Noam Chomsky On The Evolution Of Language: A Biolinguistic Perspective

Photo: en.wikipedia.org

Truth-out.org ~ September 2016. Human language is crucial to the scientific quest to understand what kind of creatures we are and, thus crucial to unlocking the mysteries of human nature.

In the interview that follows, Noam Chomsky, the scholar who single-handedly revolutionized the modern field of linguistics, discusses the evolution of language and lays out the biolinguist perspective — the idea that a human being's language represents a state of some component of the mind. This is an idea that continues to baffle many non-experts, many of whom have sought to challenge Chomsky's theory of language without really understanding it.

Journalist and "radical chic" reactionary writer Tom Wolfe was the latest to do so in his laughable new book, *The Kingdom of Speech*, which seeks to take down Charles Darwin and Noam Chomsky through sarcastic and ignorant remarks, making vitriolic attacks on their personalities and expressing a deep hatred for the Left. Indeed, this much-publicized book not only displays amazing ignorance about evolution in general and the field of linguistics in particular, but also aims

to portray Noam Chomsky as evil — due to his constant and relentless exposure of the crimes of US foreign policy and other challenges to the status quo.

C. J. Polychroniou: Noam, in your recently published book with Robert C. Berwick (Why Only Us: Language and Evolution, MIT Press 2016), you address the question of the evolution of language from the perspective of language as part of the biological world. This was also the theme of your talk at an international physics conference held this month in Italy, as it seems that the scientific community appears to have a deeper appreciation and a more subtle understanding of your theory of language acquisition than most social scientists, who seem to maintain grave reservations about biology and the idea of human nature in general. Indeed, isn't it the case that the specific ability of our species to acquire any language was a major theme of interest to the modern scientific community from the time of Galileo?

Noam Chomsky: This is quite true. At the outset of the modern scientific revolution, Galileo and the scientist-philosophers of the monastery of Port Royal issued a crucial challenge to those concerned with the nature of human language, a challenge that had only occasionally been recognized until it was taken up in the mid-20th century and became the primary concern of much of the study of language. For short, I'll refer to it as the Galilean challenge. These great founders of modern science were awed by the fact that language permits us (in their words) to construct "from 25 or 30 sounds an infinite variety of expressions, which although not having any resemblance in themselves to that which passes through our minds, nevertheless do not fail to reveal all of the secrets of the mind, and to make intelligible to others who cannot penetrate into the mind all that we conceive and all of the diverse movements of our souls."

We can now see that the Galilean challenge requires some qualifications, but it is very real and should, I think, be recognized as one of the deepest insights in the rich history of inquiry into language and mind in the past 2500 years.

The challenge had not been entirely ignored. For Descartes, at about the same time, the human capacity for unbounded and appropriate use of language was a primary basis for his postulation of mind as a new creative principle. In later years, there is occasional recognition that language is a creative activity that involves "infinite use of finite means," in Wilhelm von Humboldt's formulation and that it provides "audible signs for thought," in the words of linguist William

Dwight Whitney a century ago. There has also been awareness that these capacities are a species-property, shared by humans and unique to them — the most striking feature of this curious organism and a foundation for its remarkable achievements. But there was never much to say beyond a few phrases.

But why is it that the view of language as a species-specific capacity is not taken up until well into the 20th century?

There is a good reason why the insights languished until mid-20th century: intellectual tools were not available for even formulating the problem in a clear enough way to address it seriously. That changed thanks to the work of Alan Turing and other great mathematicians who established the general theory of computability on a firm basis, showing in particular how a finite object like the brain can generate an infinite variety of expressions. It then became possible, for the first time, to address at least part of the Galilean challenge directly — although, regrettably, the earlier history [for example, the history of Galileo's and Descartes' inquiries into the philosophy of language, as well as the Port-Royal Grammar by Antoine Arnauld and Claude Lancelot] was entirely unknown at the time.

With these intellectual tools available, it becomes possible to formulate what we may call the Basic Property of human language: The language faculty provides the means to construct a digitally infinite array of structured expressions, each of which has a semantic interpretation expressing a thought, and each of which can be externalized by means of some sensory modality. The infinite set of semantically interpreted objects constitutes what has sometimes been called a "language of thought": the system of thoughts that receive linguistic expression and that enter into reflection, inference, planning and other mental processes, and when externalized, can be used for communication and other social interactions. By far, the major use of language is internal — thinking in language.

Can you please expand on the notion of the internal language?

We now know that although speech is the usual form of sensory motor externalization, it can just as well be sign or even touch, discoveries that require a slight reformulation of the Galilean challenge. A more fundamental qualification has to do with the way the challenge is formulated: in terms of production of expressions. So formulated, the challenge overlooks some basic issues.

Production, like perception, accesses the internal language but cannot be identified with it. We must distinguish the internalized system of knowledge from the actions that access it. The theory of computability enables us to establish the distinction, which is an important one, familiar in other domains.

Consider, for example, human arithmetical competence. In studying it, we routinely distinguish the internal system of knowledge from the actions that access it, like multiplying numbers in our head, an action that involves many factors beyond intrinsic knowledge; memory constraints, for example. The same is true of language. Production and perception access the internal language but involve other factors as well, including again short-term memory, matters that began to be studied with some care in the early days of concern with the Galilean challenge, now reformulated to focus on the internal language, the system of knowledge that is accessed by actual production and by perception.

Does this mean that we have solved the mystery of the internal language? For example, the whole idea continues to be questioned in some quarters, although it is widely accepted, apparently, by most scientists.

There has been considerable progress in understanding the nature of the internal language, but its free creative use remains a mystery. That comes as no surprise. In a recent review of the state of the art concerning far simpler cases of voluntary action, two leading researchers, neuroscientists Emilio Bizzi and Robert Ajemian, write that we are beginning to learn something about the puppet and the strings, but the puppeteer remains shrouded in mystery. That is even more dramatically true for such creative acts as the normal [everyday] use of language, the unique human capacity that so impressed the founders of modern science.

In formulating the Basic Property, we are assuming that the faculty of language is shared among humans. That seems solidly established. There are no known group differences in language capacity, and individual variation is found only at the margins. More generally, genetic variation among humans is quite slight, not too surprisingly, given the recency of common origins.

The fundamental task of inquiry into language is to determine the nature of the Basic Property — the genetic endowment that underlies the faculty of language. To the extent that its properties are understood, we can seek to investigate particular internal languages, each an instantiation of the Basic Property, much

as each individual visual system is an instantiation of the human faculty of vision. We can investigate how the internal languages are acquired and used, how the language faculty itself evolved, its basis in human genetics and the ways it functions in the human brain. This general program of research has been called the Biolinguistic Program. The theory of the genetically-based language faculty is called Universal Grammar; the theory of each individual language is called its Generative Grammar.

But languages vary greatly from one another, so what's the link between Generative Grammar and Universal Grammar?

Languages appear to be extremely complex, varying radically from one another. And indeed, a standard belief among professional linguists 60 years ago was that languages can vary in arbitrary ways and each must be studied without preconceptions. Similar views were held at the time about organisms generally. Many biologists would have agreed with molecular biologist Gunther Stent's conclusion that the variability of organisms is so free as to constitute "a near infinitude of particulars which have to be sorted out case by case." When understanding is thin, we expect to see extreme variety and complexity.

However, a great deal has been learned since then. Within biology, it is now recognized that the variety of life forms is very limited, so much so that the hypothesis of a "universal genome" has been seriously advanced. My own feeling is that linguistics has undergone a similar development, and I will keep here to that strand in contemporary study of language.

The Basic Property takes language to be a computational system, which we therefore expect to observe general conditions on computational efficiency. A computational system consists of a set of atomic elements and rules to construct more complex ones. For generation of the language of thought, the atomic elements are word-like, though not words; for each language, the set of these elements is its lexicon. The lexical items are commonly regarded as cultural products, varying widely with experience and linked to extra-mental entities [objects entirely outside of our minds, such as the tree outside the window] — an assumption expressed in the titles of standard works, such as W.V. Quine's influential study Word and Object. Closer examination reveals a very different picture, one that poses many mysteries. Let's put that aside for now, turning to the computational procedure.

Clearly, we will seek the simplest computational procedure consistent with the data of language, for reasons that are implicit in the basic goals of scientific inquiry. It has long been recognized that simplicity of theory translates directly to explanatory depth. A more specific version of this quest for understanding was provided by a famous dictum of Galileo's, which has guided the sciences since their modern origins: nature is simple, and it is the task of the scientist to demonstrate this, from the motion of the planets, to an eagle's flight, to the inner workings of a cell, to the growth of language in the mind of a child. Linguistics has an additional motive of its own for seeking the simplest theory: it must face the problem of evolvability. Not a great deal is known about evolution of modern humans, but the few facts that are well established, and others that have recently been coming to light, are rather suggestive and conform well to the conclusion that the language faculty is near optimal for a computational system, the goal we should seek on purely methodological grounds.

Did language exist before the emergence of Homo Sapiens?

One fact that does appear to be well established is, as I have already mentioned, that the faculty of language is a true species property, invariant among human groups — and furthermore, unique to humans in its essential properties. It follows that there has been little or no evolution of the faculty since human groups separated from one another. Recent genomic studies place this date not very long after the appearance of anatomically modern humans about 200,000 years ago, perhaps some 50,000 years later, when the San group in Africa separated from other humans. There is some evidence that it might have been even earlier. There is no evidence of anything like human language, or symbolic activities altogether, before the emergence of modern humans, Homo Sapiens Sapiens. That leads us to expect that the faculty of language emerged along with modern humans or not long after — a very brief moment in evolutionary time. It follows, then, that the Basic Property should indeed be very simple. The conclusion conforms to what has been discovered in recent years about the nature of language — a welcome convergence.

The discoveries about early separation of the San people are highly suggestive … [they] have significantly different externalized languages. With irrelevant exceptions, their languages are all and only the languages with phonetic clicks, with corresponding adaptations in the vocal tract. The most likely explanation for these facts, developed in detail in current work by Dutch linguist Riny Huijbregts,

is that possession of internal language preceded separation, which in turn preceded externalization, the latter in somewhat different ways in separated groups. Externalization seems to be associated with the first signs of symbolic behavior in the archaeological record, after the separation. Putting these observations together, it seems that we are reaching a stage in understanding where the account of evolution of language can perhaps be fleshed out in ways that were unimaginable until quite recently.

When do universal properties of language come to light?

Universal properties of the language faculty began to come to light as soon as serious efforts were undertaken to construct generative grammars, including quite simple ones that had never been noticed, and that are quite puzzling — a phenomenon familiar in the history of the natural sciences. One such property is structure-dependence: the rules that yield the language of thought attend solely to structural properties, ignoring properties of the externalized signal, even such simple properties as linear order.

To illustrate, consider the sentence birds that fly instinctively swim. It is ambiguous: the adverb "instinctively" can be associated with the preceding verb (fly instinctively) or the following one (instinctively swim). Suppose now that we extract the adverb from the sentence, forming instinctively, birds that fly swim. Now the ambiguity is resolved: The adverb is construed only with the linearly more remote but structurally closer verb swim, not the linearly closer but structurally more remote verb fly. The only possible interpretation — birds swim — is the unnatural one, but that doesn't matter: the rules apply rigidly, independent of meaning and fact. What is puzzling is that the rules ignore the simple computation of linear distance and keep to the far more complex computation of structural distance.

The property of structure dependence holds for all constructions in all languages, and it is indeed puzzling. Furthermore, it is known without relevant evidence, as is evident in cases like the one I just gave and innumerable others. Experiment shows that children understand that rules are structure-dependent as early as they can be tested, by about age 3, and do not make errors — and are, of course, not instructed. We can be quite confident, then, that structure-dependence follows from principles of universal grammar that are deeply rooted in the human language faculty. There is evidence from other sources that supports the

conclusion that structure-dependence is a true linguistic universal, deeply rooted in language design. Research conducted in Milan a decade ago, initiated by Andrea Moro, showed that invented languages keeping to the principle of structure-dependence elicit normal activation in the language areas of the brain, but much simpler systems using linear order in violation of these principles yield diffuse activation, implying that experimental subjects are treating them as a puzzle, not a language. Similar results were found in work by Neil Smith and Ianthi Tsimpli in their investigation of a cognitively deficient but linguistically gifted subject. They also made the interesting observation that [people with average cognitive abilities] can solve the problem if it is presented to them as a puzzle, but not if it is presented as a language, presumably activating the language faculty.

The only plausible conclusion, then, is that structure-dependence is an innate property of the language faculty, an element of the Basic Property. Why should this be so? There is only one known answer, and fortunately, it is the answer we seek for general reasons: The computational operations of language are the simplest possible ones. Again, that is the outcome that we hope to reach on methodological grounds, and that is to be expected in the light of the evidence about evolution of language already mentioned.

What about the so-called representational doctrine about language? What makes it a false idea for human language?

As I mentioned, the conventional view is that atomic elements of language are cultural products, and that the basic ones — those used for referring to the world — are associated with extra-mental entities. This representationalist doctrine has been almost universally adopted in the modern period. The doctrine appears to hold for animal communication: a monkey's calls, for example, are associated with specific physical events. But the doctrine is radically false for human language, as was recognized as far back as classical Greece.

To illustrate, let's take the first case that was discussed in pre-Socratic philosophy, the problem posed by Heraclitus: how can we cross the same river twice? To put it differently, why are two appearances understood to be two stages of the same river? Contemporary philosophers have suggested that the problem is solved by taking a river to be a four-dimensional object, but that simply restates the problem: why this object and not some different one, or none at all?

When we look into the question, puzzles abound. Suppose that the flow of the river has been reversed. It is still the same river. Suppose that what is flowing becomes 95 percent arsenic because of discharges from an upstream plant. It is still the same river. The same is true of other quite radical changes in the physical object. On the other hand, with very slight changes it will no longer be a river at all. If its sides are lined with fixed barriers and it is used for oil tankers, it is a canal, not a river. If its surface undergoes a slight phase change and is hardened, a line is painted down the middle, and it is used to commute to town, then it is a highway, no longer a river. Exploring the matter further, we discover that what counts as a river depends on mental acts and constructions. The same is true, quite generally, of even the most elementary concepts: tree, water, house, person, London, or in fact, any of the basic words of human language. Radically, unlike animals, the items of human language and thought uniformly violate the representationalist doctrine.

Furthermore, the intricate knowledge of the means of even the simplest words, let alone others, is acquired virtually without experience. At peak periods of language acquisition, children are acquiring about a word an hour, that is, often on one presentation. It must be, then, that the rich meaning of even the most elementary words is substantially innate. The evolutionary origin of such concepts is a complete mystery, one that may not be resolvable by means available to us.

So we definitely need to distinguish speech from language, right?

Returning to the Galilean challenge, it has to be reformulated to distinguish language from speech, and to distinguish production from internal knowledge — the latter an internal computational system that yields a language of thought, a system that might be remarkably simple, conforming to what the evolutionary record suggests. Secondary processes map the structures of language to one or another sensory-motor system for externalization. These processes appear to be the locus of the complexity and variety of linguistic behavior, and its mutability over time.

There are suggestive recent ideas about the neural basis for the operations of the computational system, and about its possible evolutionary origins. The origin of the atoms of computation, however, remains a complete mystery, as does a major question that concerned those who formulated the Galilean challenge: the Cartesian question of how language can be used in the normal creative way, in a

manner appropriate to situations but not caused by them, in ways that are incited and inclined but not compelled,in Cartesian terms. The mystery holds for even the simplest forms of voluntary motion, as discussed earlier.

A great deal has been learned about language since the Biolinguistic Program was initiated. It is fair to say, I think, that more has been learned about the nature of language, and about a very wide variety of typologically different language, than in the entire 2,500 year history of inquiry into language. But as is familiar in the sciences, the more we learn, the more we discover what we do not know. And the more puzzling it seems.

About the author
C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to Truthout as well as a member of Truthout's Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish

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Towards A New Spur For EU Democracy Building Learn And

Engagement ~ Final Report Phase 1

New forms of Societal and intercultural engagement and volunteering as a New Spur for civic and democratic participation at EU level

The project was an initiative of *Nea Smyrni* municipality, a municipality located about 4 km southwest of central Athens, Greece, named so after the city Smyrna (today's İzmir in Turkey), from where a large number of refugees arrived and settled in the Nea Smyrni area following the 1922 population exchange between Greece and Turkey.
The municipality implemented the project with the support of the "*Europe for Citizens*" programme of the European Union.

The main goal of "SPUR" program was to highlight and assess both the value of solidarity and volunteering in the current context of economic and humanitarian crisis inside United Europe as well as to improve the conditions for civic and democratic participation of citizens providing them,as a New Spur, New forms of Societal and intercultural engagement for the enhancement of civic and democratic participation at national and European level.

These forms – away from extremist or populist movements and radicalized behaviors and beyond xenophobia, intolerance and any discrimination against the vulnerable or excluded people within EU societies and underprivileged and disadvantaged populations, which often include youngsters and people of non – EU origins :
a) Stabilize the social welfare, health, employment, education, environment, culture, etc. systems, which brutally affected in times of economic recession and poverty,
b) Protect further the fundamental rights, in particular of minorities,
c) Help restore law and civil parity for a decent living,
d) Promote and foster the economy and the development and finally,
e) Consolidate the faith, to the principles and values on which the European ideal is founded, in particular of the different types of Eurosceptics, and put forward

the achievements of the United Europe and the cost of no Europe creating a new positive narrative for Europe and Europe integration.

Information about the four (4) non-formal education events:
[Also visit the website of the project "SPUR" http://dnsspur.gr/en for the analytical programmes, videos and photos. Presentations: http://dnsspur.gr/en/presentations/

Towards a *New Spur for EU Democracy Building learn and engagement.*
New forms of Societal and intercultural engagement and volunteering as a New Spur for civic and democratic participation at EU level was funded with the support of the European Union under the Programme *"Europe for Citizens"*

Event 1
Participation: The event involved 155 citizens, including 119 participants from the city of Nea Smyrni but also from various areas of the city of Athens, capital of Greece, and its suburbs and municipalities of Athens (Greece), 5 from the Greek entity-partner IMEPO/Greece, 4 participants from the city of Brossac but also from other cities of France (France), 3 participants from the city of Porto de Mós, (Portugal), 8 participants from the city of Mali Lošin but also from other cities of Croatia, (Croatia), 2 participants from the city of Gdynia but also from other cities of Poland, (Poland), 2 participants from the city of Česká Třebová (Czech Republic), 2 participants from the city of Pazardzhik Region (Bulgaria), 1 participant from the city of Comune di Castel Goffredo (Italy), 5 participants from the city of Primaria Municipiului Bucuresti (Romania), 3 participants from the city of Strovolos but also from other cities of Nicosia region (Cyprus), as well as 1 participant from the city of Amsterdam (Nederland)

Location / Dates: The event took place in Nea Smyrni (Greece), from 21/04/2016 to 22/04/2016

Short description: The aim of the event was “Citizens on the Move” for a New Europe with the following Topics for development
• Development of citizens’ understanding of the EU policy making-process, EU history, values and diversity
• Deepening of the discussion on the future of Europe and on what kind of Europe citizens want.

Event 2
Participation: The event involved 151 citizens, including 117 participants from the city of Nea Smyrni but also from various areas of the city of Athens, capital of Greece, and its suburbs and municipalities of Athens (Greece), 5 from the Greek entity-partner IMEPO/Greece, 4 participants from the city of Brossac but also from other cities of France (France), 5 participants from the city of Porto de Mós, (Portugal), 2 participants from the city of Gdynia but also from other cities of Poland, (Poland), 1 participant from the city of Česká Třebová (Czech Republic), 3 participants from the city of Ljubljana (Slovenia),5 participants from the city of Pazardzhik Region (Bulgaria), 2 participants from the city of Comune di Castel Goffredo (Ιtaly), 3
participants from the city of Primaria Municipiului Bucuresti (Romania), 3 participants from the city of Strovolos but also from other cities of Nicosia region (Cyprus), as well as 1 participant from the city of Amsterdam (Nederland)

Location / Dates: The event took place in Nea Smyrni (Greece), from 11/05/2016 to 13/05/2016

Short description: The aim of the event was “Defining the local good – Searching the European good” with the following Topics for development
• Promoting innovative opportunities of democratic and civic participation
• Reinforcement of already existing instruments for participation in civic dialogue at local and EU level.

Event 3
Participation: The event involved 152 citizens, including 122 participants from the city of Nea Smyrni but also from various areas of the city of Athens, capital of Greece, and its suburbs and municipalities of Athens (Greece), 5 from the Greek entity-partner IMEPO/Greece, 2 participants from the city of Porto de Mós, (Portugal), 4 participants from the city of Gdynia but also from other cities of Poland, (Poland), 1 participant from the city of Česká Třebová (Czech Republic), 1

participant from the city of Ljubljana (Slovenia) ,5 participants from the city of Pazardzhik Region (Bulgaria), 1 participant from the city of Comune di Castel Goffredo (Ιtaly), 3 participants from the city of Primaria Municipiului Bucuresti (Romania), 3 participants from the city of Strovolos but also from other cities of Nicosia region (Cyprus), 4 participants from the city of London (United Kingdom) as well as 1 participant from the city of Amsterdam (Nederland)

Location / Dates: The event took place in Nea Smyrni (Greece), from 14/06/2016 to 16/06/2016

Short description: The aim of the event was "Creating long immersion volunteering youth networks" with the following Topics for development
• Local community-minded young citizens as educated and experienced in dealing of the European sides of social issues, empowered to make more informed decisions and take meaningful action as members of the European society who weigh in on issues that impact the democracy in EU

Event 4
Participation: The event involved 179 citizens, including 145 participants from the city of Nea Smyrni but also from various areas of the city of Athens, capital of Greece, and its suburbs and municipalities of Athens (Greece), 5 from the Greek entity-partner IMEPO/Greece, 2 participants from the city of Brossac but also from other cities of France (France), 5 participants from the city of Dublin (Ireland), 5 participants from the city of Mali Lošin but also from other cities of Croatia, (Croatia), 4 participants from the city of Gdynia but also from other cities of Poland, (Poland), 1 participant from the city of Česká Třebová (Czech Republic), 3 participants from the city of Ljubljana (Slovenia), 1 participant from the city of Comune di Castel Goffredo
(Italy), 3 participants from the city of Strovolos but also from other cities of Nicosia region (Cyprus), 4 participants from the city of London (United Kingdom) as well as 1 participant from the city of Amsterdam (Nederland)

Location / Dates: The event took place in Nea Smyrni (Greece), from 11/07/2016 to 12/07/2016

Short description: The aim of the event was "Learning critical EU social and political issues" – "Particular Interests and Social Partnership" with the following Topics for development

• The Disability, Ecology and Migration Strategies based on societal and intercultural engagement and volunteering as a new spur for EU Democracy
• How people with particular interests harmed by the EU could be equal active citizens in Union
• The accessible pathways for Eurosceptic individuals to ensure an inclusive and participative democratic life at EU level
• Innovative models of cooperation between state, governmental and national institutions, the economic sector and voluntary unions of citizens

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PARIS SCRATCH ~ bart plantenga [RQ's First Advertorial]

advertorial /ˌadvəːˈtɔːrɪəl/ – noun: *advertorial;* plural noun: *advertorials – a newspaper or magazine advertisement giving information about a product in the style of an editorial or objective journalistic article.*

The complete *PARIS SCRATCH* is now available from Sensitive Skin.

The skill and intensity with which plantenga chronicles these sorties into life lived at the edge should ensure his place in the next pantheon of great bohemian saints and sinners.

Kevin Riordan, Chicago Reader, Coal Hill Review

I'm really excited to announce this because *PARIS SCRATCH* is a magical book containing 365 [1 per day] not quite poems; not quite journal entries – "zen blink meta-factual snapshots of everyday Paris life" where the author lived for some 3 years, deejayed, worked everyday jobs and wrote for outlets such as *Paris Passion, Paris Free Voice, The Frank*, etc.

"A marvelous book – imagine Baudelaire taking a camera & throwing out his pen in a rebellious manner then taking snapshots of everything that comes his way…"
• Nina Zivancevic, author of Living on Air & Death of NYC

bart plantenga spent much time roaming the Paris streets, but instead of documenting with a camera he chose a pen instead, scribbling observations while walking in ragged notepads in a handwriting not quite illegible.

I really like the way *he* describes it: "Wandering the streets & writing simultaneously fuses two key creative acts – if worn shoe heels & barely legible scribbles can be considered manifestations of creativity. When you live in a city long enough, you wake up one day & what was fascinating & compelling yesterday suddenly becomes the background for routine. You may not even notice you've stopped looking, curiosity curbed, eyes down to the ground & fixed on getting from point A to point B. To reinvent my relation to my surroundings – first Paris & later NYC – I came up with the Unloaded Camera Snapshots series, a simple exercise to document the 'snapshots' of everyday life. They served as attempts to re-pollinate existence with the fecund, oft-neglected details of the everyday, *la vie quotidienne*.

plantenga was born in Amsterdam, grew up on the American East Coast, lived all over America, moved to Paris and eventually back to his native Amsterdam. He is the author of the much-excerpted novel *Beer Mystic*, which *Luc Sante* described as: "Top-fermented, with a good nose, an acrid middle, a dry finish – bubbly and acidulous in reserved measure – and with ambient yeast peculiar to the Lower East Side, the kind that turns concrete to dust. Plantenga is a poet and a prankster as well as a distinguished bathtub brewer. He deserves immediate investigation."

His short story collection *Wiggling Wishbone* and novella *Spermatagonia: The Isle of Man* earned him positive reviews and favorable comparisons to JG Ballard,

Philip K. Dick, William Gibson**.** *Andrei Codrescu, National Public Radio* described his writing as "frightfully intelligent."

His books on yodeling *YODEL-AY-EE-OOOO: The Secret History of Yodeling Around the World* [Routledge, 2004] *Yodel in HiFi: From Kitsch Folk to Contemporary Electronica* plus the CD compilation *Rough Guide to Yodel* received worldwide attention: NPR, BBC, Al-Jazeera, ABC television, WNYC, WFMU, *Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair,Washington Post*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *UTNE Reader, The Wire*, *Village Voice*, *London Review*. *New York Times Magazine* featured *Yodel-Ay-Ee-Oooo* in its *"6th Annual Year of Ideas"*. The books have created the misunderstanding that he is one of the world's foremost yodel experts.

His work has appeared in many academic journals, popular magazines, literary journals: [*Ambit*, *Evergreen Review*, *Vokno*, *Exquisite Corpse, Downtown, Urban Grafitti, Fringecore, Sandbox, Carolina Quarterly, Mississippi Review*] and mainstream media: *The Guardian, Times of London, American Heritage, American Book Review, Actuel, New Hampshire, Michigan Today, Brooklyn Rail, KLM Holland Herald, American Lawyer…*

He also writes about refugees for both Vox Populi & Truthdig.

He has lectured/read at the Library of Congress, Rotterdam Opera Days, Sound Escape Conference [Toronto], NYU Fales Library, The Brooklyn Bridge Reading, & countless venues around the world.

Anthologies: *Nation-KGB Nonfiction Reader*; *Waiting for a Train: Jimmie Rodgers's America*; *Up Is Up, But So Is Down: New York's Downtown Literary Scene*; *Reggae, Rasta, Revolution: Jamaican Music from Ska to Dub* [Simon & Schuster]*; Sonic Geography Imagined and Remembered;* Semiotext(e) *SF*, *Crimes of the Beat, Radiotext(e),Noirotica #3, Fiction International, Best American Erotica 1994* [Simon & Schuster].

He is one of the co-founders of the NYC-based *Unbearables* writing group, which has produced numerous anthologies and countless thematic lit events since their founding in the later 1980s.

He is also a DJ-radiomaker and has produced guest radio shows for the BBC and VPRO (NL), has appeared on a dozen *NPR* radio shows, as well as *NBC* and *ABC*

TV plus public radio in the Netherlands, France and Switzerland. He has produced his radio show Wreck This Mess since 1986 in NYC (WFMU), Paris (Radio Libertaire) & Amsterdam (Radio 100/Radio Patapoe/Mixcloud) where he now lives.

"Paris Scratch" is a beautiful, picturesque read that I've been savoring slowly for a couple of weeks now. In the tradition of writers like Georges Perec, Roland Barthes, Patrick Modiano, Jean-Paul Clebert, with echoes of Queneau's "Exercises in Style," Plantenga captures a Paris that finds beauty and wonder in simple exchanges between prostitutes and shopkeepers, children, workers, and random passersby. … The synthesis of poetry and prose, the homage to the visual image, and the recognition of the sublime beauty of the unspectacular, make this a compelling and immensely satisfying read. Sip this book like cognac.
Alfred Vitale, author, academic, editor of RANT

The companion to Paris Scratch, *NY SIN PHONEY IN FACE FLAT MINOR* (Sensitive Skin) documents New York using the same tactics and will appear in November 2016.

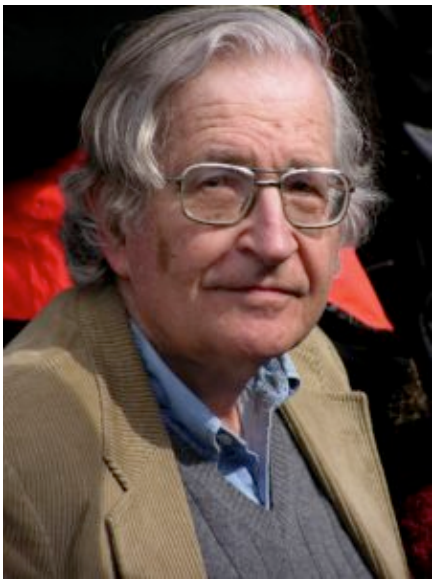
Please let me know if you are interested. Thanks so much,
Blandine Broche

* *For free pdf or paper reviewer's copy: contact us & we will forward your request to the publisher.*

The INSANE Logic Of The YODEL

Printing A Book, Old School

Global Warming And The Future Of Humanity: An Interview With Noam Chomsky And Graciela Chichilnisky



Noam Chomsky

Graciela Chichilinsky

truth-out.org. September 2016. How serious of an issue is climate change? Does

global warming really threaten human civilization? Can it be reversed, or is it already late?

In this interview for Truthout, two scholars, *Noam Chomsky*, one of the world's leading public intellectuals, and *Graciela Chichilnisky*, a renowned economist and climate change authority who wrote and designed the carbon market of the Kyoto Protocol, concur on a few key points. First of all, global warming and climate change constitute the greatest challenge facing humanity, and may pose an even greater threat to our species than that of nuclear weapons. Secondly, the operations of the capitalist world economy are at the core of the climate change threat because of over-reliance on fossil fuels and a perverse sense of economic values. Thirdly, the world needs to adopt alternative energy systems as quickly as possible. And finally, it is crucial to explore technologies to assist us in reversing climate change — as time is running out.

C. J. Polychroniou: A consensus seems to be emerging among scientists and even political and social analysts that global warming and climate change represent the greatest threat to the planet. Do you concur with this view, and why?

Noam Chomsky: I agree with the conclusion of the experts who set the Doomsday Clock for the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. They have moved the Clock two minutes closer to midnight — three minutes to midnight — because of the increasing threats of nuclear war and global warming. That seems to me a credible judgment. Review of the record shows that it's a near miracle that we have survived the nuclear age. There have been repeated cases when nuclear war came ominously close, often a result of malfunctioning of early-warning systems and other accidents, sometimes [as a result of] highly adventurist acts of political leaders. It has been known for some time that a major nuclear war might lead to nuclear winter that would destroy the attacker as well as the target. And threats are now mounting, particularly at the Russian border, confirming the prediction of George Kennan and other prominent figures that NATO expansion, particularly the way it was undertaken, would prove to be a "tragic mistake," a "policy error of historic proportions."

As for climate change, it's by now widely accepted by the scientific community that we have entered a new geological era, the Anthropocene, in which the Earth's climate is being radically modified by human action, creating a very different planet, one that may not be able to sustain organized human life in

anything like a form we would want to tolerate. There is good reason to believe that we have already entered the Sixth Extinction, a period of destruction of species on a massive scale, comparable to the Fifth Extinction 65 million years ago, when three-quarters of the species on earth were destroyed, apparently by a huge asteroid. Atmospheric CO2 is rising at a rate unprecedented in the geological record since 55 million years ago. There is concern — to quote a statement by 150 distinguished scientists — that "global warming, amplified by feedbacks from polar ice melt, methane release from permafrost, and extensive fires, may become irreversible," with catastrophic consequences for life on Earth, humans included — and not in the distant future. Sea level rise and destruction of water resources as glaciers melt alone may have horrendous human consequences.

Graciela Chichilnisky: The consensus is that climate change ranks along with nuclear warfare as the top two risks facing human civilization. If nuclear warfare is believed to be somewhat controlled, then climate change is now the greatest threat.

As difficult as it is to eliminate the risk of nuclear warfare, it requires fewer changes to the global economy than does averting or reversing climate change. Climate change is due to the use of energy for industrial growth, which has been and is overwhelmingly based on fossil fuels. Changing an economic system that is bent on uncontrolled and poorly measured economic growth and depends on fossil energy for its main objectives, is much more difficult than changing how nuclear energy is used for military purposes. Some think it may be impossible.

Virtually all scientific studies point to increased temperatures since 1975, and a recent story in The New York Times confirms that decades-long warnings by scientists on global warming are no longer theoretical as land ice melts and sea levels rise. Yet, there are still people out there who not only question the widely accepted scientific view that current climate change is mostly caused by human activities, but also cast a doubt on the reliability of surface temperatures. Do you think this is all politically driven, or also caused by ignorance and perhaps even fear of change?

Chomsky: It is an astonishing fact about the current era that in the most powerful country in world history, with a high level of education and privilege, one of the

two political parties virtually denies the well-established facts about anthropogenic climate change. In the primary debates for the 2016 election, every single Republican candidate was a climate change denier, with one exception, John Kasich — the "rational moderate" — who said it may be happening but we shouldn't do anything about it. For a long time, the media have downplayed the issue. The euphoric reports on US fossil fuel production, energy independence, and so on, rarely even mention the fact that these triumphs accelerate the race to disaster. There are other factors too, but under these circumstances, it hardly seems surprising that a considerable part of the population either joins the deniers or regards the problem as not very significant.

Chichilnisky: Climate change is new and complex. We don't have all the answers. We are still learning how exactly the Earth reacts to increased CO2 and other greenhouse gases. We know it leads to warming seas which are melting the North and the South Poles, rising and starting to swallow entire coastal areas in the US and elsewhere, as the New York Times article documents. We know that the warming rising seas will swallow entire island nations that are about 25 percent of the UN vote and perhaps at the end, even our civilization. This realization is traumatic and the first reaction to trauma is denial. Since there is some remaining scientific uncertainty, a natural response is to deny that change is occurring. This is natural but it is very dangerous. Signs of a poorly understood but treatable house fire requires action, not inaction. While denial leads to certainty, it is only the certainty of death. This is true for individuals and also for civilizations.

Political parties often take advantage of denial and fear in a moment of change. This is a well understood phenomenon that often leads to scapegoat-ism: blaming outsiders, such as immigrants, or racial and religious minorities. The phenomenon is behind Brexit and the violence in the political cycles in the US and EU. After denial comes anger and finally, acceptance. I think some are still between denial and anger, and I hope will reach acceptance, because there is still time to act, but the door is closing fast.

In global surveys, Americans are more skeptical than other people around the world over climate change. Why is that? And what does it tell us about American political culture?

Chomsky: The US is to an unusual extent a business-run society, where short-term concerns of profit and market share displace rational planning. The US is also

unusual in the enormous scale of religious fundamentalism. The impact on understanding of the world is extraordinary. In national polls almost half of those surveyed have reported that they believe that God created humans in their present form 10,000 years ago (or less) and that man shares no common ancestor with the ape. There are similar beliefs about the Second Coming. Senator James Inhofe, who headed the Senate Committee on the environment, speaks for many when he assures us that "God's still up there and there's a reason for this to happen," so it is sacrilegious for mere humans to interfere.

Chichilnisky: The "can do" logic, by its own nature, does not accept limits. And an empire does not have a graceful way to evolve out of this role. History demonstrates this time and again. Trying to conserve a privileged global position makes change traumatic for the US.

The first reaction to trauma is denial, as I explained, then comes anger and finally, acceptance. I think the US is still between denial and anger, and I hope we will reach acceptance because almost perversely, right now, only the US has the technology that is needed for global economic change.

Recent data related to global emissions of heat-treating gases suggest that we may have left behind us the period of constantly increased emissions. Is there room here for optimism about the future of the environment?

Chomsky: There is always room for Gramsci's "optimism of the will." There are still many options, but they are diminishing. Options range from simple initiatives that are easily undertaken like weatherizing homes (which could also create many jobs), to entirely new forms of energy, perhaps fusion, perhaps new means of exploiting solar energy outside the Earth's atmosphere (which has been seriously suggested), to methods of decarbonization that might, conceivably, even reverse some of the enormous damage already inflicted on the planet. And much else.

Chichilnisky: This is good news, it is a step in the right direction. But the road is miles long and the first step, while necessary, does not determine success. It is far from enough. The problem that few people appreciate and was only recently observed in the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] data is that CO2 stays hundreds of years in the atmosphere once emitted. It does not decay as particles or sulfur dioxide does. We have used the majority of our carbon budget and we are already at dangerous levels of CO2 concentrations, about 400 parts

per million. The levels were 250 before industrialization. So the problem is what we have done already and, therefore, what must be undone.

According to the Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC, page 191, in most scenarios we now have to remove the CO2 we emitted. These emissions were recent, mostly since World War II — 1945 — which was a turning point of the world economy. This was the era of US dominance and of globalization based on over-extraction of natural resources from poor nations and overconsumption of those same resources by the rich industrial nations. The era of galloping increase of wealth by the very few and the even faster galloping and record inequality and poverty in the world economy as a whole. This is the divide between the [global] North that houses 18 percent of the global population and the [global] South that houses over 80 percent.

Given that change in human behavior happens slowly and that it will take many decades before the world economy makes a shift to new, clean(er) forms of energy, should we look toward a technological solution to climate change?

Chomsky: Anything feasible and potentially effective should be explored. There is little doubt that a significant part of any serious solution will require advances of technology, but that can only be part of the solution. Other major changes are necessary. Industrial production of meat makes a huge contribution to global warming. The entire socioeconomic system is based on production for profit and a growth imperative that cannot be sustained.

There are also fundamental issues of value: What is a decent life? Should the master-servant relation be tolerated? Should one's goals really be maximization of commodities — Veblen's "conspicuous consumption"? Surely there are higher and more fulfilling aspirations.

Chichilnisky: We seem to have no alternative. I would like to say that the problem could be solved by green energy sources. However, they can no longer solve the problem: many studies have demonstrated that the long-run solutions, such as planting more trees, which are critical to human survival, and adopting cleaner forms of energy, which are the long-run energy solution, cannot be utilized in the timescale that matters. That is the problem. Technology is a many-headed monster and perhaps it would be better to regress to a safer past and avoid technological change; it is tempting to think like that. But UN studies have shown

that even if we planted a tree on every square yard available in the planet by the end of the century we would only capture at most 10 percent of the CO2 we need to reduce. This does not mean that we should not plant trees; we should, for biodiversity's sake, and for our long-term future together with the other species.

Trees and clean energy [are] the long-run solution but we have no time to wait for the long run. We need a short-run solution now, and one that encourages and facilitates the transition to the long-run solution. This is the technology that IPCC proposes, to remove CO2 directly from air. I cofounded a company called Global Thermostat that uses the heat and the power from clean and fossil energy sources, such as solar plants and wind farms, to remove CO2 from air. It provides a short-run solution that facilitates and accelerates the advent of the needed long run.

Many in the progressive and radical community, including the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), are quite skeptical and even opposed to so-called "geo-engineering" solutions. Is this the flip side of the coin to climate change deniers?

Chomsky: That does not seem to me a fair assessment. UCS and others like them may be right or wrong, but they offer serious reasons. That is also true of the very small group of serious scientists who question the overwhelming consensus, but the mass climate denier movements — like the leadership of the Republican Party and those they represent — are a different phenomenon altogether. As for geoengineering, there have been serious general critiques that I think cannot be ignored, like Clive Hamilton's, along with many positive assessments. It is not a matter for subjective judgment based on guesswork and intuition. Rather, these are matters that have to be considered seriously, relying on the best scientific understanding available, without abandoning sensible precautionary principles.

Chichilnisky: The remedy could be worse than the disease. Certain geoengineering processes have been proposed that could be very dangerous and must be avoided. Geoengineering means changing the Earth's fundamental large-scale processes. We know little of the consequences of the geoengineering process, such as spraying particles into the atmosphere that shade the planet from the sun's rays and could decrease its temperature. But this process is how dinosaurs disappeared from the Earth about 60 million years ago, by particles spewed by a volcano or a giant meteorite impact, and our species could follow

suit. The sun is the source of all energy on planet Earth and we cannot experiment with our only energy source. Changing the world's oceans to increase their uptake of CO2, as other geoengineering solutions propose, is equally dangerous, as the increased resulting acidity of the oceans kills tiny crustaceans, such as krill, that are the basis of the pyramid of life on the planet as we know it.

What immediate but realistic and enforceable actions could or should be taken to tackle the climate change threat?

Chomsky: Rapid ending of use of fossil fuels, sharp increase in renewable energy, research into new options for sustainable energy, significant steps toward conservation, and not least, a far-reaching critique of the capitalist model of human and resource exploitation; even apart from its ignoring of externalities, the latter is a virtual death knell for the species.

Chichilnisky: Here is a plan consisting of realistic and enforceable actions that can be taken now to tackle the climate change threat: We have to remove the CO2 that the industrial economy has already emitted, which otherwise will remain in the atmosphere for hundreds of years and alter the Earth's climate irreversibly. It is possible to do this. The technology now exists to remove carbon directly from the atmosphere and is proven, very safe and inexpensive. This new technology works by taking the CO2 directly from pure air — or a combination of industrial sources and pure air — using as a power source not electricity, but mostly the inexpensive heat that is residual of most industrial processes. The CO2 removed from air is stabilized on earth by selling it for useful commercial purposes with a benefit. CO2 from air can replace petroleum: it can produce plastics and acetate, it can produce carbon fibers that replace metals and clean hydrocarbons, such as synthetic gasoline. We can use CO2 to desalinate water, enhance the production of vegetables and fruit in greenhouses, carbonate our beverages and produce biofertilizers that enhance the productivity of the soil without poisoning it. Carbon negative technology is absolutely needed now as reported by the UNFCCC [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change] Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC, p. 191, and also in four articles of the 2015 Paris Agreement.

Is there a way to predict how the world will look like 50 years from now if humans fail to tackle and reverse global warming and climate change?

Chomsky: If current tendencies persist, the outcome will be disastrous before too

long. Large parts of the world will become barely habitable affecting hundreds of millions of people, along with other disasters that we can barely contemplate.

Chichilnisky: It is easier to create the future than to predict it. Right now we must implement the requirements of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the UN Kyoto Protocol, as well as the Paris Agreement recommendations: immediately we must remove the CO2 we have already emitted from the planet's atmosphere and extend the Kyoto emission limits. This is the only possible alternative in most scenarios to catastrophic climate change. This can and must be done.

The funding provided by the Kyoto Protocol Carbon Market could build carbon negative power plants in poor nations. Carbon negative power plants can provide energy while they overcome poverty and change economic values in the right direction.

The UN carbon market, which is international law since 2005, will produce a much needed change in global economic values. The change in economic values created by the new markets for global public goods will reorient our global economy and under the right conditions can usher the satisfaction of basic needs of the present and of the future. This is what is needed right now. We need to support our future instead of undermining human survival. Let's do it.

About the author:
C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to Truthout as well as a member of Truthout's Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish.

Originally published on http://www.truth-out.org/

The Gates of Damascus

Someone else's things are in the house: school notebooks that don't belong to Asma, a cardboard box of cheap cookies Hala would never buy, a small bottle of Syrian perfume. My cupboard is full of junk, and there's an unfamiliar dress hanging on the line.

Hala comes in around noon, in a hurry, plastic bags full of groceries in both hands. She looks tired – her face is swollen. 'I thought you'd never come back!' We hug, clumsily as always.

'We have guests,' she says.

'Yes, I noticed.'

'Sahar and Aisha, they're not staying long.' Sahar is a Christian, I suddenly remember, her husband a Muslim. There you have it – the religious differences everyone has been talking about during the last few days don't apply to Hala and her friends.

'Have you heard the news? They say the prisoners are going to be released. Sahar is having her house fixed up; that's why she's staying here.'

'What about Ahmed?'

Hala shrugs. 'He asked me to bring him his winter clothes. That means he's planning to stay for a while.'

She begins peeling potatoes in the kitchen; the children will be coming home any minute. I bring in the folding table from the hallway, pull up a plastic chair and apply myself to the green beans. Hala gives me a searching look. 'How was it? Anything interesting happen?' She sounds skeptical.

I tell her about Father Léon's weird cap, the grumbling hikers, the ups and downs of Louise's love life. I suddenly realize that when I arrived in Syria I didn't even know whether Hala was a Christian or a Muslim – we didn't talk about those things back then.

'Do you consider me a typical Christian? Have you ever thought of me that way?'

Hala laughs in surprise. 'No, what makes you think that?'

'Oh, I don't know, I just wondered.'

She says nothing more about it. She doesn't seem at all interested in what's preoccupying me. She tells me about Tété, Zahra, Shirin and Farid. Every name she mentions is accompanied by a heartfelt 'umph!'. Shirin has moved in with Farid. 'You know what? The cows wake them up every morning.' Hala makes a disgusted face. To wake to rural sounds – as a city dweller, she can't imagine anything worse. 'Farid is used to it, of course, but Shirin…' She lights the oven, puts in a casserole dish of potatoes, onions and ground beef, and says peevishly: 'Just the thing for them, they can drink fresh milk every day.'

Tété is worried sick that they 'll want to move in with her again before long; after all, how can they make it through the winter without heating? 'She's begging me to come and live with her for the next few months,' Hala laughs. 'She says I can even bring you along!' Asma's school is closer to her house, Tété reasons, and it would save on the heating bill. 'The price of oil has gone up again: one hundred pounds for two days' worth. How can a family ever afford that on a monthly salary of two thousand pounds?'
'But everyone here has more than one income, don't they?'
It pops out before I know it. That's what Father Léon says, and he's right too, everyone here has something going on the side. But Hala isn't used to having me contradict her – until now, she's been my principal source of information about this country. 'No, not at all,' she protests, 'most people have to make do with just their salary.' More and more children are being sent out to work, she says. Every morning on the way to the university she passes a little boy, who must be about eight, selling bread; when she comes home in the afternoon, he's still standing there.
How long have I been gone? Barely three days, but Hala talks to me as if I've just come from abroad, as though I know nothing about what goes on here! Before I have time to reply, Asma and Aisha rush in. They throw their schoolbags on the floor, change their clothes and lock themselves in the front room with a Madonna tape.
Hala tosses my clothes in the washing machine, sweeps the courtyard, scolds the neighbors who have their TV on much too loudly, runs back and forth between the kitchen and the bedroom, and grumbles the whole time about a colleague of hers at the university. He knows nothing about the subject he teaches – what he would really like to do, she says, is become head of the *mukhabarat* (the Syrian security police).
Gradually I feel my defiance ebb away. The clarity of the last few days, the empty

desert landscape, the broad hallways in Ibrahim's house, the cool guest room with its high bed – it all starts to seem like a mirage. I'm back at the school of hard knocks.

After dinner, Hala, Sahar and I lie on the bed in our nightgowns. Asma and Aisha are doing their homework in the front room, and Madonna blares through the walls. Sahar is excited by the rumors about the release of the prisoners. Aisha and she have already been to the tailor's for new dresses.
'You'll never guess who I ran into this morning,' Hala interrupts her. 'Who?' 'Omayya!' Omayya's husband was released a few years ago after fifteen years in prison. 'Well?' Sahar asks inquisitively, 'what did she say?' 'She cried, right there on the street. "Don't wait for your husbands," she said. "I waited so long for mine and now I wish they'd lock him up again.'"
'Why?' I ask.
Hala sighs. 'He's become old, he doesn't know how to be happy anymore. The only thing he thinks about is how his friends in prison are doing.'
'Did you see Tadmor prison?' Sahar wants to know.
I shake my head. 'No, *abuna Léon* wasn't so interested in that.'
I tell her about Louise. 'By the way, how did you do it? Weren't your parents opposed to your marrying a Muslim?'
Sahar thinks about it. 'At first they were, but later on not anymore.'
'What if they had tried to stop you, what would you have done then?'
She laughs. 'I didn't need their approval, it was my life. We belonged to the same political movement, we didn't care much about religion – we had other things on our minds!' I'm reminded of what a Lebanese acquaintance once told me about leftists in the Arab world. They had done nothing to change tribal consciousness, he said, they had simply started a new tribe: the communist one. There they found the security they had known before among their own people.

That night Hala and I sleep in the same bed again. We both lie dreaming, tossing and turning. In my student quarters in Utrecht I find that three little urchins have moved in with me. I try to explain to my roommates that I can't work with these kids around, but no one understands what I'm so worked up about.
Hala dreams that she's at a reception, where she meets a very bad Egyptian actress. While she's talking to her, she suddenly discovers that she forgot to put on her shoes. She's embarrassed: a faculty member of the University of Damascus without footwear! But a bit later she feels an enormous rage welling up inside

her. She looks at the actress with fire in her eyes and shouts that she doesn't even *want* to talk to her.
I'm startled awake by the rasping gutturals of the muezzin in the nearby mosque. It's still dark outside. *Allahu akbar, Allaaaah …*It sounds like he's sitting in the corner of the room. How have I been able to sleep through this for the last few months? Once my eyes become adjusted to the dark, I see that Hala is awake too. She looks at me and smiles, but says nothing.

At first, Asma was wild about her new paramilitary uniform. She put it on as soon as Hala brought it home, stuck a toy pistol in her wide leather belt, took her whistle out of the drawer and ran outside. She wanted to keep it on as long as she could at night. It took some getting used to – it was like having a little soldier around the house. After her bath she would lie in front of the TV in her pajamas, her kepi on her head.
But the first morning she had to go to school in uniform, she acted bashful. She turned endlessly before the mirror in the hall, schoolbag strapped to her back. At the bus stop she was reluctant to join her classmates; some of the girls were wearing white headscarves with their uniforms.
By now the novelty has worn off: after school she kicks off her khaki pants in the bedroom, her shirt and kepi fly through the air. One afternoon Hala picks up the pants with a sigh and discovers a tear in them. 'Look at this – what a little monkey, these have to last her six years!' Schoolbooks and notebooks with pictures of Assad on the covers lie tossed all around. Classroom stories seep into the house and begin coloring our lives.
Asma would like to be put in a different class, where more of her former classmates are, but when she asked the teacher about it, her reply was: 'Do you have a *wasta*?' This same teacher appointed one of the girls to inform her about everything that goes on behind her back. 'That's how they teach children to spy, even at this age,' Hala sighs.

Sometimes we pick up Asma from school. In the taxi one afternoon she asks: 'Mama, are the *ikhwan muslimin* – Muslim Brothers – bad people?' Hala looks at the taxi driver in alarm, signals to Asma to talk more softly and whispers: 'Why do you ask that?' Asma says they learned a new song at school. Later, when we sit down to dinner at the kitchen table, she sings it for us. It goes like this:
We vow to combat imperialism
and Zionism, and backwardness,

and that their criminal accomplices, the Muslim Brothers,
we shall destroy

They have to sing that every morning in the playground. The last line in particular echoes in Asma's mind. 'But do you know who the *ikhwan* are?' Hala asks. 'Those are the boys in prison with Papa, the ones who sometimes come over to say hello when we visit him. Remember Rafik? Does he look like a bad person?'
No, Asma has to admit, Rafik doesn't look like a bad person. She eats her soup slowly, deep in thought. Then she asks another question. It has something to do with me, although I can't find out right away what it is. Hala answers her quietly, but Asma's voice keeps getting louder. She angrily brushes aside all Hala's demurrals. I listen in amazement: this demagogic tone is so foreign to Asma, it's as if a fourth person had joined us at the table.
'What are you two talking about?'
Hala is visibly embarrassed. 'Asma wants to know why you don't become a Muslim.'
I laugh. 'How did she come up with that?'
'Oh, the things people say around her …Christians believe that Mary is the mother of Jesus, they say, and therefore the wife of God, which is impossible according to Islam.'
'Where does Asma get these stories?'
'From her religion teacher, apparently.'
Asma gives me a fierce look; the fire of this morning's religion class burns on. Islam is the most recent religion, her teacher said, and therefore the best.
'What do you tell her?' I ask Hala.
'What can I tell her? I don't want to say things that will get her into trouble at school, I don't want her to become alienated from her classmates. I can only hope she'll eventually discover the truth herself, like I did.'

Asma has left the table. Hala follows her with her eyes as she runs outside with her whistle around her neck. This isn't the first time they've had these discussions. Last spring Asma came home from school thoroughly upset. At first she didn't want to talk about what had happened. She just wanted to cry, she said, that's how bad she felt. That evening Hala suggested that they take a walk, like two grown-ups who have something important to talk about. During the walk it all came out, bit by bit. A girlfriend had told her that Mohammed didn't receive his knowledge directly from Allah, the way the religion teacher said, but from

Buhayra, a Christian monk he met on one of his journeys. It's a story Christians often tell about the Prophet – Hala had heard it before. 'And it's probably true; of course Islam adopted some things from Christianity.'
'Did you tell her that?'
'Oh no. I can't tell her everything I'm thinking. To me, Islam is an old carpet: beautiful to look at, but old nonetheless. But if I told her that and her teacher heard it, she'd think I was a communist!' She stares sadly into space. 'Who knows, maybe the things they teach Asma at school are a good preparation for times to come. Maybe before long there won't be any place for ideas like Ahmed's and mine.'

The TV is on, the cassette recorder is playing and the folding table has been moved from the kitchen to the front room – Asma is doing her homework. Sometimes she calls Hala in to help. They bicker about the law of gravity: Asma doesn't understand it, Hala can't explain it. That evening Hala has to quiz her. Another person takes possession of Asma as she recites her lessons, her legs folded under her, her body held taut as a wire. Sometimes I recognize the rhetorical, hollow tone of the speeches of Arab leaders; at other times, the entreating voice of the imam in the mosque. When she's in a good mood, I'm allowed to test her French. Her textbook was published in 1971. It contains drawings of French children, of cats and dogs and French villages in the snow – 'every Sunday, Delphine and Marinette go to church with their parents'.
I'm amazed at the complicated French sentences Asma is able to recite by heart; little stories by Guy de Maupassant, poems by Victor Hugo. They're delivered in tight little packages, with not a single word left out. Afterwards, when I ask her a simple question that isn't in the book, she laughs shyly and Hala has to translate what I've said.
'Did you learn everything by heart too?' I ask Hala.
'No, at least not that way. A military regime doesn't want people to think', she says, 'it would rather have them recite everything.'

That evening I have to go to Father Léon's house to drop off the things I borrowed from him. 'Maybe I'll ask him to come by and visit us sometime,' I say. 'I'm sure both of you would like him.'
When I come home Asma is already asleep. Hala is lying on the bed in her room reading *Le harem politique: Le Prophète et les femmes* by the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi. Not the prophet again! Father Léon was right when

he said that the Sunni Muslims wallow in Islamic history.
Hala looks up from her book. ‘Interesting?’ I ask. She doesn’t fail to notice the irony in my voice – she senses exactly what’s on my mind since my walk through the desert with Father Léon. She nods. ‘But I never thought I’d read something like this.’
‘So why are you reading it?’
She puts down the book with a sigh. ‘Did you hear Asma at the table this afternoon? That teacher of hers comes up with the biggest nonsense about Islam, just like the fundamentalists. I want to be able to defend myself when people attack me, and I can do that better with the words of the Prophet himself than with Marx or Sartre. Do you think people understood Ahmed and his friends when they talked about communism? No, they only understand the language of religion.’ Even the communists realized that after a while, she says, but just when they were trying to find common ground with the Muslim Brothers, to form a united front, they were arrested.
She likes the book. ‘There’s even something in it that will appeal to you.’ She reads me a passage in which Mernissi explains that, to Westerners, the past is like dessert, while Arabs regard it as the main dish.
Hala is sitting up now and laughs secretively. ‘Asma and I had an interesting talk after you left.’
‘About what?’
‘How can Father Léon come to visit us, he’s a Christian priest, isn’t he?’ Asma had asked as soon as I pulled the door shut behind me.
‘That doesn’t mean he can’t come to visit us.’ Hala had said.
‘But the Christians don’t like us, do they?’
‘Who says they don’t? Where did you hear that?’
‘I can tell at school,’ Asma said. ‘The Christian children always play by themselves, they don’t like us.’
‘What about Sahar, she doesn’t having anything against us, does she?’
Asma had to think about that one. Sahar, that was different, she said.
‘And what about Lieve? She’s a Christian too.’
Asma thought again. ‘Maybe she’s not a real Christian,’ she wavered. When Hala insisted that I was, Asma ruled: ‘No, Lieve is Lieve.’

It’s growing cooler in the streets of Damascus – Hala had warned me that the seasons change abruptly around here. Close to Tété’s house, little stands selling prickly pear have appeared, and Tété has spent days bottling citrus fruit and

makdous – eggplants stuffed with walnuts and hot peppers. At home, Hala puts away the floor fan and covers the bed with heavy blankets. She buys fresh olives at the market and pickles them in brine. They taste bitter, but the Damascenes like them that way – it goes with the season.

The smell of autumn is in the air, an intimate, cosy smell that reconciles me to the domesticity of my life in Damascus. The jasmine tree has lost its scent, the leaves of the fig tree in the courtyard have begun to change color and there's a new sound in our street: *Blooopblooop, blooopblooop*. The first time she hears it, Hala pricks up her ears and runs outside. It's the man who sells heating oil; there's a barrel on the roof that he fills to the rim.

The cigarette boys squat down together in the evening and warm their hands at the chestnut-seller's fire. Whenever I get out of the taxi and see them in the distance, my heart begins to pound. Their leader's leather jacket shines under the streetlights. Ever since I saw him coming out of his house with his groggy face and wrinkled T-shirt, I've felt a peculiar bond with him. But he himself seems to have lost his bravura since that meeting. His friends still judge him when I come by, but he no longer calls out to me, he only looks at me out of the corner of his eye.

His presence imparts a certain wistfulness to our street. One evening when he's not there I saunter home, disappointed, searching for a glimpse of his jacket and his proud head with its combed-back hair. Suddenly I remember Siham's story. She lived in a neighborhood just like this one, in the old part of Baghdad. As she was walking home one evening, a young man came up to her. He pressed his body against hers and she smelled his breath – he had been drinking. He kissed her, hard and desperately. She was too stunned to resist, but before she even realized what had happened, he murmured 'Excuse me, excuse me' and ran off around the corner. Only then did she smell his scent – a pleasant, spicy smell. For months the mysterious meeting was on her mind: she kept feeling his body against hers, smelling his scent. She searched for him in every young man she came across. She was twenty-five when I met her; that stolen kiss in the night seemed the most substantial thing that had ever happened to her.

Hala and Asma are taking a bath together. They talk and chortle like turtle doves; I listen to them with a mixture of tenderness and envy. They're discussing who's the best hairdresser in Damascus, Georges or Johnny. Wrapped in her robe, a towel around her head, Hala comes walking into the bedroom – 'Oh, are you back already?' Asma calls from the bathroom to ask for a robe, using her sweetest

voice. ‘Coming right up, *ya habibi*.’
Hala winks at me. *Habibi*, my dearest, is a masculine form of address.
‘My daughter is growing up,’ Hala whispers laughingly. Not long ago, Asma was looking at herself in the mirror in the hall. ‘When will the boys start calling out to me?’ she wanted to know. ‘Soon,’ Hala said, ‘but only if you start dressing less boyishly. They won’t whistle at you if you always wear jeans.’ Some time after that, Asma asked her about the difference between a girl and a married woman. Hala gave her a vague answer about a married woman usually working more around the house and taking care of the children, but that apparently wasn’t what Asma was waiting to hear. Tonight she started talking about it again. ‘Mama, is it true that girls have something fragile inside them?’ She heard that from Leila, one of her girlfriends at school. When a woman marries, Leila claims, that delicate membrane gets broken. ‘And if a woman is divorced and then marries again, Mama, does it grow back by itself?’

The curse of virginity! The same curse Hala decided to shake off at the age of eighteen. ‘It all repeats itself,’ she says. When Asma comes out of the tub she throws herself on the bed and looks at me, eyes gleaming, still under the spell of the chatter in the steam bath. Her hair is wet, her skin glistens, she smells soapy, and when I reach out an arm to her she snuggles up to me.
She peers at Hala through her wet hair. ‘Tell Lieve about Rami,’ she says. Rami is a classmate she’s had a crush on for months. Of course I’ve already heard all about him, but Hala plays along. Asma shows me the picture she keeps in her wallet, next to the one of her father: a plump little boy with a worried expression – not exactly what you’d call a playboy. But Rami is popular, and Asma isn’t his only girlfriend: she’s second in a line of five. While Hala combs her unruly curls, Asma announces that she’s going to invite him over for lunch next week. When he comes, she says sternly, Hala and I will have to stay out of the room.

That evening she lies in front of the TV and sings along exuberantly with the commercials for Lebanese shampoo, powdered milk and corn oil. She changes channels with her foot. Suddenly, Assad appears on the screen, seated across from a blonde female journalist. They’re talking about the peace conference in Madrid. Hala comes in from the kitchen. ‘This was taped at his new residence,’ she remarks. ‘See those enormous vases? Just like in Saudi palaces.’
‘What’s he saying?’
‘Wait, they’ll translate it in a bit.’ She’s right: later we see the interview again,

this time subtitled in English and French.
Assad's shirt is blue, then white, depending on the quality of the reception. The American journalist asks him about political freedom in Syria. Assad smiles affably and points out that there are only two political parties in America, but seven in Syria. 'And now the only thing we'll hear for days is how wonderful the Americans think our president is,' Hala grumbles.

Tomorrow she has to visit Ahmed; the preparations take up all her time. In the bedroom I find her standing high on the ladder, her head practically hidden in a leather suitcase on top of the cupboard. She pulls out a baggy beige sweater and looks at it lovingly. 'I knitted this for Ahmed myself.' She tosses it to me. 'Put it on the pile. It doesn't look so great anymore, but Ahmed would wonder why it wasn't there, he'd think something was going on.' He still wears the blue shirt he had on when he was arrested, even though it's in tatters by now.
'Maybe I should buy him a shirt,' I say.
'You'll probably still be here when he comes home.' Hala has turned around. 'Don't you think? You heard what Sahar said, didn't you? The prisoners are going to be released. After all, Assad has to show the Americans that he's a real democrat!' She laughs. 'Nothing's happened around here for eleven years, then you come along and everything happens at once. The presidential elections are coming up in December. There's no way you can leave now.'
'But I can't just wait here until they free Ahmed. Who knows how long that will take? I can't stay away that long. What would my boyfriend say…?'
'Why don't you have him come over?'
'And stay in this little house?'
'We could all move out to Wadi al-Nakhleh.'
'And take Ahmed along?'
'Why not? Or maybe Ahmed would rather stay here alone.'
'I'd have to have my winter clothes brought over from Holland, and send my summer things back.'
'I'd wait before sending those summer things if I were you. Maybe you'll still be here next summer.'
It's nice to bob along on her sea of fantasy. The air suddenly tingles with excitement again, and the end of my stay fades into the indefinite. Who knows, maybe important things are about to happen here.

Hala has come down from the ladder. The floor of the cupboard is covered with

more plastic bags full of things. Last winter she was in mourning for her father – she hasn't looked at her winter clothes for two years.
'Take a look at this.' She sits down in the cupboard and hands me a light-pink compact. '*Amour absolu*' is printed on the lid in graceful letters. I open the little box and carefully pick up the powder puff. 'It's at least forty years old,' Hala says. 'It was one of my mother's wedding presents.'
'And from the looks of things she never used it.'
'No, she gave it to me just like this.' She carefully wraps the box back up in its white tissue. Sighing, she explores further. 'All this junk, what am I going to do with it?' She pulls out a muff with a fake gold chain, stands before the mirror and presses it to her side coquettishly. 'What do you think?' It's not her style. 'I'll wear it when Ahmed comes home.' We both know that's not true.
She digs in the cupboard again and comes back up with a black shawl with a picture of St. Peter's on it. 'Remember that Italian cinematographer in Baghdad? She gave me this.'
'And you put it in the cupboard right away.'
'Sure, what else would I do with it?' I catch a glimpse of the little bathrobe and the T-shirt with a motorcyclist on it that I brought for Asma. Meanwhile, Hala has run across three flat boxes with silk nightgowns in them. 'Look, I bought these when I thought Ahmed was coming home.' Pink and light-blue little nothings with bows – she's never worn them and she wonders whether they're still in fashion.
'Why don't you give them to Shirin? I'm sure she'd be happy to have them.'

Hala looks at me from between the piles of clothing, incomprehension on her face. 'But Lieve, these are my dreams!'
'How do I look?' She's standing in the doorway, bags full of winter clothes and books in each hand, taut from head to toe, braced for the journey. 'Well, those earrings…' The silver hoops with tinkling bells and blue stones are much too heavy for her little face. 'Ahmed likes them,' she says bravely, 'I do it for him.'
This time she's going alone. I hug her – now it's as though she's the one going on a trip. But it's only a little past noon when I hear the gate open again. She has his summer clothes with her, and a present for me: a pen box made of wood and palm resin, decorated with copper arabesques and lined with red velour.
She collapses on the couch. 'If you knew what I've been through this morning!' She had to wait forever before they let her in, so she started talking to the woman in front of her, someone she'd never seen before. 'Is your husband in there?' The woman nodded. 'Politics?' The woman turned up her nose in contempt. 'No,

money.' She looked at Hala without a smidgen of curiosity. 'What about you?' Hala thrust her chin in the air and said: 'Politics.' Neither of them said a thing for a moment; Hala was trying to imagine what 'money' could be about. 'Bribes?' she enquired. The woman threw her a withering glance: 'That's what they say.'

The rumors about the political prisoners being released had made everyone nervous. When their names were finally called, they saw that the guards had an enormous dog with them to sniff out any drugs being smuggled in. Some of the women were frightened and started screaming. The dog was as big as a pony, and Hala didn't dare walk past it either. One woman took the bag of sugar she'd brought for her son and threw it at the guards. This caused such a commotion that they had to take the dog away.
Then, out of revenge, the guards began skimping on the food the women had brought for the prisoners. They confiscated Ahmed's mother's homemade *kibbe*, and another woman had to leave behind a plate of fish. 'They're afraid to surrender power,' Hala says, 'they want to show us they're still the boss.' But the women protested so loudly that the guards finally had to give in again.
'What did Ahmed say?'
'He doesn't know. He's hoping, but at the same time he's afraid to hope.' A smile crosses her face. 'He says he'll cook when he comes home, and that he wants at least four more children. I just let him talk, I didn't feel like arguing with him.'
She looks at me, a gleam of amusement in her eyes. 'He even said I should try to convince you to have children!'

The Jordanian spy he had spent a lot of time with had been transferred to the prison at Tadmor, making Ahmed's life a lot less interesting. 'In fact, he's desperate. If he were a criminal he'd at least know how long he had to serve, but this way… no one knows when it will be over.' Some of the prisoners have been called in by the *mukhabarat.* Since then all kinds of rumors have been making the rounds about a document the prisoners have to sign before being released.
'What would Ahmed do in that case?'
'That depends on what he has to sign,' she says despondently. 'Leaving the prison with his tail between his legs after serving eleven years for his ideals – that's not Ahmed's style.

Campaign posters start appearing in the streets of Damascus. I look around wide-eyed. At the beginning of a busy shopping street hangs a banner reading: 'The shopkeepers of Salhieh say 'yes' to President Assad, the true Damascene'. The bit

about the ‘true Damascene’ in particular makes Hala laugh. Armored vehicles with photographs of the president zip by, and amateur painters give their fantasy free rein: from the side of a bank in the center of town, Assad’s stern features stare down at us from a canvas twenty meters high. Elsewhere they’ve given him a baby face and fat little arms – just like a cherub.
Meanwhile, the peace talks are rapidly approaching. One morning in bed I hear the BBC correspondent wonder aloud whether there are enough halal restaurants in Madrid; in the front room, Hala is listening to Radio Monte Carlo. We don’t learn much from the Syrian press, and Hala says that’s the way it will stay – the journalists Syria has sent to Madrid are notorious dunces. They speak only Arabic, but that doesn’t matter – they’ll obediently write whatever their editor-in -chief tells them to. On the first day of the conference, Hala and I are out running errands for Tété. Am I only imagining things, or is the city in a more subdued mood than usual? In the taxi everyone listens tensely to the radio; no one says a word. I think of Sadat, who signed the Camp David agreements – two years later he was dead.

Most of the sellers at the *souq* are also glued to the radio. Now that things have come this far, I feel a slight exhilaration, but when I look at Hala I see tears running down her cheeks. ‘For years they’ve been stirring us up against Israel, and now they suddenly go over our heads and cook up something completely different!’ She takes a handkerchief from her bag. ‘No one ever asks us a thing, they do exactly what they want.’ I can imagine her sense of helplessness. Her years of passive resistance have been fruitless; the world has rolled on without her.
‘It’s all so confusing,’ she says defiantly. ‘If only they’d just say what it’s all about – but while our Minister of Foreign Affairs sits at the table with the president of Israel, the papers still talk about the ‘Zionist foe’. Assad puts on his left blinker, but turns right.’

We have lunch at Tété’s. Farid and Shirin are there too. Suddenly Tété says: ‘May Allah punish the Israelis and undo everything that happens today in Madrid.’ The sentence clatters on the table like a weapon, but no one picks it up. Farid acts as though he has heard nothing. Hala looks at me conspiratorially – even she doesn’t harbor such radical thoughts. ‘My mother has been listening to the radio all morning,’ she says in an attempt to smooth things over. ‘The Israelis are keeping up the bombing of southern Lebanon.’ For her mother, this conference is

unacceptable. ‘It’s like…,’ Hala searches for an accurate comparison, ‘like someone asking her to walk down the street in a bathing suit.’
Back at the house, Hala turns on the TV right away. ‘Maybe Assad has decided in his infinite goodness to give us back Jordanian TV.’ She flips through the channels, hoping against hope. Jordanian TV is much more varied than its Syrian counterpart, but it’s been jammed ever since the Gulf War, because Jordan sided with Iraq. This evening we once again have to settle for the Syrian news.
The camera roams from the Palestinian speaker to al-Sharaa, the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and from him to the Jordanian delegation. There we have Shevardnadze, then Baker… no sign of the Israelis. We sit in front of the TV for the next three evenings. The speeches by the members of the Arab delegation are broadcast in their entirety: endless, numbing monologues that blend in with the monotonous drone of Asma reciting her lessons.

Hala remains on an emotional roller-coaster. At somber moments she says that these talks will cost the Alawites dearly, that they will bear the eternal shame of being the first to make contact with the Israelis. Then she complains about how the Israeli delegation is kept off-camera. ‘Al-Sharaa is sitting in the same room with Shamir,’ she shouts one evening in desperation, ‘why can’t I see that, what do they have to hide?’ We remain hopeful to the bitter end, but when the conference is over we still haven’t caught a glimpse of the Israelis.

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Chapter 5 from: **Lieve Joris – The Gates Of Damascus – Translated by Sam Garrett**
First edition published in The Netherlands in 1993

Available in Dutch: *Lieve Joris – De Poorten van Damascus*
Lieferbar: *Lieve Joris – Die Tore von Damaskus – Eine arabische Reise* (2000) – Aus dem Niederländischen von Barbara Heller
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Lieve Joris

Lieve Joris, who was born in Belgium and lives in Amsterdam, is one of Europe's leading nonfiction writers. She has written an award-winning book on Hungary and published widely acclaimed reports of her journeys in the Middle East and Africa. Her books about the Middle East include *De Golf* (The Gulf) and *The Gates of Damascus*.

In 1985 she set sail to the former Belgian colony of Zaire, where her great-uncle had been a missionary. The journey resulted in *Back to the Congo*. *'For years we have been without a major book about Africa,'* the Polish writer Ryszard Kapuściński wrote. *'Lieve Joris' book fills this painful, rather disgraceful void.'* Congo became a recurring theme in her work, leading successively to *Dans van de luipaard* (The Leopard's Dance), *The Rebels' Hour* and *De hoogvlaktes* (The High Plains). *The Rebels' Hour* was nominated for the T.R. Fyvel Book Award. For the French edition of *The High Plains*, Joris was awarded the Prix Nicolas Bouvier 2009.

Mali Blues, the account of her travels through Senegal, Mauretania and Mali, gained Joris the Belgian triennial award for Flemish prose (1999) and the French Prix de l'Astrolabe 1999.

Joris' books have been translated into English, French, German, Spanish, Catalan, Norwegian, Hungarian and Polish. She is currently travelling back and forth between Africa and China, doing research for her new book.

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