 3, Episode 5: Sovereign Food - Transcript

**Millie Baylis:**

Hi there, welcome back to Vignettes, the EWF storytelling podcast. My name is Millie and I’m the Program Coordinator here at EWF. I’m recording from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay respect to their elders past and present, and to the elders of all lands that this podcast reaches. This always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Today’s episode is Sovereign food, and it’s also the final episode for this season of Vignettes. The theme for today’s episode was first inspired by a piece in Overland called, “The Politics and Solidarity of Food”, which we’ll link in today’s show notes, by Hasib and Jeanine Hourani - who are two Palestinian siblings involved in the BDS movement that promotes boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel and its oppression of Palestinians.

The piece spoke to the appropriation of Palestinian food as well as the power of ethical food consumption and boycotts. We’ll link this piece in today’s show notes.

Hasib will be reading a new poem for this episode today, along with Tarneen Onus-Williams and Muhib Nabulsi who will reflect on what sovereign food means to them through their own personal stories. They’re all really incredible readings and we’re excited to share them with you.

First, Tarneen Onus-Williams.Tarneen Onus Williams is a proud Gunditjmara, Bindal, Yorta Yorta person and Torres Strait Islander from Mer and Erub islands. Tarneen lives on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung peoples.

Tarneen is a community organiser for Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance and has worked on Invasion Day, Black Deaths in Custody and Stop the forced closures of Aboriginal Communities in WA. They are a filmmaker and writer and have been published in IndigenousX, NITV and RightNow. Tarneen’s day job is supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are victims/survivors and perpetrators of family violence. Tarneen also runs a baking account where they post really incredible looking food, which was part of why we asked them to be on this episode today! Highly recommend you check out their baking page @blakbaker on Instagram.

**Tarneen Onus-Williams:**

I’m sitting on Wurundjeri in stage 4 lockdown eating some tacos with my partner at Edinburgh Garden amongst the trees, I make the audible mmhh Yumm mmm Yumm with people around us and my partner tells me you’re being so loud and my reply is “yes it’s so delicious”. I think I’ve alway loved food. When I was a kid my Dad would say he loved eating with me and my nan because we loved food so much. As a young kid with tight curly hair, gapped front teeth and a small body, I would sit up at my grandmother's house in Goreng Goreng country, Bundaberg Queensland and I would eat cantaloupe and mangoes with her and my dad. My family were fruit pickers, my Dad has done it on and off for years and it was as early as this year picking apples in Yorta Yorta country, my country. As I got older I would make my Nan Jane apple crumble and potato bake after learning it in food tech at Bundy High - these were my favourite recipes in year 8 in Bundy, back in the day when the avocados were cheap I tried to make an avocado crumble. Let's say that didn't work out. Recipe test fail.

I loved cooking as a young person, making cakes from scratch with my sister-in-law Cecila and making cakes with my mum Tracey - it was my favourite thing to do and looking back at my mum’s amazing cakes she made for my brothers from Women's weekly children's cookbook, she was too tired by the time she had my sister and I. I was fortunate to grow up on my country, Gunditjmara Country in Portland. Portland is in a bay so we ate a lot of seafood from the waters my ancestors ate from and eels from my country and the Gunditjamara people are most famous for our eel traps. As I said I loved food as a young person but as I entered my late teens I lost interest until 18 months ago. I’m a community organiser for Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance and I’ve been part of the group for 6 and a half years. I’ve organised countless rallies, campaigns and supported in every way I could even through organising meals for people who are having a hard time. In 2019 I got together with my partner and I started watching TV again which I hardly did because 1) I didn't have a TV and 2) I didn't have the time. I was always busy and my local cafe/restaurant Marios in Fitzroy was called my kitchen. I spent so long doing things for my community I realised that I didn't have a hobby. In 2019 I was planning to go Berlin like every Melbournian does and mine was to try get a hobby because I felt like I couldn't in Australia, I was tired and burnt out with ulcers in my mouth, my peak was speaking at 10 events within 7 days, I was being bullied at work and I had multiple family issues coming up so yes, 2019 was tiring and I wanted to leave the colony in the quest for a hobby. As we all know COVID-19 happened and we can't travel - blah blah blah and we were all forced to stay home. This was something I wasn’t familiar with, I hadn't spent a week at home in years. Everything . . . slowed down and I was forced to stop. Not able to go to the office for a while so I put my head down in the kitchen and started to cook. I tried new recipes, built my pantry, learnt to cook rice on the stove, organised everything into jars and I was going to Beatrix bakery a lot before lockdown in March 2020 and Natalie Pauul released her bake book. A few months later I bought a kitchenaid stand mixer to try baking some of her recipes. I hadn't baked a cake from scratch in over 10 years and I fell in love with my cloud-like sponge cake squished together by thick whipped cream and homemade strawberry jam. Baking helped my burn out, it became meditative and something practical to do with my hands instead of doom scrolling. It helped me step back and think about the very intentional and scientific or chemical way of cooking that is structured and requires discipline, something that I struggle with. Since learning more about baking I have learnt more about incorporating native ingredients into my cooking, especially baking with saltbush taken from my neighbor's yard making it focaccia and making sourdough recipes. Incorporating these ingredients on my terms and not just eating it from a white person's recipe has been a really fulfilling experience and using saltbush as medicine actively thinking about this food as a way of healing and not just something to fill my tummy made me feel more connected to my people and my culture. My favourite time was cooking it in roo stews and biting into that bitter salty saltbush. It has been such an amazing experience and I’m so thankful to my white neighbor for planting it so I’m able to pick it or as I like to say ‘forage’. I’ve learnt so much about myself from cooking, I’ve learnt patience and generosity, I’ve learnt more about other Indigenous peoples food like Palestians food and learnt about what they eat and what regions eat different food depending on what's available so I think its been journey to learn about my food sovereignty through food but also the food sovereignty of other Indigneous peoples, I thought that learning more about mine and others political sovereignty was the utmost importance but we forget that sovereignty is about land and its about connections to country and plants and animal and those are a food source and help us understand who were are and what we need to survive so food has become one of the most important ways to understand sovereignty to me and I’m always learning and I want to encourage more people to cook whatever they like but really try your native ingredients because you never know what you will learn from it.

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you Tarneen! Next, we have a new poem by Hasib Hourani.

Hasib Hourani is a Lebanese-Palestinian writer, editor, and arts worker living on unceded Wurundjeri Country. Hasib is a 2020 recipient of The Wheeler Centre's Next Chapter Scheme and is currently working on a book of experimental poetry about suffocation and the occupation of Palestine. Hasib writing challenges expectations of land, identity, and the relationship between the two. You can find Hasib’s work in Meanjin, Overland, Australian Poetry, and Going Down Swinging, among others.

**Hasib Hourani:**

No word but hungry

The town of Tarshīḥa, in the district of Acca

root word: disputed

Ṭār shīḥa

meaning shiḥa flew

because he flew to the battlefield and

fought the crusaders

the city his namesake now, as thanks

i flew three oceans away

from ‘Awali too young

to chew too tired

to drink

Sometimes a blue cup breaks

and then another one does six months later

What ends with life?

It sounds like insult to say my grandmother is being eaten

what i’m trying to say is that she is feeding

i’m trying to say she is watering

i’m trying to write this poem in English

Let me try again:

i bring her a glass of water

i water my grandmother

and when the rain falls

and spills into two seas

the sky waters my grandmother

for a month

every time i walked home

and passed the church

there would be a hearse

in the driveway

Sometimes things are just coincidence

like the fact

that my grandmother’s surname

is Shureiḥ

root word: shareḥ

to explain

and that she is from Tarshīḥa

root word: disputed

Teita Shureiḥ min Tarshiḥa

that sounds nice, that language fills me up

not a pool now, an ocean

Ask a Zionist

where their grandparents are from

take their answer with a grain of salt

Tarshīḥa

Tuur meaning mountain

Shīh meaning mugwort

My grandfather’s surname is based in mountainhood

Sometimes things are just coincidence

my grandmother’s name is In‘ām

root word: na‘me

blessing

My grandfather’s name is ‘Ali

root word: ‘alou

elevated

My grandmother was born in Tarshīḥa

and so was her mother

and her grandmother

and her great grandmother

when I recite this ancestry to you

take it with a grain of “atleast”

we can’t know how far to go

we don’t know who to ask

i don’t know why my poppies buckle

before they explode   
they brown with womb still full

never make it to ballistic

canceled flight

What ends with life?

One of the cups is in a white envelope, sealed

the other is still intact at the bottom

i’ve fed the glass its own shatterings

Sometimes you go to Tarshīḥa

for no reason but ritual

and find family you didn’t know

you had

and they bring you plates of fruit, and fennel

and your dad asks

“what’s this” and they show him how to eat it

peel off the petals

bite in sips

fennel is Palestinian

and my dad was fifty

and still he had never tried it

maybe Manama

dries the soil out

too quick and all the food

he ever knew

had been grown there

maybe In‘ām didn’t like aniseed

maybe ‘Ali didn’t

What ends with life?

Did Shīḥa stay there til he died?

Is he with the dirt?

Is he feeding the fennel?

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you Hasib! And for our final artist for this season of Vignettes, Muhib Nabulsi.

Muhib Nabulsi is a disabled person living with chronic illnesses, an unproductive writer, a novice filmmaker, a 2nd gen diaspora Palestinian (aka a Palestinian), a disorganised community organiser, and a service industry worker.

**Muhib Nabulsi:**

Hi everyone, my name is Muhib Nabulsi. My pronouns are he/him or they/them. I’m a diaspora Palestinian and disabled person, sometimes writer. I’ve spent most of my life in Meanjin, where I still live and am recording this today, on the lands of the Turrbal and Yuggera peoples. The sovereignty of these lands has never been ceded.

The piece I’m gonna read today is entitled More Salt.

When I was growing up, almost every night at the dinner table, the other members of my family, myself included, would draw attention to the amount of salt my baba puts on his food and berate him for it, ostensibly out of concern for his health. This is to say that, often, as we ate, at some level, we imagined his death.

On a trip to Jordan in the summer of 1998, baba instructed me and my brother Jamal to look across the Dead Sea to the shore on the other side. That’s Palestine, he said. I can’t remember any other words he spoke, but I remember well feeling his sadness and anger in that moment, which stands out in my memory as my first experience of individual, familial, and collective trauma and grief existing simultaneously, in a way that will forever be beyond the capacity of language to annunciate.

When I was asked to contribute a piece on the theme ‘food sovereignty,’ these memories came to me only after an experience still fresh in my mind.

When the Brisbane lockdown was called in August, my partner Georgia and I were shopping for supplies for my birthday party that we had planned for that evening. When I pulled out my phone in the middle of the supermarket to listen to that day’s Covid update, our baskets were close to full. As we stood frozen for a moment, we quickly realized that we no longer needed the ingredients for two cakes and myriad snack foods; we needed nourishment.

My birthday was the first day of lockdown. Georgia had come to stay at the house I live in with my youngest brother, with whom I also share my birthday. As I woke up that morning, for the first time since 2020, I felt an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, and was startled by how quickly the added layer of anxiety I had experienced last year returned. I spent many hours that day cleaning the house from top to bottom in an attempt to make things as comfortable as possible, assuaging at the very least some of my OCD symptoms.

After Georgia and I left the supermarket the previous day—which within minutes of the announcement was swarming with hurried people on their phones—we went to a Mediterranean wholesaler where I picked up kilos of Molokhia, a leafy green vegetable used to make a dish of the same name, eaten with different local variations across South West Asia and North Africa. Molokhia—the dish—is my favourite meal, a comforting stew of the uniquely textured green cooked with chicken in fresh chicken stock, with garlic, coriander, and lemon juice, and served on a bed of turmeric rice topped with onion pickle. At least this is how baba taught me how to make it.

As I cleaned the house, I began making the dish for Georgia, my brother, and I to eat that night. I put the chicken stock on, checking on it every so often. When I had finished cleaning, and after showering, I cooked and put together the other components of the meal. It was getting late, so I was rushing, which, combined with the lockdown anxiety, was making me increasingly agitated. I felt myself retreating inwards, and I began resenting Georgia for not meeting needs I had that day that I wasn’t communicating.

When all the ingredients were in the pot and I had left it to simmer for a while, I tasted it. It didn’t taste right. But I had done everything right. I added more salt, waited and watched it nervously. I tasted it again. The anxiety turned to panic.

I approached Georgia and asked her to come to my room with me. Perceiving my distress, she immediately followed and closed the door as I collapsed on my bed in tears. As she had in the past and has since then, she didn’t offer spoken consolation. She just held me. When it had passed, we went together back into the kitchen to the pot still simmering on the cooktop. I added more salt, stirred, and then tasted it. Still not right. More salt again. And then once more. Finally, it tasted how it should. I finally let Georgia taste it and I could see on her face too that it was right. While she is not Palestinian, she also has a migrant background and her own complex relationship to food. She looked at me and smiled. “All it needed was more salt.”

I tried, in many different ways, to incorporate the two anecdotes with which I began this piece into the third to form some kind of seamless whole, but I simply couldn’t do it. Nor could I leave them out.

Earlier this year at my parents’ place, I heard my dad lament having raised me and my brothers calling him dad, rather than baba; he didn’t teach us Arabic for a complex set of reasons that I can’t fully grasp, and if I could, there wouldn’t be room for here.

When I was editing this piece, getting ready to record it, a new anxiety arose: as I read back the word molokhia, I feared that I wouldn’t pronounce it correctly. Though I can read Arabic now, even if I don’t understand all of the words, and have some limited speaking and listening skills, I’ve only studied Modern Standard Arabic. I looked up the spelling of Molokhia, but the way it’s written in MSA doesn’t sound the way baba says it in his dialect, so before recording this and submitting it, I called him.

[Audio recording of phone conversation with baba]

Baba: مرحبا يا حلو

Muhib: Umm, so I didn’t press record last time [laughter]

Baba: [laughter]

Muhib: [laughter] yeah, so can we do that again?

Baba: Sure. What are we doing?

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you Muhib.

That’s our episode for this week, and our final episode for this season of Vignettes. Thank you again to Tarneen Onus Williams, Hasib Hourani and Muhib Nabulsi for sharing their stories with us today – and to all the artists who shared their readings throughout this season of Vignettes.

We hope you enjoyed it, and we can’t wait to see you all again next year! Have a great Summer and we’ll see you soon. :)

This podcast was produced by me, Millie Baylis and audio produced by the wonderful Joe Buchan. Our theme music was created by Thu Care and the beautiful artwork for each episode was created by Molly Hunt. You can find out more about the team behind this podcast and the artists featured in this episode on the EWF website at emergingwritersfestival.org.au --- Bye!

END EPISODE.