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What Remains: Eco-Feminist Pursuits

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Loving The Unseen

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Loving the unseen, seeing the unloved. I like playing with words and seeming contradictions, a seeking to grasp the fullness of existence.

Loving the unseen, seeing the unloved. If we see it, if we take the time to really see it, is it still unloved?

I did not always believe what I did not see. And then I learned that we learn what and how we see.

What queer feminism awakened in my life was the desire to remember. What ecology and environmentalism gave me was a validation of the relationship with the non-human.

The non-human is—has become— the unseen. And to not see is not that it is not there, but that we do not value it or credit it enough to take it into consideration in our public, political and intellectual lives. Or that we have compartmentalized the political and the non-human. We are socialized into, and taught, what to see or not see.¹ But sometimes, yes, what is unseen is because it is endangered or extinct; misrepresented or unspoken. The unseen are plants and trees; soil and animal life; the unseen are the ladybirds that filled our childhoods but that no longer live in our gardens; air and every breath we take (for granted); little water streams;² but also imagination and dreams. The unseen are the accents that are lost as we try to fit in, and the stories these suppressed accents no longer tell. Our histories. It is women's reproductive labor, the workings of our bodies; entire communities and the places they inhabit.

¹ In *Interviews/Entrevistas*, Gloria Anzaldúa talks about a “non-physical spirit part” of us and our world that we are taught not to see: “It’s like a little child is taught what to see physically. If we were taught to see differently we would probably see people from other dimensions sitting in the armchair, you know—interlapping universes. But we’re not taught to see that way” (152).

² Next to our house was a little stream where we would go looking at crabs, and sometimes these crabs would wander into our houses. They have disappeared, both the watercourse (currently sewers), and the crabs.

The unseen is also something unholdable and often hard to define and confine. Intuition. Knowledge imprinted into our bodies. Intelligence, energy; what connects, across geographies, and across generations; across vast lifespans, and minute by minute.

For me, some terms that I learned from feminism, like “intersectional” can become a hollowed identity label. Yet one of the things that intersectionality has taught me is to see what is sometimes conveniently left unseen, when more than one social category is at work but not being recognized by law or social practices.³ And from that, to recognize a dimension that figures into our lives but that is not grappled with, adequately or at all. There are many examples. Like spirituality. Like our relationship to our inner worlds and to the world at large, over time and including human and non-human lives.

So maybe it was from feminism and queer feminism that I learned, or am always learning, to pay attention to the “unseen” after all, and to the non-human: as a lens to see people, relations, desires, identities, labor, entire systems that are not always taken into the equation of our lives. But it was not the first time I learned that lesson...

And here is another contradiction: I leave my own self-labeling as feminist without really leaving it.

Around five years ago, I found myself noticing that I am unattached to the label “feminist” and to living my life under the sole umbrella of feminism.

³ Intersectionality as a term was put forth by Kimberle Crenshaw looking at race and gender in US legal practices, showing cases when Black women are denied their right by the courts because the law sees them as only women, or only Black. On the other hand, I remember a young white woman, also in the US, once saying to me: I do not see race. What that meant was that in an attempt to not be racist and deal with US racial history, color blindness was an easier option that she was taught. On a different note, bas on also similar on some level, a colleague of mine in Beirut insists that she does not see someone’s sect/religion, because she wants to smash the sectarian system so that it is no longer the controlling factor in our political, personal and sometimes professional lives.

But I am also aware of ableism as part of our language, and the limits of the language of “seeing” without yet having an alternative term to offer here.

The first person I told this to was my therapist, and she was very understanding. I agreed when she said: You have taken what you need from it. Because there are other tools and languages and frameworks, and a whole life, to explore.

I didn't tell more people. Maybe I felt that it was a hard confession to make. My friendships, my daily bread, and the life directions I took, have been guided by feminism and feminist thought for more than 15 years. And it also never came up in conversation.

But then the topic came up one day. A close friend half-jokingly called what she was going through "post-feminism." In our mid to late thirties, we were all living through a multi-year "personal" crisis that may be categorized under mental ill-health, but is really about growing and outgrowing. I don't want to tell her story, but to summarize, I would say that when she was going through her darkest days, it was not feminism or feminist politics or language that she grabbed to stay afloat. In fact, she pointed out how feminists and activists had set up trenches in our "political" lives that kept us from truly supporting each other; and we judged each other on what we say and called it politics when it was, in fact, often policing.

I was trudging through and falling into my own long process of outgrowing my shrunken self. And how I deal with many of life's existential crises is by reading. But again, it was not feminist texts that I sought and that *fed* me this time around, the way they did a decade or so ago. This time it was spirituality; and nature writings that were indigenous-based and spiritual.⁴ "Fed" is a key word here. Fed and fulfilled. Because there was a hunger that could not be satisfied by feminist or activist language and practices around me. I needed and sought something that paid attention to the everyday, to the thoughts in my mind and the feelings in my memories, but that was also much vaster; the brutal honesty of Change that could look the here and now

⁴ Examples: Caroline Myss, Brene Brown and Pema Chodron; Robin Wall Kimmerer and Terry Tempest Williams.

in the eye, in all its ugliness and potentials, and see beyond it too. I needed tools to help me both accept fully and change drastically. And that was one of the hardest things to grasp: that change starts with acceptance and surrender.

Still, the term “post-feminism” never really clicked with me, although my friend’s use of the term gained her a small following of 3-4 people, all hard-core feminists who have also felt the limitations of categories. Like me, my friend once sought feminism to understand the world better and to be better equipped to confront and survive the violences of the patriarchal system. And we are still committed to that.

And so too, I would say, for many of the spiritual writings I was hungry for: these texts and their authors have surely benefitted from feminism. It was not something to be discarded and moved to another era of post.

Around that time, I was introduced to a framework put forth by Ije Ude and Samia Abou-Samra, that is rooted in the natural cyclical processes of how we work, make decisions, and grow. They termed one of the stages in that cyclical process: wisdomize/integrate.⁵

And that was the word I was looking for, not “post” but “integrated”: to take the lessons and wisdoms of what we have lived through and learned and to integrate it into who we are becoming.

And so I’ve been exploring what it means to integrate feminism into my life and work, instead of holding it as an identity label that assumes who I am, what I think, or what and how I give to the world.⁶ I do not need one label to

⁵ Turtle Tank/ School for Radical Purpose. 2019. “Part 4”. October 8, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/turtletanksschool/videos/938661746495588/>

⁶ Not even like the statement I used to hear a lot, before “feminist” gained some acceptance: I’m-not-a-feminist-I’m-a-humanist thing. Correct me if I’m wrong, bas if you’re not integrating feminism into your humanism, then there is a chance that you are sexist.

subsume all labels.⁷ I want to suspend many of my ready-made opinions and approaches, to not assume I know, but to still make use of all that I am and what I do know. And now, as we face severe states of collapse that we had not faced before in our modern memory on such a collective level, we turn to surviving rather than to self-identifying. How we identify becomes less important than what we do and how we do it.⁸ We learn, and many are learning, to reassess our language and identities and practices. We experience, and many are experiencing, the soul and the politics of survival.

We need feminism to be integrated into our analysis and practices more than ever. Violence and inequality intensify the need for feminist tools, actions and ethics. And here we are, struggling in the present as we are also often subsumed—especially as women—by legacies of intergenerational violence, repression and exclusions. And these “personal” and familial histories have also commonly existed within a larger context of discrimination, colonization and war. That is why we need all the tools that we can use as we face the present and delve into our histories, transparently and compassionately.⁹ But our history is not all shackles of oppression, and our present still has possibilities for joyful expressions. And I am interested in exploring all these connections— with each other, with our pasts, with the land we live on, especially the connections we do not easily see.

And so I am more open to stretching a little bit out of comfort zones and trying to integrate new or other worldviews, or to talk about it more; and sometimes new things are really return to old things. To some parts of ourselves, or how we understood our place in the world. For me, it started with a return to remembering how I grew up among trees and earth and

⁷ I know there are thinkers and activists and spiritualists and writers out there who have developed important feminist tools that go into fields and concepts I am interested in or benefit from: feminist spirituality, feminist therapy and eco-therapy, etc.

⁸ Thank you Azadeh Faramarziha for articulating this idea to me.

⁹ There are other feelings and states to deal with of course when we dive into our histories: anger, confusion, shame, grief, and maybe pride and belonging, but I don't think those should take away from the need to face our inheritance openly and compassionately.

rocks as much as it was among my family, and that these cannot be cut out from our lives.

Remembering the Forgotten.

Did I come to feminism as a kind of religion, looking for spiritual bonds and a cause that brings us together and promise us a better life? But feminism was also something to escape and outgrow the limitations of where we came from and who we are supposed to be. And then Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*¹⁰ reminded me that the first religion and spirituality is that of the earth and working with it.

It was my friend/mentor Samia who first introduced me to eco-feminism back in 2008-2009 by telling me about Winona LaDuke, Vandana Shiva, Linda Hogan, to Jacqui M. Alexander and to indigenous thought. It was something that would turn my life 180 degrees, a shift that is also a return.¹¹

Around that time, I was part of the Feminist Collective (FC) in Beirut, what would soon morph into the short-lived star organization, Nasawiya. As we were starting to build the FC, my feminist friend Nadine who was leading the collective, asked me to write position papers on the issues we address or support. One of these issues was environmentalism as a feminist cause. I don't remember whose idea it was to include environmentalism (it may or may not have been mine); but I do remember that it was one of the position papers that I most enjoyed working on. I titled it "The Earth is Female," and I share a snippet of it here for memory's sake:

"This synthesis [of feminism and environmentalism] can help us better understand how the patriarchal capitalist system works, how to resist it and how to present

¹⁰ *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (2015)

¹¹ And conversations with Samia continue to help me clarify many of the ideas that appear here.

alternative ways of living, based on our interconnectedness rather than on the dominance of one group over another. We all need water and land and air. We're all deeply connected to the Land, profoundly dependent on it for surviving, and for thriving... We need to learn to respect the biodiversity in nature, including the differences among people—differences in genders, ethnicities, sexualities, characters etc. We need to understand that “war on nature is a war on the psyche” [(La Duke, 155)] that healing a community (and our communities, and the women in particular, need a lot of healing) depends on recovering our relationship to our own bodies and to their environment.”¹²

Currently, I might not relate to gendering the earth as female, and we can question the limits of referring to the earth and all its creatures through genders that we have created as humans.¹³ But I also understand many of those who make statements such as “the earth is our mother” to guide them in their environmentalist and land-based struggles.

I don't know if I ever fully adopted the label “eco-feminist,” although it was always clear to me that ecofeminism presented a necessary ground to work from. I am convinced that connecting these two movements brings (or recognizes and validates) important ideas and practices that we need during this time.

Eco-feminism pushes frameworks and praxis that can see the interrelation and the simultaneity of the personal and the minute, as well as the systemic and the global. The cell and the planet, and the relationships between them. Because it is, and it is not only, about our relationship to the earth and the trees and the sea. It is also about the systems that allow and encourage different kinds of violence and exploitation, that privatize Earth and severs our relationship to it, that pollute water and monopolize it and then profit off it; And it is about being part of other layers of this story, embodied or felt everywhere, including in our human natures, in the ebbs and flows and the seasons.

¹² LaDuke, Winona. *All Our Relations*, 1999.

¹³ I thank Safaa T. for asking this question.

And this is what I find myself seeking more of, in spaces that accept more layers and nuances of our existence; in spaces where we can be in our fullness, where we can learn from each other about all the ways that we are connected, including to what is still unseen and undefined. Because how else can we learn for liberation if there was some type of gun pointed at your mind—whether internal, friendly or enemy fire—as you are trying to figure things out.

Loving is seeing. Loving is saying.

So this I say. As much as feminism shaped my intellect, it has also brought to my life amazing women and people, magical in their brilliance and their spirit. Women who really saw me.

Trees saw me first.

Trees were my childhood friends where I had none. I had to be a lonely child with tendency to explore emotions across the “misery” continuum. But the trees saw me. Or they were the voice of the Me that saw me. They were the wisdom inside me, but they were simply the wisdom. Don’t jump, it will be okay, came the voice. I was tilting towards further edges of this misery as I stood on the roof, where a beloved vine tree climbed from the garden below, and made a tent at the top of the house that welcomed social gatherings and my solo wonderings.

Seeing the Unloved.

It is winter. It took a long time to arrive this year, but today is said to be the coldest day of the season so far. Those in power have put us in deadly competition with the trees: their lives or ours as we freeze. Electricity is scarce, and mazut is expensive; the generators run all day, or for a few

hours, depending on where you live. We are paying and will continue to pay for this dependence on generators with the air quality and our health for many years.

We know and we can see those responsible for the state we are in today. Or rather we are not able to see them. We are not in direct contact with those making decisions, running banks and political parties and militias. We fight or are fought by those doing their work: bank tellers, public employees, and angry men with stupid hashtags on twitter and with guns on the streets.

Or you could say that some people are making statements to not see those in power, turning attention to other spaces where their power does not shape all our time. Because those in power have created a system that keeps us on survival mode. Survival mode imprisons our focus on the individual, the family, the town,¹⁴ the sect. Our distressed enraged instinct is to forget or to fight anyone who does not belong to this configuration. No other forms of connection will help us now, not to our spirits and not to our neighbors, not to a drying or polluted river nor to the hunted birds or hyenas.¹⁵ Survival mode turns our access to a car or to a gallon of benzene from the gas station, to a visa, or to a job that still pays in dollars to an accusation or a reason for self-flagellation, rather than giving us the time and tools to work together to ensure that everyone is surviving this collapsing system.

In a meeting of feminists in Beirut that I attended some months ago, R., a twenty-something feminist kept saying words I had been feeling, and I think many of us in that room were too: “I am here because if in the future I am asked what I did during the collapse, I never want to say: nothing.”

¹⁴ Remember when some gas stations would not fill your car unless you showed them your ID that you are from this town? And there was always someone angry that the “stranger” from the neighboring town was being served by the station before him.

¹⁵ Brennan, S. (2018, Nov. 28). *Lebanese groups work to protect striped hyenas*. from *Al-Monitor*.

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/11/lebanese-striped-hyena-under-threat.html>

In his book on environmental philosophy, Habib Maalouf repeats how environmental justice is about responsibility not only to ourselves in the now, as humans, but to plant and animal life, and especially to the next generations.¹⁶ You can frame it as responsibility in your role as ancestor to future generations; or leaving a better world for your ancestors as you become their ancestor.¹⁷

As someone who was never interested in experiencing motherhood/ parenthood or reproducing familial bonds, it took me a long time to understand this idea of next generations, because I always heard it in terms of parents and children. But this is not about blood relations. It is not even always human relations. It is all of us. On the days where I do not know why I should get out of bed, this puts a little fire in me: I can't see it now, but some of the work we are doing, some of the relations we persevere in building, is for the benefit of the future. The stories we are making space for. How do we maintain and ritualize the time to tell these stories and to listen to them? From Ije Ude and Samia Abou-Samra: "those rituals, when repeated, engrave a system in place."¹⁸ I want a good system to last us a while and that re-vitalizes us, that helps remember and think of all the "impossible" possibilities that we feel but have not seen yet.

This Monday morning, I woke up with a different thought. A very unusual thought for a Monday, especially when it was cold and the generator is on only for a quick hour in the early morning. This thought was a voice not so dissimilar from the voice of the trees of my childhood: "Things will be okay"

¹⁶ على الحاقفة: مدخل الى الفلسفة البيئية (المركز الثقافي العربي، ٢٠٠٢)

¹⁷ Another Maalouf, Amin Maalouf writes: "I am the son of each of my ancestors, and in exchange, I am destined to be their belated parent," from *Origins*, translated by Catherine Temerson (214).

¹⁸ Turtle Tank/ School for Radical Purpose. 2019. "Free Class: Sacred Leadership." October 25, 2019.

[https://www.facebook.com/turtletankschool/posts/2482701082006273?_cft__\[0\]=AZVDAxXyRO5r5yNH4p3h3YBmSuqrBOGqq-ID3mH9BaXbb60nbgSq1ANQe4TpY-QAt6S1p7yUt4P3GAymPZkTBUVsKi03Us8vymv8DdEuLW6fTOx7K9jjGUeBta5csq7vU6L6ssp9Di4HRP_Bp0YvmWwtIWA6TjUGMWz_nwGLEQWLxHSHhaBVqxXPg_fXNndliwQ&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/turtletankschool/posts/2482701082006273?_cft__[0]=AZVDAxXyRO5r5yNH4p3h3YBmSuqrBOGqq-ID3mH9BaXbb60nbgSq1ANQe4TpY-QAt6S1p7yUt4P3GAymPZkTBUVsKi03Us8vymv8DdEuLW6fTOx7K9jjGUeBta5csq7vU6L6ssp9Di4HRP_Bp0YvmWwtIWA6TjUGMWz_nwGLEQWLxHSHhaBVqxXPg_fXNndliwQ&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R)

it whispered in the back of my mind. I didn't know if it meant that it will no longer be this cold, as per natural law of the seasons, or whether we will survive what we are going through right now. That someday all of this will be a distant memory.

But it will not be something to abandon: what we have learned and felt these years; the disillusionment with our structures and systems, with some of our relationships, with assumptions that we confined ourselves and each other to; loved ones gone; but they may still be here. Hopefully we will not rush to forget, or to return, to how we once were.

Hopefully this will be something to integrate, to remember into our stories. We will still be here to remember, and the trees will still be here too, encouraging us onward.