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## **Of Cities, Women, & Bodies: Etel Adnan and Huguette Caland in Conversation**

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I came to Etel Adnan's collection of letters, *Of Cities & Women*, and Huguette Caland's paintings following the August 4 explosion that devastated Beirut this summer. It was at a time when the nation was paralyzed, then mobilized, by collective grief and anger at a negligent state that destroyed the Lebanese capital. It was also a time when many were grappling with the loss of a city, one that had been wounded by violence and trauma on countless occasions. This loss was a physical ailment—a heaviness that permeated bodies, traveled through veins, and tightly wound around hearts. Adnan's and Caland's work represented a sense of refuge from Beirut's newly incomprehensible landscapes, and I would like to think that we found each other in a time of crisis. It was the combination of home, exile, and being a woman — in that exact order—that drew me to their work. Both Etel Adnan and Huguette Caland were women who were born and raised in Beirut during times of monumental historical change; whether it be Adnan's childhood during French colonial rule in Mount Lebanon or Caland growing up as the daughter of Lebanon's first president following independence. They were also women who left Beirut to pursue their passions abroad—an affliction that has been passed on to generations of Lebanese who seek new opportunities on foreign lands. More importantly, they were artists whose work firmly and loudly reflected their positionalities as Arab women in exile, illuminating the identitarian tensions that underpin this category of *being*.

Finding Adnan's and Caland's work at a time of crisis was thus symbolic of the spatial and temporal fluctuations that Beirut, and Lebanon more generally, experienced at various historical moments. The path of discovery that joined us was also a connective thread through which women's stories can be shaped and written. This paper is an attempt to parse out these intersecting storylines, putting the artists' works in conversation with one another while reflecting on the narratives that emerge. Specifically, I will read Etel Adnan's

letters to Fawwaz Traboulsi, which she sent from Beirut in 1991 and 1992; in relation to two of Caland's paintings, *Self Portrait* (1995) and *Girl Skipping Rope* (1998 or 2000), looking at how the authors' orientations toward space and bodies re-frame the landscapes of postwar Beirut as feminine spaces where belonging, escape, exile, and loss are affectively negotiated.

### **War, Objects, Bodies**

Finding the letters and paintings was not happenstance; rather, it was a moment of self-recognition. I saw my experience as an expatriate mirrored through Adnan's words; a relentless pursuit for "home" in all the places I lived and visited, laced with the difficult realization that each stop was somehow lacking. Perhaps it was the mental discomfort and physical uneasiness of this search for home that led me to Caland's two paintings. In them, I found a coupling of freedom and closure that proved cathartic to my tiring pursuits. The nude body in *Self Portrait* appears unrestricted by the boundaries of the canvas, filling its spaces assertively and completely. The painting of a young girl skipping rope whilst floating above a two-dimensional city signified to me some kind of a release, letting go of a past chapter and drifting toward a new one.

It is my personal relationship with each of the three texts—one that was formed amid Beirut's shattered geographies—that propelled me to excavate the connections *between* them. I use Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) to examine the links between Adnan's letters and Caland's paintings. Ahmed's text looks at how we can make sense of the world around us from a queer studies perspective. Nuancing the "orientation" in sexual orientation and the "orient" in orientalism, Ahmed argues that bodies are situated both spatially and temporally, which impacts the ways in which they are constituted and whether they move towards or away from particular objects. She notes that

“the work of inhabiting space involves a dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar”, so even though being orientated means feeling at “home” in a particular space and context, it remains “possible for the world to create new impressions, depending on which way we turn” (Ahmed 2006: 7-8). Her affective reading of space and self-centers intimacy and feeling as a way of knowing; thus, grounding spaces as part of bodies, rather than exterior elements— “spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body” (Ahmed 2006: 9).

In connecting bodies, spaces, objects, and emotions; Ahmed’s text provides a productive ground to think through the selected works, my relationship to them, and the context of postwar Lebanon. The civil war (1975-1990) was arguably one of the most important events in the country’s recent history, producing spatial and temporal reverberations that remain palpable to this day. The bloody event destroyed large parts of Beirut; demarcated neighborhoods along sectarian lines; left visibly wounded buildings around the city; and ushered in a sectarian power-sharing system and postwar reconstruction era that sought to erase collective memories of the war through state-sponsored amnesia. Temporally, the aftermath of the civil war produced a period of “stuckness”—which Judith Naeff (2018) terms a “suspended now”—where the present is constructed as a protracted moment of crisis and precarity. Rather than frame the event as singular or the product of History, Ahmed’s text allows us to reflect on the ways in which violence can disturb orientations; how trauma can uproot bodies and environments; and how these transformations are produced and performed in everyday capacities.

### **Queering the Nation, Framing Exile**

At the heart of Ahmed’s text is an exploration of how bodies, particularly bodies that do not fit within normative social boundaries and interpretations, come to

occupy and/or claim space through their relationship to different objects. She argues for a historicized understanding of objects; one that takes into consideration the labor relations, power dynamics, and political economies that shape them into what they are. For example, the table in Ahmed's analysis is not a neutral "thing". In the case of women writers— many of whom existed at the margins of society or whose voices were unheard— claiming space to write is a political act, and the table becomes a site of feminist action.

In parsing out the threads of Ahmed's argument, I begin to reflect on how the female body can exist as both site and object. The nation, in its geographical and identitarian expressions, binds the female body within a set of sociopolitical and cultural norms that often regulate how this body moves, what it should look like, how it should speak, and where it can make itself visible. Taking the nation as a framework and point of reference can (re)produce the female body as a symbol and an object for consumption, limiting explorations of bodies and spaces that move beyond territorial boundaries. What orientations can open up new possibilities for reading the female body? Gayatri Gopinath's exploration of queer regional diasporas offers one potential answer. In her book, *Unruly Visions*, Gopinath (2018) looks at how the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora in painting and photography can bring to light "histories, subjectivities, and desires" that were otherwise unseen in dominant historical narratives (9). The turn to the regional, she argues, is often personal and autobiographical, taking the "form of deeply affective, personal explorations of regional belonging or alienation" (Gopinath 2018: 10). Queerness, for Gopinath, does not only signify non-normative sexuality, but also new ways of seeing and interpreting space and time.

I thus read Adnan's letters and Caland's paintings as queer objects, in that they open novel possibilities for comprehending space, memory, and history in Lebanon. I also view the artists as queer subjects who dive within inner worlds

and orient themselves towards outer ones in ways that challenge normative understandings of self, space, and nation. When read with and against each other, these texts paint new boundaries for the female body that move beyond the confines of the nation, speaking to both artists' positions as women in "exile". I frame this condition as the displacement and/or disturbance of bodies from spaces otherwise known as home—whether or not this home is desired and/or acknowledged as such. More specifically, it can be read as a protracted moment of disorientation; "a bodily feeling [that can be] unsettling, and it can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground..." (Ahmed 2006: 157). This interpretation of exile is expressed by Adnan herself, who notes in the final letter of the collection: "...I feel that I haven't settled anywhere, really, that I'm rather living the world, all over, in newspapers, in railway stations, cafes, airports...The books that I'm writing are houses that I build for myself" (1993: 127). I anchor myself in the folds of Adnan's literary homes—in their fragility, their hopefulness, and even their fleetingness—and create my own home within them.

Adnan's letters were written between 1990 and 1992 from different locations across Europe and from Beirut. In each of them, she reflected on the condition of women and their evolving relationships to surrounding environments, as well as the compounding crises and violent wars facing Lebanon and the Arab world. Her words drew threads of solidarity between the women in Berlin, Rome, Greece, and Beirut; forging an imagined literary "region" where female bodies, belonging, and feminist longing can be mapped. Her musings also outlined the alienation she felt growing up in a household of diverse national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds; the desire to excavate home from personal memories while searching for it in present locations; and the discomforts of trying to belong to a city—like Beirut—that is persistently under the thread of violence. Similarly, Caland uses her relationships to her body, to personal

memories, and to the city as ways to reframe what it means to be a woman through these different sites.

In that light, one can read *Of Cities and Women*, and Caland's two paintings as attempts to grapple with the disorientation of being women-artists in exile, living the majority of their lives away from Lebanon, and feeling the pull of a country that is brought to its knees by compounding crises and violent wars. The artists re-draw the borders of home in their work, creating, as Gopinath mentions, queer affective landscapes and regionalities that re-interpret space and time. Specifically, I look at the city and the sea as sites where these landscapes are written.

## **The City**

Both Adnan's and Caland's work re-imagines the city as a feminine space; one that is constituted at the intersection of remembering the past and imagining alternative futures. They orient themselves in the postwar moment, reframing it in terms of affective attachments to surrounding environments.

Following years of absence, Adnan arrives in 1991 to a city changed by war. She notes that women, through their contact with the earth and land, are witnesses to the war, whose strength is reflected in their desire to remain in Lebanon. Adnan gives the example of her friend Janine Rubeiz's elderly mother, who refused to leave her home despite it suffering severe damage and destruction. Her act is framed as one of defiance and resistance, establishing women as memory keepers and an embodied link to the ruins of war.

Not only do women remember the war, but they are also the ones who keep track of the city's changing urban facades. Adnan notes how women are always willing to speak of houses, describing "with an architect's or a doctor's



precision exactly whatever happened to each house, and balcony, the charred walls, the disfigured facades, the gutted rooms” (1993: 109). Her commentary reflects the way in which the city-space comes to be gendered—with the home perceived as a woman’s domain— and how orientations toward this lived environment are unsettled in the aftermath of war, leaving physical scars that are visible (like ruins and debris) and those that exist beneath the surface (memories of what once was, what was lost, and what could have been). How can we memorize and memorialize destruction in the wake of tragedy? Who do we archive our ruins for, and is our compulsive categorization healing?

In her re-drawing of Beirut’s disfigured boundaries following the war, Adnan remarks how the street has changed. This space, often imagined as public and accessible to all, had transformed into the “exclusive domain of men” (Adnan 1993: 110). Perhaps, Adnan posits, the women are now relegated to the private sphere. She wonders if women’s return to the streets, their occupation and ownership of this public space, could mean liberation; not only for women, but for the men who fought the war— “if greater numbers of women went outdoors in the damaged neighborhoods...all these overwrought, exhausted men, barricaded in their shops and businesses, still worried, humiliated, would again find themselves some power from tenderness, some liberation” (Adnan 1993: 111). For Adnan, the affective afterlives of the war (feelings of shame, of humiliation, anger, and desperation) could perhaps be reoriented through a feminist and feminine perspective, transforming vulnerability into a force for regeneration and liberation.

Just as Adnan sees the feminine in her city, Caland paints her city as feminine. In *Self-Portrait* (1995), we see an outline of a naked body covering the entire canvas; provocative and evocative with its starkly pink space and soft lines. Caland’s lines form an orientation toward self, sexuality and surrounding environments. They are playful and welcoming, offering up the body—a literal

and figurative home—that Caland has built for herself. Sara Ahmed notes that lines depict directionality of sexual orientation and that following certain lines involves uncertainty, moments of hope, and doubt—all of which open the possibility toward new imaginaries. Caland’s nude drawing, an extension of her self, creates room for alternative interpretations that are not “in line” with traditional conceptions of bodies and spaces. We can read the vastness of the pink space in the painting and the firmness of Caland’s outline, as sites for re-mapping and re-drawing the city. Thus, the nude female body is not merely a shape or vessel, but also a frontier that negotiates power dynamics. It holds the potential for tenderness that Adnan discusses, as well as liberation.

Caland’s *Girl Skipping Rope* is perhaps an attempt to remember the city with imprecision, through the fuzziness of personal memory. A young girl floats above a two-dimensional city in aerial view and the landscape that unfolds below her marries harsh lines with intimate stitching motifs; overlaps disjointed spaces with fluorescent colors. The girl’s skipping rope splits the painting spatially and temporally—it asks the viewer to travel along the rope’s lines and perhaps remember a different version of themselves as they do so. A reflection on memory and the past, Caland depicts her younger self in a fantastical environment. The city is disfigured and spatially disoriented, reflecting both a loss of home as a referential framework, and an invitation to imagine new landscapes through floating and fluid structures. Her work is wistful and colorful; patching together a scene from childhood that nuances memory as an assemblage of past attachments and present realities. One could read this piece as nostalgic for a simpler time, a reflection on youth and girlhood, or as a desire to escape the constraints of past lives. In the corner of the art piece we see an older figure peering at her—her husband Paul Caland—who she fell in love with at a young age. Perhaps her floating above the buildings and patchwork city also reflects a moment of transition from young girl to woman; from a past life to the promise of a different future.

While Adnan discusses the potential for finding tenderness and liberation when women occupy the streets of Beirut, Caland portrays tenderness and liberation as part of the feminine body, transcending the confines of geographical space. This relationship between the three texts frames the body as a “homing device”, which helps one calibrate a sense of self and home in moments of disorientation; particularly those that travel through different time periods. The physical space of the city is not “exterior to [the] bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body” (Ahmed 2006: 9).

## **The Sea**

The sea is an important theme throughout Adnan’s letters and is linked to her intimate and identitarian relationship to the Mediterranean. Born to a Syrian Ottoman father and Greek mother, Adnan often found herself floating between national and linguistic identities; thus, the sea became a refuge and a space for belonging. In Adnan’s Beirut letters, she frames the sea as a multimodal site that mediates escape, belonging, home, and loss. Upon her arrival to the city in 1991, she describes the view from her eleventh-floor apartment which overlooks the sea from three sides. Adnan notes, “I am reunited with that sea again, the one that I love above all, and, I often fear, more than anything in the world...I never really left her behind” (1993: 106). This quote encapsulates how she orients herself toward the Mediterranean Sea in particular, regardless of where she may be in the world. She constructs her Mediterranean identity through the process of orientation; specifically, she grapples with affective dimensions like love and fear to frame the sea as a home and a homecoming—a constant in spite of exile.

For Adnan, the sea is not only a feminine space, but also one that is intrinsically and inherently female. She notes that there “is no separation

between the sea and a woman, and it is futile to look further, in thought or through experience of others, in order to come close to the essence of what is feminine: water, salt...and the sun covering it all” (1993: 110). She transforms the sea into a medium and site through which subjective attachments are re-negotiated, and a space within which she can “dissolve” herself, surrendering to the ebb and flow of the Mediterranean waters. The intricate map of seaward attachment that Adnan draws carries interesting methodological implications. If the sea is, as Adnan notes, a space “to become what one is” (1993: 110), then the nude body in Caland’s *Self Portrait* transforms the vast, pink space in the paintings into a symbolic sea that we can orient ourselves towards and against. The body can also be a home, a homecoming, an anchoring, and a place from which to set sail.

Adnan’s musings on the relationship between sea, self, and everyday life are nuanced by her discussions on loss, violence, and death. While reflecting on ruins and the brutality of the war, she notes that “if it weren’t for the sea, Beirut would not have survived its devastation” (1993: 110). Were it not for the salt of the sea— which exists on us, within us, and in our surrounding environments— the city would have succumbed to its wounds; and perhaps been lost in the process. Her orientation seaward is hopeful, in that it appears to counter the permanence of war as a lived reality that leaves tangible traces around the city-space. It leaves room to re-orient ourselves toward natural environments, viewing them as both spaces we interact with *and* ones that can pave alternative imaginaries for the future. Perhaps a turn toward the elements can illuminate resistance, preservation and survival strategies that resist the specters of violence and decay.

## Transformations

Adnan's perspectives on city and sea are drastically changed in 1992, when she returns to the Beirut for her friend Janine's funeral. The event is profoundly disorientating for Adnan, changing the way she relates to the physical and imagined landscapes around her. Traces of hope for a better future are replaced with resignation and defeat. The difficulties of life in Lebanon—the power cuts and heat—which had been bearable during the first visit are now intolerable. She is more attuned to the noise, to the heat, to the daily discomforts of life in the city, and to her, “living [in Beirut] is an act of submission to the worst” (Adnan 1993: 122).

Following her friend's death, the same familiar places transform into ones that are no longer welcoming. The grief she is experiencing is so profound that it alters her orientation to the sea. She begins writing her letter by the window, and as she looks out at the Mediterranean before her, she notices that there are only a few boats peppering the horizon, which has been erased by haze or heat (Adnan 1993: 122). This sea, which had always been home and a refuge, becomes “flat and of no help” (1993: 124); no longer an ally but a space that “resembles the sun too much and burns [her] eyes.” (1993: 127). Through the affective prism of loss and grief, the sea for Adnan is as terrifying as militia leaders and this thought frightens her. The salt that had preserved her body has dissolved under the weight of grief and the stickiness of Beirut's heat. If she gives way to the anger and merges her imaginaries of the sea with war and violence, it may produce a profound disorientation that shifts her body falls out of place. As Ahmed notes, “bodies that experience disorientation can be defensive, as they reach out for support or as they search for a place to reground...their relation to the world” (2006: 158). Instead, she searches for ways to grapple with her friend's death.

One way she attempts to understand and unravel her feelings is by equating her friend with the city. The death of Janine becomes the death of Beirut, and Adnan finds herself wanting to talk to Janine about how she is feeling, and the pain of her friend's death! The absurdity of this thought allows Adnan to reflect on how bodies are orientated toward death. The fragility and perishability of the body and the way in which people are socially and politically constituted through their vulnerability, frames the disintegration of her friend's woman-body and that of the city as similar (Adnan 1993: 128). The emphasis on the woman-body recalls Adnan's earlier discussion on tenderness—in this context; however, what she viewed as a way to overcome the horrors of war becomes a reminder of our humanness; the soft folds of our bodies that can also be pricked and prodded.

It is only after some time has passed that Adnan is able to regain her orientation toward her surroundings. In mid-September of 1992, she feels the wind changing and the sea in movement, and comes to the conclusion that while “the mystery of death goes through us...we are not death”. Through participating in the funeral and mourning rituals, she discovers that “Beirut has kept its moments of nobility and that we do have a lot to preserve and to discover” (Adnan 1993: 129). In her reflection on life and death in a dying city, she comes to an almost full-circle conclusion that there is still room for hope.

## **Conclusion**

Beirut has often been imagined as a feminine city, perhaps a victim or a damsel in distress. Caland's and Adnan's works take Beirut's postwar landscapes and reframe the feminine within them. They dive into themes of exile, belonging, home, and self; reminding us that neither them nor the city need saving. The artists open new possibilities to reflect on Beirut today, following the port explosion and the multiple socioeconomic and political crises

that Lebanon is experiencing. Perhaps feminizing the city as Caland and Adnan do— finding the tenderness in its folds— can help us grapple with loss; paint alternative political and cultural imaginaries.

Towards the end of her 1992 letter, Adnan writes, “The day the sea will be obstructed we’ll face an irrevocable nightmare” (1993: 127). We have lost significant parts of Lebanon’s shores to privatization and illegal occupation, and the country’s central port has been severely damaged; however, a turn seaward in our thinking and orientations may reveal new horizons for understanding, re-building, and belonging to our city. After waves drench the homes we lost and those we build, how do we excavate the “salt” that lingers within and around us?

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