Nafssiya: Mediating Emotional Distances

In an essay written for Tohu's special issue, Saadi Nikro writes about souls and breathing, technology, migration, and long-distance relationships. He discusses the work of two Beirut natives – artist Etel Adnan and filmmaker Ahmad Ghossein, and writes about how technologies help us conduct relationships over distances in space and time.

Essay / Saadi Nikro December 31, 2022

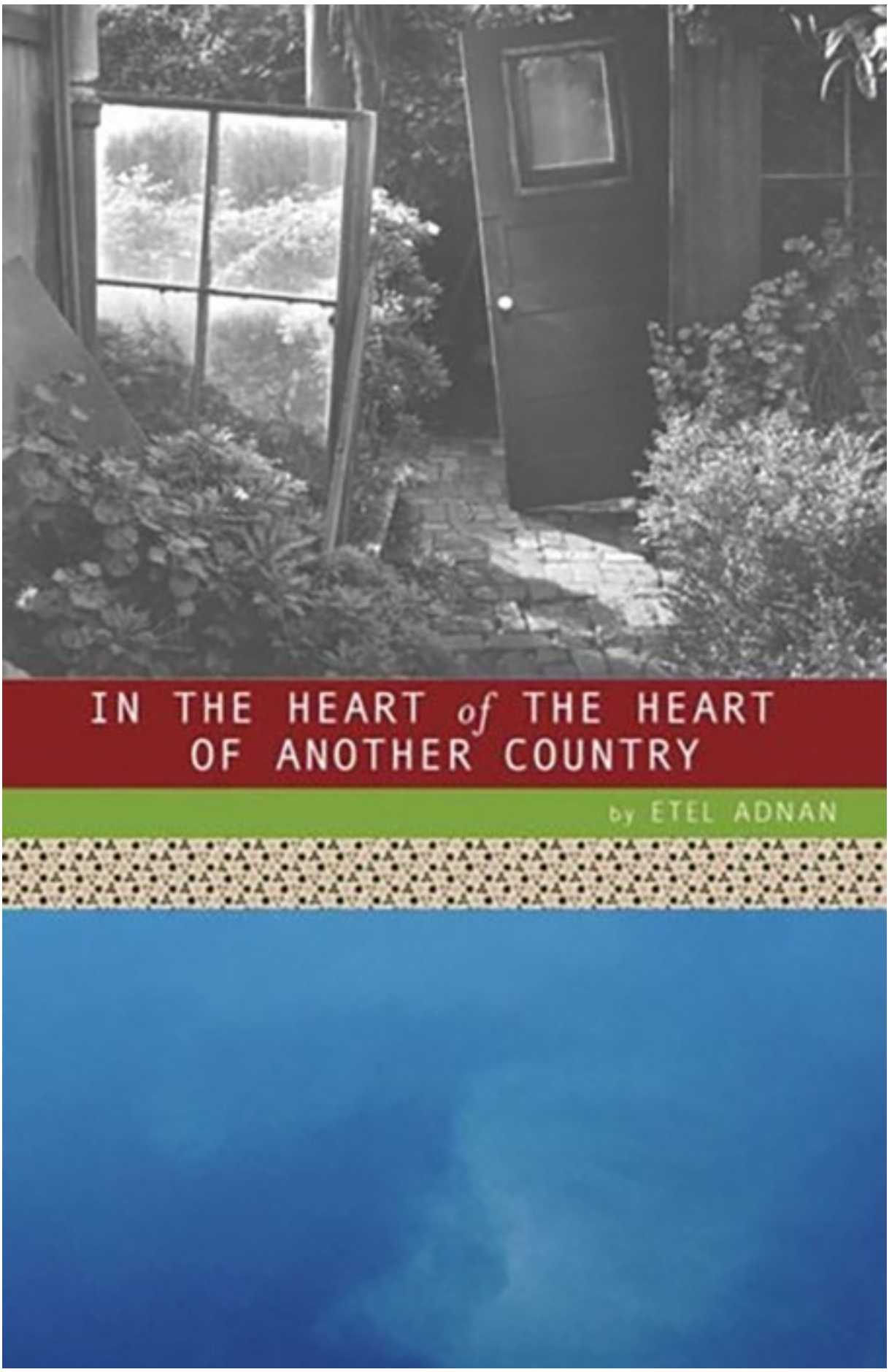
> A poet is the one who mounts the guard over the inanimate objects of this world. And this explains how my breath is essential.
>
> Etel Adnan, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*

In a general sense, capacities to inhabit the world always have to be mediated by forms of technology, which can be understood as varying modes of graphic application. In this sense, we can broaden an understanding of technology to include less elaborate graphic exercises of using a pencil, a pen, charcoal, or indeed voice. Obviously, such practices are mediated by forms of communication, which in turn can be understood as modalities of address and response.

But alongside their mundane effect of relaying messages, such modalities embody certain repertoires by which one becomes a subject of their world, acquiring certain schemes of social and cultural associations. Through such schemes, one maintains relationships to others, to an artefact, a pet, a plant, or a place. At the same time, technologies help us to negotiate relationships over temporal and spatial distances, relationships often imbued with intimate and emotional orientations.

The writer and artist Etel Adnan was well aware of this medial aspect of technologies and related graphic applications. She was a poet, who expressed herself in various mediums, such as writing, photography, drawing, and painting. The epigraph above comes from her autobiography of 2005, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*. I would rather describe the book, somewhat awkwardly, as an AutoBioGraphy, so as to capture how Etel articulates her self-understanding (auto) in relation to the environments she inhabited and traversed (bio)—relations she expressed through a graphic practice of writing (graphy). This writing itself is far less than uniform. Discontinuous and aphoristic, it embodies a design of gaps and fissures, cracks and breaches. In the process, language is given the space to breathe.

adnan taschenbuch.jpg



[1]Cover of Etel Adnan's book In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country, City Lights Publishers, 2005

“Breath,” she says, is “essential,” if we are to safeguard the “inanimate objects of this world.” Objects, things, artefacts, technologies—living beings, we can say, that bear the traces of social and cultural associations—are to be protected from their mere use. While they can’t talk back and defend themselves, they both occupy and traverse time and space, influencing how people learn to become subjects of their circumstances, inhabit their actual and imaginary worlds meaningfully. Thus, in writing an autobiography, Etel writes biographies of places and things. Or more precisely, she articulates an awareness of herself in relation to things and places.

Attentive to the historical threads and social knots in which the self is relationally, differentially constituted, Etel’s autobiography is similar to an Arabic tradition of *tarjama li-nafsihi*, “an interpretation of self.”[1] The Arabic terms *nafsi*, *nafssiya*, *nafsihi* carry the root nafs, or breath, which forms a basis for a number of connotations. Close to the Arabic *ruh*, or Hebrew *ruach*, which refer to spirit or soul, *nafs* carries a more subjective constellation of meanings, such as breath, ego, inclination, tendency, aspiration, temperament, psyche, and longing. We could say that for Etel an autobiography constitutes the scene of a graphic application of self, a scene of bodies in molecular relationships of comportment, a scene that breathes.

Graphic practices and their technological mediations can be regarded through this notion of *nafssiya*. They influence how one breathes, how one sighs, how one moans, how one respires in the presence, or else non-presence, of another, and how one extends their sense of care and love to the world around them. Technologies constitute an obstinate being-ness that does not completely disappear behind the messages or illustrations they bear. Technologies have the capacity to mediate the passing of time and the traversal of space. In doing so, they shape emotional comportment, help manage longing in distance and the politics of love.

The mobile phone that transports my voice to the other side of the world, the pen with which I scribble in my diary, or the screen that now faces me as I write—they share with me a certain emotional livelihood, a varied range of capacities by which to inhabit circumstance, imagine and move in the world, traverse time and space.

The television set that transports images and narratives into my home has a physical presence. It both shapes my capacity to develop relationships with the world and occupies a certain part of the house, for a certain length of time. It is folded into my corporeal experience of my home—to some extent defines how the very idea of home itself is perceived. At the same time, what is often referred to as “the box,” with the connotation of *boxing one in*, the television set influences how I incorporate, and physically digest, an imaginary sense of the world around me.

In a quite significant development, a camera or a cassette tape, a laptop or a mobile phone, are more interactive than television, considering how I can create graphic material myself, share it with others, and store it for purposes of future retrieval and reference. It would not be an exaggeration to think of a mobile phone as a prosthetic of sorts, like these spectacles I have had to sport for the best part of my life; an artificial body part, without which my capacities to interact with others and the world would be somewhat limited.

saadi cassette.jpg **[2]**



[3]Cassette tape

Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 [4]

With a mobile phone in my hand, my digitised perception (rather than analogue-induced perception) of the world I inhabit anticipates that I can send and receive a message from the other side of the world in seconds. I now embody a very different anticipatory perception of time and space as I did in my youth in the 1970s when it would take something like 24 hours to send what was called a “telex” across the globe. On the few occasions when my parents had to use a telex, rather than the usual letter through the post, there was a heightened sense of drama, of urgency and anticipation.

In his 30-minute film from 2005, *My Father is Still a Communist: Intimate Secrets to be Published*, Ahmad Ghossein mined the cassette letters his parents exchanged when his father left Lebanon to seek work in Saudi Arabia, for about a ten-year period between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s. From my own youth in Sydney, Australia, I recall how this practice became popular amongst Lebanese migrants. Rather than write a letter, people would record long messages on a cassette tape, usually on both sides.

Cassette tapes, or what we can call cassette-letters, were convenient for a number of reasons. They were small and compact and thus did not cost much to send through the post. They were also relatively lightweight, which was important, as very often tapes would be sent with people in the community who were going back home, usually for a holiday. Speaking into a tape recorder is more spontaneous and less laborious than writing. It also has the advantage of voice, which, arguably, is more intimate than writing.

In his film, Ghossein used parts of some of his parents’ cassette letters as voiceovers, while the visuals are either of his mother in the present, the early 2000s, or else still photographs of her as a young mother when the father was away. We only hear those parts of the cassette letters in which

his mother is speaking to her husband. Thus, we only hear her voice, and not the father's. This has the effect of emphasising the father's absence for long stretches of Ghossein's childhood.

Often, in the tapes, his mother bemoans her husband's absence, expressing her longing for him to return home, to return and stay by her side. In doing so, she imaginatively anticipates when and how he will listen to her message: "if you're listening to this recording at night, close your eyes and dream, dream, dream how we were once together." Like the other tapes we hear from in the film, this particular one is numbered, "1978, Tape 3, Face B." His mother's voice is played against a shot of a broad expanse of night, the tail lights of an automobile visible in an expanding distance. The motif is repeated about halfway into the film, with another visual of cars moving along a winding road in the distance. In the almost pitch black setting, the road's curves are noticeable only through the movement of the tail lights.

For Ghossein, an expanse of space, or else a stretch of time, is significant not in terms of objective coordinates, but with respect to movement, to modalities of traversal. Keeping in mind his preoccupation with his parents' cassette-letters, we can appreciate the way in which voice travels, how voice is pitched. Distance has most often been represented as coordinates of space and/or time, coordinates that can be objectively measured, calculated, situated through a descriptive mode of address. Such coordinates come with well-honed repertoires of reference—such as the days and months of a year, or else the number of kilometres between one city and another, one country and another.

By contrast, Ghossein is interested in how spatial and temporal distances are negotiated emotionally—how emotions, intimacy, and love, are mediated by technological applications. This interest resonates through his film. The visual images Ghossein records are often about distances that are expanding and contracting. Such as an earlier scene of his mother walking on the road, towards the camera, from about 200 metres away, until she is only a few centimetres away from the lens, so close that her face fills the entire frame. The scene has been shot in the making of the film, so that his mother is in her late 50s or 60s. However, her voiceover comes from a cassette-letter, from around 25 years ago.

In her recorded message, she pleads with her husband to return, talking about memories of when they were together, even about their fights. "You're my life," she tells him in an exasperated tone of voice, "my love, my soul, the pulse beats of my heart…" In this fashion, Ghossein explores emotions and distance through time lags, in a temporal dislocation between his mother's voice and her present image. He repeats the scene of her walking along the road towards the camera, only with a different recorded voiceover of hers. She employs her imagination to break down the distance between her and her husband: "Sometimes I imagine that I'm sitting, and I hear a knock on the door. I would get up, and as I open it, I find Rachid standing in front of me." She whistles in astonishment, as though the scene she imagines is real. "What an amazing time," she says. It transpires that she is pregnant, and records that she expects to deliver their child not later than March 20. The child is Ahmad, the filmmaker himself.

The next cassette-letter is visually announced as "1982, Tape 6, Side A." The distance between this tape and the previous one is around 6 years. In her message, she says that there was no electricity at the house for a couple of days. At the same time, we hear the voice of a child, Ahmad, now around 5 or 6 years of age, saying in the background that he doesn't want to speak with "baba," meaning his father. His mother explains that Ahmad "doesn't believe that baba is in the recorder." While childish, Ahmad's sense of his father *being in* the cassette recorder constitutes an astute observation. The child's shy sense of emotional (dis)attachment gains its liveliness in relation to the technological apparatus.

While emotional, this distance is mediated by the social and political circumstances in which the father had to travel to find work, and was constrained to maintain the livelihood of his family by being away. They lived in a small village in south Lebanon, which had come under the occupation of Israel. In other words, her emotional need for her husband's ear is conditioned by the political circumstances of occupation. "If only the days calm down," she says in another cassette-letter, "if only things can calm down, and everything returns to normality. Too many days escape us. We are at the height of our youth, but there is no fun for us. I don't know if you agree with me. I feel as

though my life is wasting away. But anyway, God willing, we will make up for what we have lost." She ends her recording by imagining that, though distant in another land, her husband is physically close to her: "I can't talk anymore, I'm exhausted…let's have some rest."

Nafssiya, the trembling, wavering, melancholy reverberations of voice constitute the message itself. Like Etel's sense of care for inanimate objects, Ghossein extends care for the emotional livelihood of the cassette tapes. In a very special sense, his film orchestrates his childish sense of his father being in the recorder itself. And like Etel, Ghossein works on and creates graphic applications to render the world amenable to social and cultural production and the emerging solidarities brought about in their wake.

Etel_Adnan,_2008_(cropped).jpg **[5]**



[6]Etel Adnan, 2008

- 1. According to Dwight Reynolds. See his introduction to his edited volume *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*. Berkeley, 2001.

Source URL: https://tohumagazine.com/article/nafssiya-mediating-emotional-distances

Links
[1] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/adnan%20taschenbuch.jpg
[2] https://tohumagazine.com/file/saadi-cassettejpg
[3] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/saadi%20cassette.jpg
[4] https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=Cassette+tapes&title=Special:MediaSearch&type=image&fileres=%3E1000
[5] https://tohumagazine.com/file/eteladnan2008croppedjpg
[6] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Etel_Adnan%2C_2008_%28cropped%29.jpg