



In the Company of Loss: Oral History and Feminist Legacies
Developed and Edited: Knowledge Workshop

Introduction

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I. Death and Feminist Legacies in the Age of Collapse *Deema Kaedbey*

Feminists work within the realm of change: changing policies, practices, attitudes, and systems. Pushing to bring justice to victims and survivors of interlinking forms of violence. Imagining and continuously trying to embody a life where we can enjoy safety, power and pleasure in the different bodies, identities and histories that we inhabit. Restlessly working to increase our communities' access to resources. Re-writing historical narratives so we can fit in it, so we can exist then, now and forever; re-shaping words and spaces to make them more welcoming of who we are; expanding who "we" means and who it includes.¹

But we are always rooted in something constant, even universal. Death and Change. Adaptation and resistance.

What does it mean to be aware, to be repeatedly reminded, that the most certain and constant aspects of our lives are death and change?

What changes in us and our work when we are so focused on survival? For some more than others, for sure. For many and not others, perhaps. Yet the question of survival and loss have become a collective mark, especially in a country collapsing more each day; in a region pulled violently apart by occupations, dictatorships and wars; and across a planet scorched by human exploitation and isolated by their terrors.

What remains of us when we are gone, knowing that we will be gone. What is within our power, and therefore our responsibility, to shape? And where do we let go because we cannot control if and how our stories and our work will be remembered, will have its impact in the world.

What would we do differently if we knew we are going to die, to change, to break up? There is no escape from fear and heartbreak, but there is a life to be lived not through bulldozing aggressively nor through evading passively. And for those of us who can, for those of us who have been here and seen these changes before, there is a role to play in sharing what the histories we carry, to make way for futures we can shape.

And this is where legacy enters the conversation.

¹ Thank yous to Jehan Bseiso and Razan Ghazzawi for reading and commenting on the draft of this section.

Legacy as Strategy

Legacy is not a luxury, to re-use Audre Lorde's words.² It is about making strategic decisions about what we want to create and pass on, what stories and tools, what connections and kinships with the people and the environment.

Everything can and will change,³ our stories will be heard differently, but in thinking about legacy, they are more likely to become lessons for other times. They can become the reminders we need that we are not starting over every time, though there will always be more to do, new and persisting issues to take on.

Legacy, in other words, is not about iconization, and it is not simply individualistic. It is the work of remembering, of seeking stories and being able to hold them, of building the connections that open space for these stories, and always finding ways to re-introduce them. Legacy is intergenerational connections. It is the slow labor of building relations across time and politics and experience. Legacy is how we heal from intergenerational wounds, and how we continue to shape our love and life a little better than how it shaped us.

Legacy is how I assuage the dread and panic of death and loss, of mourning even before our loved ones are gone. Legacy is history written, and remembered, and our people written into it. It is weaponizing fears: of death, of old age, of how we treat our elders, of how we forget so quickly, of a likely grim future, and making meaning of it all. Can legacy save queers as they get old and have no family and no social support? Can legacy re-direct us from walking further into collapse, in-fighting and civil wars; and having to start over and reassemble our lives and hopes every few years? Can legacy heal something in us?

Why Etel Adnan and Nadya Jouy?

These were the contemplations that brought this book into being: death, loss and what we leave behind that is remembered and can be of benefit; the importance of documentation and archives; seeking and defining more clearly the legacies of those who came before us, and getting clearer about how we use what they left us with; expanding what feminist

² The original phrase from Audre Lorde is "Poetry is not a luxury." (See Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*)

³ I am inspired here by Octavia Butler's quote: "The only lasting truth is Change" from her novel, *Parable of the Sower* (1993).

histories and stories mean, who writes them, who is in them, and what forms they embody.

This publication is our attempt to reflect stories rooted in what is constant—in loss, and death and change, and in the acts of remembering and survival through stories. The chapters that will follow are our attempt to grapple with loss, and with what/who remains: friends, families, lovers and communities, memories and stories, their work. And so, what you will read in these upcoming pages are about two women, the times they lived in, but also the now in which they are remembered.

Why Nadya Jouny and Etel Adnan?

There are two reasons: the first reason was contextual and “coincidental,” reflecting the themes we were working on: death played more than one part in who was remembered at the conception of this book. And the second reason was to expand the sites that feed our writing of feminist histories: beyond one organized movement, or a single trajectory, occupied by certain figures.

We started working on this publication in early 2022, exploring legacies, archives, and practices of remembering feminists who have passed. Initially, we were considering various feminist figures, from across Lebanon and who lived during its different historical periods. Since Nadya’s life and death had left its impact on almost everyone at KW, and on our friends and peers, we knew that we wanted to remember her in this book. It was our way, too, to acknowledge how Nadya wove together various communities, causes and ways of working in the way she lived and fought.

There were other names we were thinking of, and asking researchers about: Wadad Shakhtoura and Anissa Najjar, among others.

Etel was a suggestion offered by Narod Seroujian, as she was about to join the research team for this project. And it was an unexpected, exciting idea. Why was it so unexpected?

When Radwa Ashour died, I got the urge—as many of us did, to read all her novels and novellas. In a bookstore in Hamra, the shop owner, sitting behind his desk and surrounded by his books says to me: *صرنا منتمنى الكتاب يموتوا للناس تفوق تشتري كتبهم. We now wish that writers die so people would remember to buy their books.*

Would Etel have been on Narod’s mind so tangibly, if she had not so recently died? Would we have jumped so quickly to include a figure who was not an activist directly associated with movements and mobilizations in Lebanon? I don’t know. But death (and the media) do rekindle our urge to know and discover someone who is no longer with us. And it was an exciting idea because we knew that there was a time not so long ago when we searched for any trace of queer existence, and especially those unshaken by shame or the need to justify or defend. This was Etel.

Secondly, we wanted to expand where we look for feminism, and the sites that feed it and help shape it. The veins, big and small, that pump life and inspiration into the living being that is feminism. Feminists have long acknowledged grandmothers, rebel rousers, artists, teachers and factory workers, witches and misfits as initiators and shapers of the paths they are now walking.

In 2021, we published *Feminist 90s*, a book on 1990s Lebanon from a feminist perspective, documenting with it the feminist movement and the changes it was undergoing during that decade.⁴

When reading through and looking back at what feminists in Beirut who were active during the 1990s were explaining, it became clear that many of them saw two diverging routes that feminists took from that decade onward: one that they described as opening up to new ways of talking about violence, attempting to be more inclusive and refusing a singularity of women's lives and identities; and another that they described as being more conservative and focused on respectability. The first route, as the feminists of the 1990s remember it, is what got us to the feminism of today: they may not have adopted the very same issues we do now; they did shy away and were not able to have confrontations on sexuality and on racism and left those battles for us and for some of them with us, but it was what eventually created room for our then-young movement of the early 2000s.

In the first years of the 21st century, when I was coming into feminism, we did not make these distinctions because we did not know the feminists who came before us. As we built our own spaces, language and relations, we resisted what was already established: what we then saw as institutional structures set in their ways, focused on lobbying and changing laws, directing their attention to the mainstream and thus being stuck in a particular narrow narrative.

Today, the feminists who lived through the movement in the 90s see themselves as our predecessors. And that is true. But that happened after we laid claim to our present and what it stood for, and after they had accepted it and us. I would say that, in the beginning, they did not see us as their inheritors any more than we saw them as our elders whose work we were building on. That took many years, as we came to get to know and see each other. History is created through these interactions, warping time lines: we are successors because we claim our predecessors; we open roads to our histories as much as those before us make the way for us.

And then again, in the *Feminist 90s*, there was also Etel and her love of the sea and of fellow artists and writers; in the 1990s, there was a boom in galleries in Beirut; there was

⁴ You can download the *Feminist 90s* book, developed and edited by KW and published in 2021, here: <https://www.alwarsha.org/blog-post/downloadfeminist90s/>

activism outside Beirut. There were mobilizations that were not yet registered and institutionalized.

And just as Etel reminds us of the sea and love of women, of art and writing as part of feminist legacies, Nadya reminds us (again) not to be stuck in very rigid structures, and to take the protest back to the doors of religious institutions.

But it is also not only about Nadya and Etel

We chose to recall women, feminists, artists and activists, who are no longer with us. But we also were looking for the stories of those who remained. Family, friends, co-workers, people and spaces touched by them. And as Talah explains in the following section, this process comes with its particular set of challenges.

In a way, the challenges that we saw our two researchers, Fatima Fouad and Narod Seroujian, face and come through with were how to center both absence and presence. Their work was to talk about Nadya and Etel, but not only about Nadya and Etel. The stories of these two figures served as channels for more stories of those who are left living their lives, carrying their memories and the loss in a collapsing city and in daunting times. And the researchers told a piece of their own stories too through what they were writing.

Narod and Fatima were still able to sit with the person in front of them, and despite the magnitude of loss—and often of multiple losses, they listened to the pain of those who remained as they remembered the two main characters of this book.

In these times, I see how we are turning to cultural productions, to the hope of mutual networks of support, and to “informal” or unregistered campaigns and activities. Etel and Nadya remind us that we always have.

Literature, after all, has played a significant role in ensuring that we know of feminist voices in previous decades, whether or not the women authors called themselves feminist: Leila Baalbaki, Ghada Samman, Emily Nasrallah, Etel Adnan, Hanan el Sheikh. This is not feminist activism as we know it, and it should not be. But in these works of literature is some kind of reflection on, and documentation of, women’s lives and struggles in particular periods in Lebanon. I know of these writings more than I know of feminist activism on the ground in the 50’s, 60’s, and 70s.

Cultural productions have always taken a leading role in expressing protest and envisioning or pushing for change. It can be argued that when direct modes of action and activism recede, or are not able to take a visible shape, feminists use other tools—such as

documentation; cultural engagement comes to the forefront as holder of protest and of an alternative vision.

Yet death is not the whole story

Death of course is not the full story either. As death is an integral part of life, so does life continue in death, and they exist together in a cycle. We mourn and grief, but we also open to joy, we reunite in happier occasions, we change.

What does it change if we know we are all dying, if we know that the future is not certain? We document. We archive. We institutionalize. We birth children and create projects into this world. We build solidarities so that we are not killed that easily. We appreciate the now. We push to change what we can. Change is certain, death is natural, but some deaths are not. We rebuild our memories. We release our stories.

Who is remembered and who is forgotten? These are questions of the archive, and they are questions that feminists ask too. A significant aspect of KW's work is to decentralize feminist memory as we are also building it. Storytelling and oral history are very adept practices for this endeavor, remembering the now and the past together, the intimate daily recollections and the larger picture of what was happening at that time, and molding them into creative tools for our communities and our movements.

II. Legacy and Oral History ***Talah Hassan***

Oral history is, among other things, a project of preservation.⁵ It is a project of building archives that chronicle and honor stories, of seeking legacies we can ground ourselves in to survive.

⁵ Here, we do not use the word “preservation” to refer to the archive as a fixed space of storage. Rather, as modern archive studies propose (such as the work of Ann Laura Stoler), we use it in its fluid sense, situating the archive in its local and current context, acknowledging its movement and continuity, and emphasizing active listening and interaction with what is “preserved.”

Oral history archives are curations of knowledge, made and re-made in the process of narration and listening. They are kept alive and safe from disappearance in the process of documentation, in the way they invite one to keep listening, and in how they invoke a curiosity for more.

Archives are not static. They document stories from particular moments in time, at one specific point in time, but they do not freeze them neither there nor here. The archive is meant to move across the multitude of connections that make up its constellation; across generations and communities, borders and movements.

Through oral history, experiences are spoken into the world and they find one another, whether to collide or diverge. Within these many tales, we may find legacies in stories past and of people lost, legacies that will live on through—and ensure—our own survival.

This is a project that undertakes loss and legacy as main themes through oral history—a research methodology based in the practice of storytelling. Amidst crises political, economic, and existential that we are facing daily, we want to honor the Knowledge Workshop’s Storytelling and Oral History project as we search for stories to embrace and for the legacies that embrace us. We explore and push the boundaries of oral history as a methodology, as we ourselves continue to be pushed into new, harsh circumstances that we must navigate together.

The two researchers who took on this project, Narod Seroujian and Fatima Fouad, did research predominantly based on oral history interviews about and around Etel Adnan and Nadya Jouny, respectively. They interviewed several people each, women who were close to Etel and to Nadya in different ways.

In exploring the legacy of Etel Adnan, Narod interviewed: Nawal, a friend of Etel’s; Tania Hadjithomas Mehanna, Etel’s friend and French-language publisher; Alice Mogabgab, Etel’s friend and collaborator, hosting Etel’s artwork in her galleries; Sara Mourad, a writer and professor in feminism, gender, queerness, and media, who never met but is inspired by Etel; and R, a young feminist artist who once met Etel and is inspired by her. She also spoke to Nadim, a researcher at a queer feminist space in Lebanon, who shared his thoughts on Etel as an artist and a queer figure.

The two chapters on Nadya Jouny in this book, the first written by Fatima and the second by KW team member Safaa, revolve around the interviews that Fatima conducted with family members and friends of the young late activist. Fatima interviewed Nihaya

Qawasmi, a close friend of Nadya's and a fellow feminist organizer; Nada Jouny, Nadya's sister with whom she had a close relationship, and who is carrying on Nadya's custody battle alongside the rest of their family; Badia Fahs, an acquaintance of Nadya who fought her own custody battle; and two close friends of Nadya's, Safa Abu Diab and Sara Farhat.

Their projects took on a multiplicity of meanings. First, they were conducted in the interest of learning more intimately about Nadya and Etel. These two figures are often, in their different positions, reduced to icons. We wanted to understand in more detail the place they hold in those around them, during their lifetime and after their passing. The interviews were also a process of learning more intimately about the storytellers themselves—the women around Etel and Nadya—whose lives and voices and experiences are ones we want to document and preserve, too. And finally, the research project was also about the researchers and writers, the histories they carry as they conduct these interviews, and the ways they relate to these women whose lives and legacies exist around them as well.

The chapters you will read in this book situate Nadya and Etel's experiences and their legacies in the contexts we inhabit, while also centering the women who are being interviewed and giving space for the researchers' own voices. Through these engagements, we come to see how the idea of "context" is called into question. We exist not only within a context, but we also embody certain contexts for those around us. This is particularly if a person has a form of social authority in their circles, or is active in the public sphere, or is iconized within a particular realm.

This project is full of possibilities, but it is not without technical, ethical, or conceptual challenges. In this section we will reflect on oral history as a methodology, what it means to us, how we navigate it, how we cherish and challenge it, and how we can push its limits while knowing where to stop.

Briefly, on the "History of Oral History"⁶

Oral history (OH) came to be as a form of research-based documentation in the mid-20th century, propelled forward by the development of digital recording devices.⁷ It was part

⁶ The information in this section largely comes from the book *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology* (2007), edited by Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless.

⁷ Oral accounts are of course a historical form of transmitting information; what we are referring to here is oral history's particular approach and use of technology, which advanced it as a research tool.

of a growing attempt to make sense of historical events by consolidating existing knowledge in the written form with experiential accounts in the oral form. Some oral historians ground this form of research in traditions of storytelling in different indigenous societies.⁸ While in the west oral history was first used to preserve the biographical accounts of “notable figures,” its development in medium and reach was made possible with the increasing availability of resources and technology. Its potential as a social and political tool particularly began to manifest with the rise of US civil movements, in which different marginalized communities began organizing and mobilizing more visibly.⁹ Black communities, women, and queers, as well as other leftist and feminist organizers,¹⁰ recognized that recording and sharing their experiences was not only an important form of historical documentation, but was also an effective tool to counter the silencing, erasure, and oppression that they face(d). With this, historians, researchers, and activists began doing oral history with “ordinary” people rather than “great men,” noting the exceptionality and importance of documenting everyday experiences.¹¹

At KW, these academic and socio-political developments, as well as their accompanying politicized reflections on knowledge production, inform our work. But we are also informed and inspired by historical storytelling traditions and present-day storytelling practices, which make up core forms of knowledge preservation and transmission in the cultures of our region.

Oral history as a methodology

Beyond being a research platform wherein the documentation of certain experiences can be used to challenge existing knowledge and discourse, oral history has also transformed into a methodology that offers a valuable space of preservation in and of itself. It is a space that doesn’t need to prove itself, or the voices it holds, in order to exist. Intentionally

⁸ Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki and Franca Iacovetta, *Beyond Women’s Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).

⁹ Women and Memory, *Documenting the Stories and Experiences of Women from a Gendered Perspective* (2015).

¹⁰ This is not to lump these groups together nor to romanticize the organizing of that time—while the mass movements and actions of that time made a shift in Western society, issues of classist / racialized / gendered / sexuality-based exclusion within different groups were present—and remain present in present day organizing—both in the global north/west and in the global south/east, including in the highly, violently, stratified Lebanese society.

¹¹ مؤسسة المرأة والذاكرة، توثيق سير وتجارب النساء من منظور النوع: دليل إرشادي

situating and engaging with oral history in these various ways invites us to see its many social, political, and cultural potentialities.

Oral history archives, whether they are private archives or public ones, are now increasingly seen and used as both historical documents and as art forms. In the SWANA (south west Asia and north Africa) region, feminists and activists have also been using oral history as one of their primary tools of political and social engagement and resistance.¹²

Used as a research tool, oral history can disrupt the status quo of knowledge and information, and challenge the normative modes of knowledge production that continue to reproduce this status quo.¹³ In unearthing stories that tell us about the worlds that people inhabit and create, the practice of oral history is very much about listening and seeking to understand certain realities, rather than seeking to assert them as truths.

As people who love stories, who believe in the importance of individual and community voices, who see the value of preserving and passing on personal narratives, it is easy to be charmed by the intimacy we find in oral histories. It is easy to romanticize it as a space of telling history differently, telling it honestly and vulnerably, shedding light on that which shouldn't remain untold. And while as feminist oral historians we believe this is true and necessary, when we consider it as a methodology for research, we have to remember that oral history narratives cannot be taken as fact. One story, or one way of telling a story alone, can never be enough. Oral history is in its very nature subjective, and its subjectivity cannot be brushed off simply because we're aware of it. A story can be full of contradictions, and almost always includes personal opinions. It reflects the position of the person who tells it, and the moment in which it is told. One's own memories shift across time and space, and of course, different individuals will remember and narrate the same events differently. In other words, oral history requests an openness to constant self-reflection and critique. Just as feminist critical thinking has taught us to question the claimed objectivity of more mainstream research methods, it must ask the same of feminist approaches and practices. Developing a feminist research process requires both acknowledging the storyteller's narrative and experiences as her own valid reality, but

¹² Some examples from the region (to name a few): the oral history archive of "Women and Memory Forum" (Egypt), the work of "Al-Rowat for Studies and Research" (Palestine), the oral history archives of "Sharq" and "Badael" (Syria), the Palestinian Oral History Archive, made up of Al Jana and Al Nakba archives (Palestine/Lebanon), and our own archive at Knowledge Workshop (Lebanon). The KW archive houses stories of women and trans people from a variety of backgrounds and places, both to preserve them and value their very existence, and to offer as a form of knowledge production to researchers, educators, artists, and cultural workers, amongst others.

¹³ From surveys and structured interviews that come in seeking out particular information, to research conducted by academics and scientists from stances of power and privileges, the search for information that reinforces the norm remains ever prevalent.

also using critical analysis, literary research, and/or information that stems from other methodologies, to inform the personal accounts found in oral history.

Looking inwards

KW's oral history project has always paid attention to the position of the researcher who is conducting oral history interviews, and to the relationship between researcher and storyteller; these dynamics affect which stories come out, and how they are shared. In 2021, KW began deepening the work of oral history and looking into all its intricate possibilities, particularly by focusing on oral histories with members of people's own families, communities, and groups. We call this project "minna w fina" ("about us, by us"),¹⁴ and what makes it unique are the stakes that a person holds in uncovering and documenting the stories of those they share relations and spaces with.

Expressing to those around us a desire and commitment to listen to their voices, and developing "minna w fina" processes and archives, can shift the ways we know about our personal and collective histories. In this work, we explore the ways in which we are embedded in our families or communities, and how the individuals that make them up embody, in themselves, contexts for our own lives. Within the "minna w fina" approach, we uncovered a variety of methodological and ethical questions, particularly around the emotionality of the process, the ethics and the question of "ownership" of a story, our own place in the collective memories being shared, and the contextualization of our own lives within the lives of those close to us.

We find ourselves asking similar questions as we now take the oral history project to a new place, one we have contemplated but never delved into before: conducting oral histories around and about the lives and legacies of individuals who have passed away. These are oral histories around people who were (and remain) part of feminist history-making on personal or public levels. They are people who teach us about the contexts we live in and whose voices make up part of it, and people who are somewhat "minna w fina" in how we've shared feminist politics, knowledge production, and spaces with them. We seek to bring together and acknowledge these ongoing histories and legacies in the feminist worlds we've engaged in, parts of which and whom have passed. Nadya has

¹⁴ In 2021, the Knowledge Workshop held its first "Minna w Fina" workshop. Participants received an in-depth introduction to feminist oral history, and delved into the questions and ethics of doing such a project with people close to them and communities they are part of. At the end, each participant was asked to conduct their own family or community-based oral history project. See a reflection of the first workshop here: <https://www.alwarsha.org/minna-w-fina/>.

passed and Etel has passed, but we often hear: they remain with us. Where, with whom, how?

As Fatima and Narod show us in their many interviews, we find them in the physical work and worlds they've left behind, but also beyond this, in memory and in imagination. We find them in our reflections of the past, in which their feminist legacies were being formed—in art and in activism, in politics and queerness and motherhood—and we find them in the feminist futures we strive to see, where their fights and voices echo and ground us.

Accompanying loss

An oral history approach can teach us something about how we remember, honor, and build on the work of those who have passed. This process of building on histories and legacies is not easy, however. We are doing this work in the midst of deteriorating political, social, and economic landscapes, and we are navigating a socio-cultural context that makes alternative feminist work, documentation, and knowledge-production a continuous challenge against the tide.

The oral histories conducted with those close to, or inspired by, Nadya and Etel offer us insight into these issues, stored in their reflections on, memories of, and engagements with each woman. The storytellers tell us of the two women's youth and family lives, their personalities, their movements, their political beliefs and fights, their resonating presence, the spaces they remember them in, the influence they had, the difficulties they faced. The storytellers also spoke of feelings and meanings of grief and loss, the shifts that take place after the death of someone dear, the ways memory and legacy can serve in processes of mourning and healing.

But at the core of this project also lies the preservation of the narrators' stories themselves. Oral history must engage with a storyteller, document her reflections and experiences as she chooses to share—to curate—them, and derives knowledge from this. In deciding to do an oral history project centered around a figure who has passed away, it was essential for us that the storytellers are not reduced to their relationships with these figures, or to the loss they have suffered. Every narrator, no matter her position, firstly holds her own experiences and memories in the stories she tells. She is not merely transmitting information, and her reflections are just as contextualized, contextual, and to be valued.

This is not a simple task; Etel and Nadya, each in her own way, shifted something in feminist cultural and political spheres, and inspired and touched many, including the members of the KW team and the researchers doing the interviews. And so, it is tempting for us all to delve into Etel or Nadya's life and to discover the personality behind the public figure through those who knew her best. But Narod and Fatima made sure that the women they were talking to were central to the story they were telling; they ensured that the storytellers had the space to talk about their own lives, memories, and endeavors. Most of the interviews—as you will read in the interview transcriptions included in this book—intertwined these aspects together. The storytellers would narrate their own memories and experiences while linking it to the questions the researchers had about Etel or Nadya. Grief, rather than being merely expressed as an emotion felt, became a lens through which experiences were narrated. A memory of Etel or Nadya became a point of departure for hearing the storyteller's own reflection, rather than a descriptive piece of information about the late figure. This mesh of stories is what made the interviews rich and telling; while each narrative in itself is never a complete story, for there is always more to say, their beauty lies in how they inform each other, move together, and the new places and contexts they take the listener.

This approach helps us not to iconize Etel or Nadya, or romanticize personal and collective grieving. It is straightforward to write *about* these two women, who lived in the public eye and who left behind abundant legacies and memories to be preserved and analyzed and mourned. What we wanted to do was to break, nuance, delve into these narratives that exist, to situate them, to recognize all the people and places that held and propelled them.

Etel and Nadya's feminisms are vastly diverse and differently situated—however, one thing that perhaps brings them together is their desire *not* to be iconized, their own constant implicit and explicit recognition that they are embedded in structures and systems and communities that cannot be erased, even when it comes to grieving them. Etel writes,

*The morning after
my death
we will sit in cafés
but I will not
be there
I will not be,¹⁵*

¹⁵ Etel Adnan, *The Spring Flowers Own* in “The Spring Flowers Own & The Manifestation of the Voyage,” (Sausality: Post-Apollo Press, 1990), 15.

alluding to her simultaneous presence and absence, both situated, both communal, and both to be cherished.¹⁶

Ethics and reflections

What are the boundaries of oral history? What are the challenges of doing oral history after death, engaging with it while centering the lives impacted—the lives that hold the death itself and create meanings and futures of it? Oral history, classically, is a form of autobiography. People are invited to narrate their own stories, documenting experiences from childhood to the present day, or experiences with the framework of a particular time, place, occurrence, or theme in their lives. As a form that centers a storyteller's own voice about her own life, we ask ourselves what it means to conduct oral history centering around figures who are no longer with us, but whose stories both remain and continue to unfold, in personal and collective memory and imagination and mobilization.

We also ask ourselves questions around ethics and the ownership of stories, consent, and the right of response, as we publish writings and interviews centering around individuals who are no longer with us. As you read through this book, with its analysis, reflections, and sections of some of the oral histories that were conducted for this publication, two elements of feminist oral history come to the forefront: care and discomfort—perhaps also two themes inevitable in a project on death and mourning. These two elements can help us think through these ethical questions. They might comfort us, or they might challenge us further. In both cases, the reflection is important and necessary.

Oral history is a project of care—care for the stories and the person, but also care for the process and the preservation. It asks to be conducted with consideration and intention, and with continuous consent and engagement with the storyteller. On the one hand, oral history is about dialogue: the conversations that arise come from the back and forth between researcher and storyteller. On the other hand, it is about listening intently: the researcher, in her questions and participation, makes space for the storyteller to take the lead in narrating, at her own pace, telling the stories she chooses. In their projects, the researchers had to navigate how to care for the storyteller while also asking of the storyteller to reflect on someone else—someone whose loss is deeply felt by her.

¹⁶ Read also in KW's 2022 book, *What Remains: Eco-Feminist Pursuits*, Reem Joudi's engagement with Etel Adnan and with archives: <https://www.alwarsha.org/an-archive-of-ghosts/>

The archive itself must also be cared for, in how and where it is preserved, shared, and used as knowledge. It requires tending to and upkeep so that interviews remain available, accessible, safe, and their quality preserved. Archives that include limited-access content require oversight to ensure that privacy is respected. Communication with the narrators of oral history interviews is also important, so that decisions around preservation and dissemination can be taken carefully, mutually, and with consent.

Oral history is also a project of unsettling. There is a constant unraveling, intentional or not, that can be sticky to navigate. Oral history asks for an in-depth look into someone's life, which is often an uncomfortable endeavor. Sometimes storytellers share something, only to later ask for it to be removed from the interview, and sometimes they withdraw their consent to publishing the interview entirely. Many times, painful memories and emotions arise during the interview, and this becomes part of the process of documenting their stories. Other times, a storyteller brushes past a particularly difficult topic, and others still they share something that they say they have not thought or spoken about in a very long time. Oral history also unsettles what we think of as knowledge. It sees that subjective and personal experiences are forms of knowledge, even in the most minute of details, where such narratives are often disregarded as arbitrary personal accounts not worthy of preservation, documentation, or research.

It is unsettling, too, to conduct an oral history about someone after their death. They cannot consent, engage, or respond, they no longer have control on what is out there. In any oral history conducted with someone alive, these are at the core of the project—of course, they were practiced with the storytellers in this project, too. But in thinking about the ethical duty towards Nadya and Etel, we find ourselves turning to the principle of care again. The researchers asked about and documented Nadya and Etel's stories with care, from the language they used in their questions to their own judgements about what to include or not include in the final texts. In particular moments, they also asked the storytellers what they thought was appropriate to publish, taking consent from them as individuals close to each woman. We can also think about how stories take on a different meaning after death, where they may be safer from judgement and repercussions, or contained as "a thing of the past." Because Nadya and Etel were public figures, we also think of how they would share personal stories from their own lives in the work and commentary they left behind. Both women were vocal and unapologetic in the public eye.

Finally, at the very heart of this project is the recognition that lives are entangled and that legacies are in motion. With these reflections, we reached a place where we felt comfortable collecting and publishing these stories, while remaining always open to dialogue about ethical and political responsibilities in feminist oral histories.

Final note

We named this book “In the Company of Loss” because, in listening to oral histories, there is a sense of accompaniment. We may feel like we are accompanying the storyteller throughout her narration, or perhaps we relate to particular experiences that connect us to her stories. In doing oral history interviews with women who surrounded Etel and Nadya, we are invited to accompany a multitude of journeys. There is absence, mourning, and difficulty in confronting its reality. But there is also a deep reflection on presence, change, and what remains, or rather, what continues to exist.

The two central figures of this book are very different people. Etel and Nadya existed and inspired dialogue, politics, and movements within vastly different spaces. But part of what brings them together is that they are being remembered so poignantly at this time, as Lebanon collapses under the weight of crises. They are on the minds and tongues of many, as we try and find in their work, their words, and their worlds, histories that can contain us and that we can build on. The chapters of this book thus also contain reflections on art and feminist politics during this time. They can be understood as rituals of mourning and coping with loss, as much as they are about the afterlives of these notable feminist figures. Safaa, in the next section, will write and reflect on how this project came to be, and what became of it.

III. The Work Process: Wanderings at Crossroads¹⁷ ***Safaa T.***

I'm attempting to finish this introduction as we draw closer to the end of the writing process for this book. Looking back on the different phases of our planning and work, it seems to me that many major events happened in less than a year—whether they had to do with this book, the country, or the world. Everything that happened in the past months affected our path and processes. As I try to document these processes, to collect and connect them, I realize how complicated it is to do so. I go back to my notes and reflections, and I pause to consider how crucial it is to document and to write, in order to be able to recall events and memories later. But I also think about how important it is to give space for a different perception of events now that time has passed, even if only

¹⁷ This section of the introduction, originally written in Arabic, is translated by Islam Khatib.

months after those incidents; the raw and direct moment is important to capture, but so are the reflections that we build over time after.

The choice to produce knowledge by unearthing stories from the past and present is a deliberate decision we make with every project, aware as we are of its importance for our own feminist presents and futures. We know that feminists have fought and struggled in Lebanon for at least a century, yet still there is a tremendous gap in the documentation of the history of this struggle and the context that it lived in. There is an absence of so many women's stories and narratives. And we need this connection to the past, and to those who came and have gone before us, in order to plant ourselves in a history that looks like us and that includes our numerous struggles; a history that we can build on and wrestle with and expand on; a history through which can learn how to support one another despite our differences.

We have an imperative need for this knowledge to be written, and to be documented through art, research, and other forms and mediums. Sara Mourad mentions in her interview with researcher Narod Seroujian how significant it was for her to locate the text of a lecture given by Etel Adnan, since it was published in an anthology.¹⁸ Even though we may not recognize its importance in the moment, this documentation of our feminist history in all of its forms is very consequential cumulative work.

On the other hand, we understand that if we place too much weight on this feminist legacy—like any legacy—it could become a hindrance. History can become constrictive if we attempt to project it wholly onto the present or the future or if we hold it as sacred; if we are too desperate to flee from it, or if we imprison ourselves in it. The stories of feminism past also holds so many schisms, mistakes and pains, and we may be tempted to avoid them in fear of recognizing some of ourselves in their stories. Finding our path thus becomes that delicate balance of knowing the past, appreciating its lessons, and building on it, without drowning in it or in our fear of facing it. And this is what we attempted to do in this book.

I also draw attention to the writing process here because I believe that documenting our processes is a vital part of preserving knowledge; we learn from our experiences how to create such knowledges that are feminist not only in their content but also in their processes. This is our third book, after all, and we are well aware by now that the timelines

¹⁸ See Narod Seroujian's paper in this book, "Collecting Etel Adnan's Stories," and her "Interrogation of Borders" interview, in Arabic, with Sara Mourad.

we set at the start of each project will shift, and that we will constantly encounter unexpected situations that will force us to change and adapt.

With every challenge we faced during the development of this book, we had to make decisions that would affect everyone involved, and we tried to keep the following in mind: How do we make a feminist decision? How can we continue with the work while also taking into consideration the physical and mental well-being of everyone involved? When do we stop and rest, and when is perseverance in tumultuous circumstances the best option? When do we support one another, and how do we know our capabilities and limits in this regard? They are questions that arise in some form or another in every journey and at every crossroad. These are the questions we wrestled with during the months in which we were immersed in this project, and they are heavily related to the themes of this book, from loss and legacy to stories we pass on and build on.

The context

The Knowledge Workshop offers a space for discussion, thinking out loud, and reflexivity that I have not found elsewhere. I may be veering off topic here, but I feel compelled to write the following because it is closely related to our work on loss, legacy, and feminism:

We are living in challenging times in the region and in Lebanon. Although the crises are not new, they have accelerated since the revolutions and the uprisings in several Arabic-speaking countries.

During our work on this ok, there were a few weeks between May and June 2022 that were exceptionally heavy and draining, because the rate of violence against women and queer people, in Lebanon and across the region, increased significantly. This affected every member of the team, and there is no doubt that it impacted everyone's productivity. Fatima Fouad's testimony, in which she shared her experience and the sexual violence she was subjected to (which she also writes about in her chapter), added another intense layer to our work together. At that point, we decided to pause a little, to be able to catch our breath and to sit together, as the Knowledge Workshop team. We needed to air what we were feeling and thinking, but we also wanted to think together about our responsibilities and what we could do for ourselves and for others with the resources we have, however limited they may be.

We carried a lot of questions with us into the space we made together, and we took with us many of these questions to reflect more on afterwards. It was a period for us to rethink our tools and the overlapping cycles of violence; but we also considered the legitimacy of

these questions about our accountability tools and in our efforts to achieve justice. These discussions will remain open and ongoing in the hope that we will be able to provide tools that will allow us to have processes of accountability.

We will perhaps ultimately return to what we have learned from past experiences and generations. We recognize the mistakes we made as feminists and try to figure out ways to address them. We inherit this responsibility to find solutions to the violence we face for as long as this patriarchal system governs us, just as we have inherited a fear of it holding us accountable for attempting to discover or practice certain forms of justice ourselves.

And because change is constant, as we were nearing the end of our work on this publication, the Iranian women's revolution against the Islamic regime erupted in September 2022. As I do every time, I watched with both excitement and worry for the women who are continuing a path of resistance as they light it for us as well. I write these words not knowing where this uprising will lead to, but I do know that the stories of these women and their voices in the streets have changed the existing narrative about them and the patriarchal religious system they live under. I cannot help but think about how the murder of a young woman who violated the Iranian regime's hijab rules was what sparked this revolution. Another loss that was followed by the deaths of many women in the streets. Will we always lose so many of us as we fight back, no matter what happens? Loss appears to us as a path that women will always take in their struggle, and we must learn to walk alongside it.

In solidarity with the women of Iran, feminists in Lebanon called for a sit-in in Beirut on October 5, 2022. A sheikh opposing the Iranian regime attempted to join, but some of the participants demanded that he leaves the feminist gathering, declaring that his presence was unacceptable. Afterwards, there was a discussion about the usefulness of this act. We understand how the presence of a man of religion can provoke disapproval as a result of thousands of years of oppression of women and non-conforming people by religious systems; and we recognize that this disapproval is valid. But, in order to create a kinder world than the one we live in and that subjects us to daily violence, do we need to reconsider our approaches and the forms of refusal and resistance we use? With such questions, we live with "I don't know," and with ambiguous answers and conflicting emotions.

I recall Nadya Jouny. What would she have said and done?

The course of this book and the events surrounding it raised a lot of questions for me, despite the fact that I have been attempting to assess what is happening to me and around me through a feminist lens for many years now. My questions and answers have evolved over time, and I'm certain that what might transpire after I finish writing this section will result in new questions about topics we haven't covered yet. But we want these trajectories to continue so that we don't keep asking the same questions without getting answers, and

instead, to build on what we have for different reflections and queries. Because each story contains another, and because the stories unfold and overlap to create new ones, and because we can move from being passive in one story to decision makers in another; the story of this book has become yet another that each of us tells as she lived it and was affected by it.

And as we move between questions and reflections, we return to the question: why Etel Adnan and Nadya Jouny?

The process of selecting topics and main characters for this book was a lengthy period of collective reflection, discussion, and objection. Our goal was to share a segment of our feminist histories through oral history narratives. However, in the planning stages at the beginning of 2022, we had not yet decided: are we writing about a person? A phase in the feminist movement? Or a city in Lebanon and its history of women's organizing? We sat with numerous suggestions and deliberated the threads between them: what connects, what intersects, and what differs. And when writing about feminists who have left us, many curiosities and speculations arose, both in our group discussions and in each of our consciousness.

Chasing the stories of the departed among us appears as a quest, evoking something within us and in the way we engage with others; we want to document what some of us know about them and to take it a step further with what you may not know. How do we fill these gaps of knowledge, in our histories and in theirs?

We wanted to show the feminists in this book, first and foremost, through the eyes of those who "knew them," how their lives intersected and how these women, with their disparate stories, interacted with one another. We also wanted to see them in the context of the feminist movement in its broadest sense, with all of its hidden and unearthed stories. We attempt to map a portion of these relations and movements through these two particular characters.

We wanted to examine the context, movements, and choices—both personal and collective—to envision how they affected individuals, as well as the trajectory of the feminist movement. We also look at the "lack of choice" and how this affects many of us. What does it mean to have "privileges" that others do not? What impact does this leave on our stories, relationships, and various life paths? What do some of us do with our varying privileges? Can these privileges be used as tools to support each other, since we do not choose where we come from, and we often have little control over the legacies that we carry, both individually and collectively? How do we then engage with legacies in order

to build on it, rather than burying successive losses and ignoring its impact on our lives? Why don't we know the stories of the women who came before us? Why don't we know what they fought for, what they accomplished, and what they sacrificed before we lost them? Those stories will evade us as long as they remain in the shadows, confined to narrow circles that, like other losses, fade with the passage of time. So, why don't we discover ways to find, preserve, and share these stories. This book is one way we intend to change this course.

What brings the stories of this book together is the methodology, with its oral history research, and writing through the stories that were documented by the researchers—and Talah has elaborated on the possibilities of this methodology in the previous section. But we also lost the two feminists who feature in this book, Etel and Nadya, at around the same period, between 2019 and 2021. And so, we reflected on the impact of these losses on the people who knew them, and on us. We saw the effect their deaths had in how heavily present they were in the stories that were told about them, particularly because they passed so recently.

In light of the successive losses and stories of death that surround us, what also binds the chapters in this book is the “now”—this perplexing and dispersed present that many of us live in. We hold with us the stories and memories of those who have passed during prolonged and divergent journeys of struggle.

We remember two feminists from an extended past/present; they have died only a short time ago, but yet it seems so distant because so much has happened since then.

Etel Adnan was born in the 20s of the last century and passed away in the 20s of our current century. She lived in Lebanon, France, and the United States for nearly ten decades, accumulating experiences and stories in an enriching political, artistic, and cultural life. After traveling and moving, she found an anchor in Paris, and she adopted painting and poetry as her tools of expressions. But her thoughts and imagination did not settle down.

Nadya is a different story, one that appears to be from a different world and time than the one from which Etel came.

Nadya was born in the 1990s and spent her entire life in Lebanon. She did not leave because the opportunity did not present itself, and because her son, over whom she had lost custody, lives here. She learned various tools of struggle throughout her journey, shaped by her experiences. And the stories of her that are remembered in this book allows us to think more about our strategies, if they exist, and how we seek change.

For us, Etel and Nadya meet here, in our present day and the now of those who knew them.

We recollect their stories in the midst of the country's perpetual collapse since 2019, the year Nadya died and the uprising erupted. And then came 2020, when the pandemic spread and the Beirut port blew up; and then 2021, the year of Etel's departure, and the continuation of the collapse, which is still ongoing. We are therefore seeing Etel and Nadya through different eyes and from the point of view of living in a "collapsed city," as Narod once put it. Is this the same Beirut that Etel wrote about in 1993, when she said, "Living [in Beirut] is an act of submission to the worst." Is it the very same submission, or was it altered by all the collapse(s), and the "worst" has only gotten worse?

What else could this be for? Well, because our struggles are not separate from one another, even if made to seem so. Because no one of us can reach her rights without the other. And because every attempt or struggle for women's rights, no matter how distant in time, place, issue, or approach, is interconnected with another in this long path to achieve justice for women. And Nadya's voice, which continues to echo in protests, is an extension of Etel's voice in poetry, writing, and drawing, as well as for every woman who has tried, made mistakes, and tried again. This enriches and burdens our legacy at the same time. As a result, we must learn to bear it while also mitigating it.

In the introduction to KW's book, *Feminist Nineties*, Deema writes, "Any moment of feminist activism holds multiple pasts, is connected to multiple other contemporaneous issues and occurrences, and holds many possibilities that are moving towards us as we are moving towards them." I find this very relevant here.

Although they appear to be from different times and places, Nadya and Etel's feminist work guides us not only in time but also in locale and geography—between Etel's decision to move from one location to another and Nadya's persistence to remain in Beirut to be near her son, we see how the circumstances of place also determine the extent and form of the struggle, without necessarily limiting us.

Perhaps in Nadya's case, we grieve what could have been. We mourn her departure from protest squares and from our lives, and we cannot know how she would have carried on. In the case of Etel, we recognize that she lived a long and productive life, but this does not diminish the sadness of her loss. It also brings us to questions about how much we appreciated her during her life, and how a person's importance resurfaces in memory after death.

The voids which are the unwritten histories of women are terrifying. These are the voids we are trying to fill. We are also attempting to write about women we have known, with whom we have shared similar platforms, contexts, and changes. We are writing it from "up close," documenting it with women we knew, each in her own way, so that there are fewer gaps in our collective or individual memories. This terrifying chasm that each of us feels in our own stories, even if we are not conscious of it, is the same void that we fear, if

filled, will become a mirror repeating the same stories. Same stories with different details but with the same heavy burden of this oppressive patriarchy that seems to never end.

Evoking collective work

Because I don't have the answers, and because the reflections I present in this section are for further contemplation, I'll leave them here and return to the course of this book. The first people to join us on this journey were the two researchers, whom we first met in early April 2022. With Fatima and Narod, we continued the discussions we had been having about the themes and directions we wanted to take with the oral histories and the narrators. We also recognize that the people interviewed by Narod and Fatima, as well as the two researchers' own backgrounds, played a role in shaping the directions of the stories they asked about and the papers they produced.

We were aware that different people from Nadya or Etel's circles, or different researchers, would have brought alternative points of view. But we also recognize that one of the appeals and power of feminist oral history is allowing for multi-dimensional visions and layers. Each one of us has her own different engagement with Nadya and Etel—or their legacies. These stories may converge in certain places and times, and their intersections surprise us, or they may differ or conflict and awaken questions and pique our interest—the possibilities are endless.

Furthermore, each researcher brings out her own personal and feminist history into her research. We see it in the oral history interview questions as well as their interactions with the storytellers; because no matter how much one tries to be “neutral,” one cannot but bring something of themselves into their writing. This is evident in the texts you will read, as each writer approaches the themes in her own unique style.

This year, we also worked with brilliant translators, each of them bringing a distinct spirit to the texts. We worked with the translators: Diana Abbani, Ghadeer Sweidan, Youmna Mroue, and later on for translating this introduction, Islam Khatib; and this work reminded us that translation is a form of knowledge production that takes place through the interplay of concepts and stories across languages and speakers/writers. In the meantime, designers were invited to apply, and we held interviews in June 2022, choosing Yaman Tohme to work on the cover and design, while Reem Hammoud labored on the technical aspects of the design. And every time we see our ideas translated into artistic and visual content, we experience a very particular “creative” joy.

We also wanted to share clips from the interviews that became part of the Knowledge Workshop's archive. We transcribed the interviews and translated excerpts from French and English, which are published in the third chapter of this book. For transcription, we collaborated with Pascal Ghazaly, Youmna Mroue, Areej Shreim, and Mihad Haidar.

In addition, we want to thank Rana Issa and Rima Rantisi for reviewing two of the texts that appear in this book, providing critical eyes that push the texts towards better possibilities. And in this book, as in previous Knowledge Workshop books, we returned to Rami Kattar for proofreading. And as always, he was present with us for linguistic scrutiny and to answer all our linguistic questions.

As Deema explained at the start of this introduction, loss and death are unavoidable. They are a part of everyone's lives, and we live with them, try to escape from them, and adapt to them in various ways. However, building is also a part of our work. Perhaps there is no avoiding the issue of legacy: what do we leave behind, as actors in some form or another, in public spheres, when we focus on history-based knowledge production around hidden and heard stories? We use writing and oral history: to inquire, to listen, and to document.