

ما تبقى

تصوّرات نسوية بيئية

What Remains: Eco-Feminist Pursuits

Developed and Edited: Knowledge Workshop

An Archive of Ghosts

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This is a personal and experimental archive that begins and ends with death. Death in its many forms—in its finality; in its mundanity; in its heartache; and in its promise of regeneration. The death of surrounding environments, of spaces and places, and ways of life. It begins at the end of a personal journey whose beginnings, boundaries, physical and metaphorical landscapes grow increasingly enmeshed. The journey is one of excavation—with all the labor this act entails—where memory is tilled to unearth ghosts and plant alternative imaginaries. Even when—or if—these alternative visions come to life, they emerge through ghostly remnants. Sometimes because of them, other times in spite of them, but always *with* them—a layer that lingers.

I conceptualize this archive as an inventory of places, feelings, and moments that have left both physical and intangible marks on me. I am inspired by Julietta Singh's brilliant book, *No Archive Will Restore You*, in which she combines theory, memoir, and poetic prose to argue for the urgent need to create an archive of the body. Her point of departure is Antonio Gramsci's call to compile an inventory of historical traces—those infinite moments big and small that have worked to produce an individual—in order to better know oneself. Singh's body archive is an "attunement, a hopeful gathering, an act of love against the foreclosures of reason. It is a way of knowing the body-self as a becoming and unbecoming thing, of scrambling time and matter, of turning toward rather than against oneself" (2018: 29). While my archive does not focus solely on the body, it reflects on the ways in which the body can react to changing landscapes and cityscapes; how my identification as a woman mirrors and is refracted through my surrounding environment.

More importantly, this archive is an attunement to loss in its many forms and an attempt to grapple with it. A loss that comes in waves of grief and hope—the loss of home; the loss of a

revolutionary spirit; the loss of natural environments and familiar surroundings; the loss of oneself in the process and the courage to gather whatever fragments remain.

The archive houses a collection of texts that either recall or have become interlaced with personal memories. This archive is personal, affective, and buoyant: personal, because of the emotional pulls that undergird the corpus selection; affective because it is spatially and temporally unbounded, made up of traces that can spill over, linger, or circulate and combining an assemblage of media texts that are linked by an invisible thread of ghostly apparitions; and lastly, it is buoyant because the selected media texts share a common link to the sea and waterbodies.

*A note on ghosts: Here ghosts and ghostliness take on multiple meanings: they engulf material objects and spaces; they register the intensity of loss and the ways in which it lingers and haunts us; and they reflect a state of temporal suspension, where past, present and future are in limbo. Ghosts imply an otherworldliness, existing in a spatial and temporal plane that is different from our own. When we become aware of their appearance, we become aware that something “feels” off, and it is this feeling that I wish to explore. The emergence of ghosts and ghostly matters unsettles the mind and body. It produces a haunting, which Avery Gordon (2008) describes as the moment “when the cracks and rigging are exposed” (xvi) in a system; when things no longer fit; reflecting a symptom of a more systemic problem. The archive asks when do these ghosts appear? What are the conditions of these ghosts’ emergence and what are the consequent implications of their apparition?

*A note on water: The archive looks at the sea and waterbodies as media that connect the different texts both literally and metaphorically. They are spaces that hold the capacity for reflection on self and other; home and foreign; past, present, and future. What happens when our seas and rivers disappear? What happens when familiar landscapes are lost to exploitation, environmental degradation, and neglect? Both vast yet finite, waterbodies foster ways of being, seeing, and

orientation—ecologies of self—that float between the deeply intimate and deeply collective. Water has been a medium around which communities have formed, providing for their economic, ecological, and urban development needs. It delineates national and regional boundaries and conditions political relations. Water is evoked to make deeply identitarian claims, allowing individuals or communities to define themselves in relation to the sea (a Mediterranean spirit; a Phoenician past). Lastly, water is central to ours and our planet’s makeup; it conditions how our bodies function and is thus essential—in a biological and existential sense—to our being. Perhaps this is one reason why water is often a space for rumination, thinking and dreaming by artists—it feels incredibly familiar even when we fail to find the right words to describe it.

This affective archive invites readers to traverse and reflect on a collection of four texts—in no particular order: an excerpt from Etel Adnan’s poem *The Spring Flowers Own* (1990); Mounia Akl’s short film *Submarine* (2016); Lena Merhej’s comic *Salam* (2019); and Lamia Joreige’s video installation *The River* (2013). Each object unpacks the relationship between geography, exile, loss, and home; reflecting on when and how these themes entangle with one another, and the moments at which they diverge. Organized in dated entries that recall a personal memory or experience, the archive asks more questions than it offers answers, thus illuminating the silences in between. Through these texts I attempt to grapple with my own ghosts. What does it mean to grow up as an expatriate then rediscover a “homeland”—Lebanon, in this case—as an adult? How do you find your way in this homeland then make sense of its gradual decay? Why does the political disappointment of the October 17 uprisings weigh so heavy and why do its ghosts travel with me everywhere I go, making it increasingly difficult to plant roots elsewhere? How do we, as human beings occupying this planet, deal with our disappearing connection to natural surroundings, the awareness of environmental destruction and the guilt that comes with it? Where are the spaces for healing and how do we find them?

Entry 1: Melting

November 16, 2021

The gardener is planting
blue and white flowers
some angel moved in with me
to flee the cold
temperatures on earth are
rising
but we wear upon us some immovable frost
everyone carries his dying as
a growing shadow.

—Etel Adnan; *The Spring Flowers Own*

Etel Adnan opens her poem, *The Spring Flowers Own*, with the following: “The morning after/my death/we will sit in cafes/but I will not/be there/I will not be.” It is both unsurprising yet heartbreaking that I revisited the text following her recent passing. When one is no longer physically walking this earth, are the ghosts of their past selves, their memories, their words all that remain? I have been engaging with Adnan's work for a few years now; her reflections, her art, her poetry and her devotion to the sea were healing at times of deep personal turmoil. She wrote from an in-between space—always oscillating between East and West, belonging to both worlds but never completely. In her hybridity I found a refuge for my ambivalent status as a Lebanese who grew up abroad, an Arab woman who could not find her space in the East or West. I found myself returning to her work following the August 4 Beirut blast—when the city I loved felt unfamiliar, I needed Etel's words and her sea to remind me that hope still lines our horizons. The news of her death came as an additional layer of heartbreak atop a difficult two years on a global scale. I wish I could tell her that the morning after her death, she was still with me. I cannot look at the sea without thinking of her.

In the above excerpt, Adnan depicts a burial scene, her an omniscient narrator who observes the vividly colored flowers planted atop her grave. The cold is all-encompassing and lonely that even angels seek refuge, and in so few words Adnan makes a passing commentary on climate change and rising temperatures on earth. The image of the “immovable frost” leaves a lasting impression on me—the frost depicts the imminence of death/impermanence of life but also opens alternative possibilities. Can this frost also hold the ghosts of unresolved pasts; much like the childhood memories that Adnan grapples with throughout her body of work? Does the frost act as a shield, protecting us from a world that grows increasingly unfamiliar and violent, or is it a burden that weighs us down? Can there exist conditions that bend the frost’s immovable nature, permitting it to melt? And if such conditions exist, does the melted frost seep into the soil, return to the earth, take on alternative afterlives?

Entry 2: Waste

March 18, 2020

I first watched Mounia Akl’s short film, *Submarine*, in 2018, following a growing interest in activist movements in Lebanon. The film discusses the 2015 garbage crisis that unfolded in Beirut particularly, when the city’s streets were covered in waste following the closure of a landfill. The crisis inspired a series of grassroots-led protests against the ruling elite and their failure to rectify the problem, which ultimately resulted in confrontations with the police and no long-term or sustainable solutions. I was not there when these protests unfolded, but I did take to the streets in October 2019 during the nationwide uprisings that called for a fundamental change in Lebanon’s socio-political status quo. Though four years apart, both the garbage crisis and the October 17 uprisings are connected by threads of collective discontent, by a sectarian-political system that haunts and paralyzes life, by the ghosts of interrupted progress. Political movements transform over time; even when their revolutionary potential appears

to wane, its fragments linger and accumulate and produce other forms of activism. Tides may recede but always come back to shore.

Submarine follows Hala, a young woman who refuses to evacuate her home under the imminent threat of the garbage crisis; even though everyone around her has chosen to leave their lives and embark on a seaward journey elsewhere. Piles of garbage bags litter the neighborhood streets and though she tries to shelter her home from the mounds of trash outside, she is unable to escape the problem. The film starts with a news report addressing the gravity of the situation at hand. A man speaks directly to the camera of his plans to flee the country, warning of incoming, poisonous acid rain—water that is meant to breed life not death—and its deleterious effects on inhabitants. He cries, in anger and desperation “Who will welcome a population that has been drowning in trash for 3 years?”; reproaching the ruling class for failing to resolve the issue and the population that could not effect change. He adds, “Why stay? When we protested, they broke our bones, and made us hate this place? ...Then they left to live abroad.”

Although the film is fictional and debuted 6 years ago, it speaks to the current socioeconomic and political situation in Lebanon, where systemic, sectarian-political concerns persist. My inability to disassociate fact from fiction while watching the film, coupled with its glaring relevance today, reveals the ghosts of a political status quo that continue to haunt an entire population. These ghosts of neoliberal growth, corruption, and sectarian power-sharing transcend spatial-temporal dimensions, dating to the foundation of Lebanon as an independent nation-state and heightened following the end of the Lebanese civil war. Instead, they are suspended ghosts that linger and burden—an “immovable frost” of another kind. The waste represents the material ramifications of a system that can no longer function as is, testament to the extent of damage humans are capable of wreaking on this planet.

Hala is adamant about remaining in her home; her intimate, private sphere where memories of her late father occupy every corner. Perhaps to her, he is a presence she feels and his ghost is a haunting memory she carries. Her struggle is one I grapple with on a daily basis—I have left Lebanon to pursue a better life abroad, yet feel constantly weighed down by the guilt of leaving. The gravitational pull of “home”—no matter how romanticized or fragile the structure is—continues to sink the anchor deeper into seabeds of regret. I think about the family I chose to leave behind, about the city—Beirut—that shaped me. Is it fair to leave her just because she is broken, or is there still hope, a responsibility even, to rebuild? I see and feel Lebanon everywhere I go—it sits with me at every café I frequent; it joins me on morning and evening walks. Every public park I pass by becomes a lost opportunity; every metro station a “what if Lebanon was like this?”; every corner bodega a disappointment (“they don't sell *za'atar* here”). And then I remind myself that life must go on—I cannot romanticize Lebanon's tragedy nor can I escape it. I must find the tools to weather these waves, but there is no map to guide me. Perhaps this guilt—in its many manifestations—is my own immovable frost.

We discover that Hala is a rebel; an activist in her own right. Posters demanding the downfall of the regime decorate her walls and feminist slogans appear to the viewer onscreen. She wants us to know that she tried, but failed, to make a difference. When I revisited the film in March 2020, I felt Hala's disappointment and heartache viscerally. Following the tumultuous yet hopeful October 2019 uprisings in Lebanon—protests that I had proudly participated in—I, too, felt defeated by ghosts I could not shed. I remembered Arwa Salih's *The Stillborn* (2018), in which she laments the failure of the Left and the student movement in Egypt. She notes, “We searched the miscreant present for a crevice to release the ghosts of the past—ghosts of the nation, of course...The old and very small part we played was, at least, a role. When it faded away, our generation held on to its icons like relics...” (5). And so, too, Hala holds on, hoping that her stubborn attachment to a disappearing home will produce something meaningful. The

ghosts of the past are simultaneously what keep her attached to her home and what are pushing her to leave—her father's memory; her activism and their failure to produce change; and a political system that is literally drowning the country in trash.

When the rain begins to fall and after she takes a long, hard look at her apartment, Hala heads toward the sea to see where her neighbors and friends—her community—are heading. Leaving her home behind and with no bags in tow, she begins walking in the opposite direction, her desperation palpable. She takes a moment to come to terms with the fact that all hope is lost, then joins the crowd who are marching, presumably, toward a different life. They are all carrying their few belongings, except Hala who is marching empty-handed. We assume that the crowd are walking toward the sea and the ship that will carry them elsewhere. We cannot see the water onscreen but we can hear the waves crashing and the ship's foghorn in the background. The sea thus represents a chance for escape, a vast landscape upon which new horizons and opportunities can be mapped. Can the salt water balm our wounds? Can it exorcize and drown ghosts?

Submarine walks the tightrope between hope and hopelessness. The film can be seen as the embodiment of Gramsci's interregnum, or perhaps what comes after—the old regime is dead, the new could not be born, and the morbid symptoms he warned of occupy and fill the streets.

Entry 3: Catharsis

August 15, 2021

Where do you turn to when home is no longer a safe haven? What happens when the multiple places you called home are destroyed, defaced, or rendered unfamiliar? I grew up an immigrant child in the Gulf, living in a country that

would never call me its own no matter how hard I tried. In that sense, I grew up acutely aware of the futility of nation-state borders and their imposed violence from a young age. Years after I left the Gulf, my childhood home there was destroyed for commercial building purposes, and so I had an increasing urge to hold on to the home I made for myself in Lebanon more tightly, despite the incessant inconveniences it presented—from daily electrical outages, to unreliable public transportation systems, to political instability. Following the October 17, 2019 uprisings and their consequent suppression, I found Lebanon—and my efforts at rebuilding home— slipping through my fingers once again. Stubborn as I was to keep a tight grasp, Lebanon no longer felt familiar—the streets no longer held my memories like they used to, places I frequented shut down, a general and inexplicable sadness burdened people and buildings, and the ghosts of failed attempts at effecting political change lingered...in that gulf of emotion and uncertainty, I sought refuge and catharsis, eventually landing at the shores of Lena Merhej's book, *Salam*.

The comic, published in 2019, reads as a visual poem. The images she depicts are not decorated with words but offer a chance for silent contemplation. *Salam* begins with a short poem by Merhej, in which she contextualizes her solitude and eventual catharsis. She begins with her birth during the Lebanese civil war, a transformative event that followed her throughout her life. The war constantly beckons, transfiguring like a mythical creature to permit each stage of her life. At 13, it is a childhood punctuated by Israeli bombs and death. At 18, it is the Qana massacre; at 20, she finds herself in New York following September 11; at 29, she experiences the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon...overwhelmed by the violence of war and destruction, she has been running from city to city and country to country in search for home and peace.

And since then, I have been running. Brême, Durham, Berlin.

And now, Marseille. The sea, the light, hope.

Beirut is on my mind and hope comes in waves.

I imagine them contemplating the sea over there, the children of my Mediterranean.

Here, I have started to learn how to look death in the face.

Salam, which is translated from the Arabic for “peace,” begins with the drawing of a young woman, the author, swimming in the sea. Alone in the water, she allows herself to be taken by the waves—a complete engulfing that sees her become one with the surrounding landscape. In this moment of complete immersion, she begins to see images of violence—most from her memory—appear before her. Armies marching and bombs exploding, a city in complete ruin (Beirut). Drawings of people crossing the sea en masse—refugees searching for a better life—are stark reminders that the sea is not always a safe haven, but often a medium of great danger for many communities seeking asylum. Images of refugee camps are juxtaposed against drawings of diplomats, reminding readers of the fraught international, humanitarian discourse that frames global mass migration and displacement crises. In one drawing we see the image of Alan Kurdi, the young Syrian boy washed up on the shore. In Merhej’s landscape, Alan is brought back to life. He stands up and walks away, presumably to a better elsewhere whose borders are not defined by violence.

Salam reads like an emotional catharsis and an exercise in alternative world making. Through Merhej’s silent images, I find myself reflecting on why I feel more at ease in cities by the sea; why the Mediterranean always feels like home regardless of national borders. Perhaps being by the water offers me refuge when I lose my sense of self and of what home should be. The sea is ever-moving and ever-changing yet a constant geographical landmark on our planet. It does not ask to be claimed; it transcends nation-state boundaries; it is a space where individual and collective dreams are carved. Does the search for home end when we learn to look violence in the face, as Merhej suggests in her introductory poem? Can saltwater rinse the ghostly residues that linger on the skin of children born into war and/or forced to experience its violent aftermath?

Entry 4: A River Runs Within

January 21, 2020

There are landscapes that leave their mark in one's memory, becoming permanent features of everyday life. Others are slowly erased, eventually disappearing from one's cognitive space-making until they are forgotten and lost. The Beirut River is one example of such a space. The river is 25km in length cutting across the capital city and emptying in the Mediterranean Sea. According to Maged Youssef and Bashir Abou Ali (2020), the river has three main zones: a waterfront zone that is occupied by a landfill, a slaughterhouse, fishermen's port, along with a beach and estuary polluted by industrial waste; an urban zone occupied by the neighborhoods of Bourj Hammoud, Sin El Fil, and Achrafieh; and an agricultural transition zone occupied by mostly open space. Through years of state mismanagement, pollution, lack of cohesive urban planning and proper law enforcement, the river which had once been a source of livelihood and community interaction became a dried-up, waste zone.

Reflecting on the state of the river and its current inaccessibility, Lamia Joreige excavates notions of home, exile, suspension, and contested landscapes through her video installation, *The River* (2013), part of her broader project Under-Writing Beirut. The video is a continuous shot of the dry and polluted river, overlaid with a voiceover from Joreige herself. She begins with the following phrase, "It had been a long time that something was broken, that I was separated from what was dearest to me, and that this rupture was irreversible." The opening sentence begs an important question: is Joreige speaking of her own experience, or is she speaking as the river? Are the ghosts of a neglected and forgotten space so intimately enmeshed in our personal histories, that a boundary can no longer be drawn? The rupture she speaks of and through echoes Gordon's haunting; the river a crack in the system so starkly exposed.

Joreige reflects on her positionality as a Lebanese living abroad, projecting her conflicted emotions and her feelings of loss onto the neglected, dried up river. In her exile, she feels as though something is permanently missing but this loss is dampened in Beirut, where “the light...eases [her] sadness and the horizon of the sea, with its disfigured shore carries [her] to another time.” Similar to Merhej, Joreige seeks an “elsewhere,” choosing to travel far to find a place “where nature was so vast it could swallow [her]” and the rivers, mountains, and sea could appease her, so that she no longer thinks about herself or Beirut. For Joreige, the landscape of the river is intimately tied to ghosts of the past that follow her across different countries. No matter where she goes, Lebanon and its years of unrest haunt her and she can only find refuge in the natural environment. She seeks landscapes to fully drown herself in and it is only in this complete immersion that she can possibly cure her internal unrest.

Perhaps if the river were to speak it would echo Joreige’s sentiments. It would pray for full immersion, to be filled with water once again so that the memories of its troubled past are drowned out and the ghosts washed away. Joreige's video installation is both a commentary on the river and its state of neglect, and a call for imagining alternative futures across a forgotten space. Beirut River, like other rivers in Lebanon, carries in its physical and imagined space histories of violence and chronic neglect. It also carries the stories of communities that built their homes along riverbeds, using water to generate life and commercial activity. These histories undoubtedly move from river to sea, their remnants float in salty waters, leaving traces on the objects and bodies that swim in Mediterranean waters. Could Beirut River be redrawn with newfound possibility? If so, when and for whom? Is it only in exile that these suspended spaces—caught between the past and a halted future—become apparent?

This archive begins and ends with death, yet as it meanders across river and sea; space and time; through meanings of home, exile, identity, and

self; excavating ghosts along its journey—the archive creates spaces for rest and reflection, opening up spaces for alternative imaginaries and world-making. In between these different deaths exist narratives of possibility.

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