ART, NATURE, AND MEMORY IN ETEL ADNAN'S *JOURNEY TO MOUNT TAMALPAIS*

ETEL ADNAN'IN JOURNEY TO MOUNT TAMALPAIS *ESERİNDE SANAT, DOĞA VE BELLEK*

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Makale Bilgisi
Türü: Araştırma makalesi
Gönderildiği tarih: 3 Eylül 2023
Kabul edildiği tarih: 14 Kasım 2023
Yayınlanma tarihi: 25 Aralık 2023

Article Info
Type: Research article
Date submitted: 3 September 2023
Date accepted: 14 November 2023
Date published: 25 December 2023

Anahtar Sözcükler
Etel Adnan; Journey to Mount Tamalpais; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Algı; Bellek

Keywords
Etel Adnan; Journey to Mount Tamalpais; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Perception; Memory

DOI
10.33171/dtcfjournal.2023.63.2.16

Abstract

In her Journey to Mount Tamalpais: An Essay (1986), the Lebanese American painter and poet Etel Adnan (1925-2021) contemplates on the relationship between art, nature, and memory by focusing on the act of perception. Adnan's text tells of her inner journey towards peace in contrast to her other work that responds to the Lebanese civil war, from which she had to flee in the 1970s. The centrality of perception reveals an intertwining relationship between art, nature and memory. In this relationship, the subject is intertwined with the object, self with the other, the perceiver with the perceived, which traditional Western thought separates as binaries. One of the prominent figures in phenomenological approach, Maurice Merleau-Ponty has focused on perception that is compatible with Adnan's text. His concepts of "reversibility," "chiasm," "dehiscence," and "flesh" are useful tools to analyze the essay both in its conceptual and cultural dimensions. As a work which incorporates verbal and visual treatments of the mountain, in which Adnan excavates the hidden histories and memories, retaining their differences, Journey to Mount Tamalpais proves to be a manifestation of "the intertwining—the chiasm" as Merleau-Ponty attempts to map. In relation to perception, memory emerges as a preeminent concept due to Adnan's engagements with cultures and linguistic worlds such as Arab, French and American, and her witness of colonial wars. This article proposes a reading that captures the conceptual and cultural dimensions of the text, which ultimately leads to a new visibility of the mountain. The ultimate manifestation of Mount Tamalpais is the image of a wise and wounded old woman. When the process of perception that produces this image is analyzed from Merleau-Ponty's perspective, Journey to Mount Tamalpais reveals a way of thinking about the chiasm of art, nature and memory in which the boundaries between subject and object, perceiver and perceived, and background and foreground collapse.

Öz

Lübnanlı Amerikalı ressam ve şair Etel Adnan (1925-2021), Journey to Mount Tamalpais: An Essay (1986) adlı eserinde California kıyısında bulunan Tamalpais Dağı üzerinden, algı edimini merkeze alarak sanat, doğa ve bellek üzerine düşünür. Bu eser 1970'lerde Lübnan'da başlayan iç savaştan kaçarak Kaliforniya'ya yerleşen Adnan'ın o dönemde yazdığı politik yönü belirgin eserlerden farklı olarak içsel barışa doğru bir yolculuğu ele alır. Eserde merkeze alınan algı edimi sanat, doğa ve bellek arasında iç çe geçmiş bir ilişkiye işaret eder. Bu iç içelik, Batı düşüncesinin ayırdığı özne ve nesne, ben ve öteki, algılayan ve algılanan gibi kavramları birbirine katıştırır. Fenomenolojik yaklaşımın önemli figürlerinden Maurice Merleau-Ponty'nin algıyı ele alışı ve özellikle son döneminde olgunlaştırdığı tersine çevrilebilirlik (reversibility), kesişme (chiasm), çatlama (dehiscence) ve ten (flesh) kavramları, Adnan'ın metnini kavramsal ve kültürel derinliğiyle okumayı mümkün kılar. Tamalpais Dağı'nın hem yazı hem de resim düzleminde ele alındığı bu metin, bastırılmış kültürler arasında farklılıkları koruyarak kurduğu bağlar dolayısıyla Merleau-Ponty'nin kesişme kavramına ilginç bir örnek oluşturur. Adnan'ın birbiriyle neredeyse çatışma hâlinde olan Arap, Fransız ve Amerikan kültür ve dil dünyalarıyla ilişkisi ve tarihsel tanıklığı dolayısıyla, algı ediminin bellek ile birlikte ele alınması gerekmektedir. Bu çerçevede mümkün olabilecek iki boyutlu (kavramsal ve kültürel) okuma, bizi Adnan'ın yolculuğunda Tamalpais Dağı'nın yeni tezahürüne ulaştıracaktır. Adnan'ın bakışında yakaladığı Tamalpais Dağı nihayetinde yaralı, bilge, kadim bir kadın imgesi olarak belirir. Bu imgenin altında işleyen algı süreci Merleau-Ponty'nin kavramlarıyla incelendiğinde Adnan'ın metni sanat, doğa ve belleğin iç içe geçmesiyle nesne ve öznenin, algılayanın ve algılananın, arka ve ön planın birbirine karıştığı bir düşünce biçimi sunmaktadır.

Introduction

The Lebanese American painter and poet Etel Adnan (1925-2021) was, and remains, an exceptional witness to the social and political events, such as the Lebanese civil war, the social uprisings of the Arab countries against French colonial rule, and the countercultural movements in the United States, all happening during the three decades that followed World War Two. Her perception has developed through a series of engagements with and estrangements from multiple cultures and languages, such as Arabic, French and English, as she faced the consequences of colonial wars that interfered with the Arab world. Adnan's settling in Sausalito, California with her partner, the Syrian American artist and publisher, Simone Fattal, in a house facing Mount Tamalpais was occasioned by her exile from Lebanon that was gradually turning into a land of memory.[1] A key text in her oeuvre, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais: An Essay* (1986, reissued in 2021) reveals the entanglements between art, nature and memory. An image deeply rooted in Adnan's life and imagination, Mount Tamalpais appears in most of Adnan's visual art and the Japanese-style folded books, called leporellos, conjoining drawing and writing.[2] The mountain also acquires a personal spiritual presence for Adnan, subsuming all the mountains that surround Beirut.[3] Reading Adnan's essay in terms of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concepts of "reversibility," "chiasm," "dehiscence," and "flesh" regarding perception and painting, reveals an aesthetics intertwined with politics that emanate from Adnan's first-hand knowledge of civil war, occupation, the oppression of national and religious fundamentalisms, and exile. *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, like the mountain it alludes to, rises on the memory of colonial wars, which determined the tracks of Adnan's journeys. As one who started from the Levantine shore and ended on the westernmost American shore, Adnan perceives her own sense of exile as resonant with the vanished and vanquished life on the planet.

[1] Adnan lived prominently in three cities, Beirut, Paris, and Sausalito. For the purposes of this article, I focus on her American episode where she wrote *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*.

[2] Serhan Ada and Simone Fattal curated an exhibition containing a wide range of Adnan's art work at Pera Museum in 2021, under the title, *Etel Adnan: Impossible Homecoming/İmkânsız Eve Dönüş*, where examples of such work can be seen: https://www.peramuseum.org/press-bulletin/new-exhibition-etel-adnan-impossible-homecoming/3593. Also see Hazal Aksoy Kökkaya's article for a compilation relevant literature and visual materials from this exhibition with insightful comments especially on the leporellos.

[3] I thank the anonymous reader for pointing at this connection, and for the idea of the mountain as Adnan's comrade or companion. Given Adnan's readings of the Muslim mystic-poet-philosophers, the significance of the mountains in the Sufi tradition might also be relevant to her attachment to the Tamalpais and the mountains of her mother country.

Adnan's literary works have been discussed in the contexts of postcolonialism and post-structuralism. The cultural hybridity in her work results from her estrangement from circumscribed categories of nationality and gender, and the ways in which she can move out of these categories that are enclosed in language.[4] Among the scholarship, there are examples that tackle the politics and poetics of the relationship between Adnan's geographical affiliations and her invented language, which inform my focus on perception and memory in the case of *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*. Jennifer Scappettone claims that estrangement is fundamental to Adnan's difficult sense of place and the materiality of her writing. Scappettone traces this estrangement in Adnan's painted texts, which enlarge the predetermined linguistic and cultural semantics, and concludes, "Adnan's work ultimately permits us to apprehend the effects of statelessness across generations in terms that expose the holes in political definitions of citizenship, in material gestures that bespeak liberation from political constrictions or denial, however fleeting and rarified" (2020, p. 41). Scapettone explains how in Adnan's literary-visual work, the symbolic language of rigid and legal category of citizenship is upset. Teresa Villa-Ignacio explores the complex intimacy between the binaries, such as "I" and "you," and "here and "there," which can be translated into self and other, and east and west. In Adnan's work, Villa-Ignacio discovers "a poethics that privileges the singularity of all forms of alterity" that constitutes a "community of singular beings, rather than as individuals or collectives atomized by competing national, imperial, or globalist agendas" (2014, p. 311). In his review of Adnan's works, Ammiel Alcalay perceptively traces the nuanced cultural sophistication filtered through her awareness of imperialisms, "recording the very same colonized pain, aspirations, and defeats of the cogs that make the great machine of [the empire] operate so smoothly" (1999, p. 143). Emphasizing "Adnan's insistence on remembering, […] her insistence that difference is memory," and describing her "as an essential guide to a world bent on obliterating even the traces of unsanctioned existences," Alcalay indicates that an informed politics of remembering characterizes her vision, and following that vision, one can uncover the people, the views, and the histories that threaten the preconceived narratives of reality (1999, p. 145). Inspired by these analyses, I aim to focus on the singularity of Adnan's perception and offer a phenomenological explanation of how

[4] Majaj and Amireh's comprehensive critical edition brings the prominent secondary sources, along with a number of informal responses to Adnan (2002). However, references to *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* are few and brief, except for Simone Fattal's insightful reflections on Adnan's paintings and the composing of this text.

art, nature and memory intertwine with one another Adnan's subtly political work. As mountains, suns, oceans, clouds, dispossessed women, journeys, war, destruction and regeneration permeate all of Adnan's work, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* proves to be a relevant source which meditates on embodied perception as immanent in cultural experience and artistic expression.

In examining the primacy of perception in *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy is particularly relevant since it suggests that the subject-object relationship is a form of entanglement that occurs during the process of perception. As the phenomenologist sees it, in the act of perception, the perceiver is also perceived, which implies that perception occasions a collapse of the binary between the (perceiving) subject and the (perceived) object, eliminating the subject's privilege over the object. In her meditation on the Tamalpais, Adnan declares early on that "our involvement is with Perception" (1986, p. 11). She further notes that her "journey to Mount Tamalpais" began when her artist friend Ann O'Hanlon[5] said, reverberating Merleau-Ponty's view, that "'To perceive is to be both objective and subjective. It is in the process of becoming one with whatever it is, while also becoming separated from it'" (1986, p. 11). Applied to the complex net of relationships in the human world, the intertwining of the subject and the object, the perceiver and the perceived is analogous to the entanglement between the self and the other. This entanglement, however, is neither a merge nor a dissolution at the expense of the other. Thinking about perception as an intertwining of the subject and object is itself an aesthetic and political approach to phenomena since it opens up a consideration for the radical difference of the other. It is a moral stance of acknowledging the presence of the other, of the not-me. If, as proposed above, the text rises on the memory of colonial wars and destruction, the artist's perception and what she perceives indeed features a political element, a special knowledge of the mind that resists colonization, claims memory, and marks, in Alcalay's words quoted above, "unsanctioned existences."

[5] The artist and scholar Ann O'Hanlon was among the Tamalpais workshop. She plays an important role in Adnan's life in urging her to paint.

The Merleau-Ponty terminology

An influential thinker on the act of perception, Merleau-Ponty's ontological reflections intervene in the ages-long mind-body separation, which lies at the basis of Western philosophy.[6] In his later writings, particularly, the last essay published before his death, "Eye and Mind," and "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" chapter in the posthumous, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty has, as most scholars point out, introduced a new vocabulary that promises to eschew the impasse of binary thought (Şan, 2015, pp. 61-63; Soysal, 2015, pp. 454-455; Johnson, 2010, pp. 13-19). Descriptive and tentative, Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy breaks from the traditional Western model by centralizing the body as the locus of perception. Perception proposes an active and "reversable" relation between the seer and the seen, the perceiver and the perceived. In this sense, it is a reflexive relationship formed between "bodies"—neither privileged as the subject, nor reified as the object. The subject and object positions are destabilized in the moment of perception. The perceiver and the perceived, active and passive, and the knower and the known cease to qualify bodies in a one-sided manner. The subject becomes the object as its gaze is returned, and the former-object projects its gaze and thus becomes the perceiver: "The enigma derives from the fact that my body is simultaneously seeing and visible. The one who gazes upon all things can also be gazed upon and can recognize, in what he sees then, the 'other side' of his seeing power. He sees himself seeing; he touches himself touching; he is visible and sensitive for himself" (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 354). This idea of the body's boundedness conflicts with the sense of the subject as the center of meaning, primarily because it is defined by the reversibility of (subject-object, active-passive, seeing-seen, touching-touched) positions, and its entanglement with the physical world, being "caught in the fabric of the world" (2007, p. 354). Merleau-Ponty avoids the traps of Western metaphysical thought by abandoning the god-like bird's-eye perspective and locating it on the ground, among the enveloping structure of the concrete visibles. We are no longer dealing with a hovering abstract coordinate but a literally grounded and embodied one. This is later expanded as "flesh," the state of being in the world and of the world, a being among other beings (Zengin, 2003; Evans, 2014).

[6] For my general understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, I benefitted from Zeynep Direk's edited collection *Dünyanın Teni* (2003), Emre Şan's edition of *Merleau-Ponty* (2015), along with critical reference sources, *Merleau-Ponty: Key concepts* (Diprose and Reynolds, eds. 2014) and *Merleau-Ponty dictionary* (Landes, 2013).

By the token of its flesh-ness, the body is conditioned to open up into the world on the most basic physical level. Perception is, thus, primary and anonymous. A related term is "chiasm," based on the Greek letter (X; "chi") which Merleau-Ponty makes use of on several levels: anatomically, it is the crisscrossing of the two optic nerves in the brain, incorporating the different angles of each eye. It is also a rhetorical tool in which same words are repeated in an inverted order so that the meaning changes in the reprise; as in "all for one and one for all"; AB:BA. Adopting the rich semantics of chiasm, Merleau-Ponty adds a new layer of meaning to point at the intertwining of binaries, explained above as reversibility of seeing/seen and touching/touched. "Dehiscence," a term which Merleau-Ponty introduces to describe the act of opening up to the world, is almost a poetic metaphor, likening perception to a birth, the splitting open of the seed vessel to throw the seed forth into its future formation—the seed being the shed tissues of the flesh. As a metaphor dehiscence signifies a fissure, wherefrom a different body grows. The flesh is not an embodied matter but a node, an intersection, a site that provides the ability to sense itself sensing. Sensing is a moment of "concentration of the visibles," "bursting forth of the mass of the body toward the things" (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 405). Perception thus prompts a move, "makes me *follow with my eyes* the movements and the contours of the things themselves, this magical relation, this pact between them and me according to which I lend them my body in order that they inscribe upon it and give me their resemblance" (2007, p. 405). For Merleau-Ponty then there is a reciprocal animism on both sides of the binary—self and other, me and not-me. The flesh that senses itself as a "self" is "lent" to the things in the world. In the self's intertwining with the other, each "inscribe upon" the other, and "give their resemblance." The flesh of the world, for Merleau-Ponty, is active on both ends, and perception is the activity of that node.

Painting is a useful ground for Merleau-Ponty to examine "this magical relation."[7] The principle of reversibility can be recognized in his observation that "Inevitably the roles between the painter and the visible switch. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them" (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 358). He contemplates the act of painting rather than the end product. For him, the process

[7] Merleau-Ponty did not produce literary work like his close friends Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. However, his studies of figures like Paul Cézanne, Paul Klee and Marcel Proust are especially creative and play an important role in his philosophy. That being said, I do not aim to apply Merleau-Ponty's reading of artists' paintings to Adnan's text. I mean to explain how art, nature, and memory intertwine with each other in Adnan's perception of Mount Tamalpais from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective.

in which the optic messages to the brain transmogrify into the painting remains invisible, and a mystery. The end product, however visible, bears an invisibility since it is subject to an endless cycle of perception. Basing his argument on the chiasm of seeing/seen, Merleau-Ponty reflects, "Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—painting blurs all our categories, spreading out before us its oneiric universe of carnal essences, efficacious resemblances, muted meanings" (2007, p. 360). The "oneiric universe" of the painting carries the imprint of its maker, and the "muted meanings" remain to be voiced over and over again. In the case of Paul Cézanne[8] and Adnan, each of their mountain gains, what Hugh J. Silverman calls, "a new visibility": "The visibility that marks the relation between his invisible seeing and the visible scene as he looks at the mountain becomes a new visibility as he watches the mountain appear on his canvas" (2014, p. 107). The mountain gains "a new visibility," emerges anew, on the canvas through the seeing-seen dynamic, a birth of the mountain in a hitherto unimagined order. Merleau-Ponty's feminine analogy of birth and dehiscence are useful here. In the womb, the child is first invisible, then its growth in the mother's body is felt until the moment of birth, after which it becomes visible to itself and others as a separate body.[9] Merleau-Ponty translates this process into painterly creation:

> What we call "inspiration" should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that we no longer know who sees and who is seen, who paints and what is painted. We say that a human being is born the moment when something that was only virtually visible within the mother's body becomes at once visible for us and for itself. The painter's vision is an ongoing birth (2007, p. 358).

Despite the fact that the concepts of reversibility, intertwining and chiasm signify a close dependence and reciprocity between the seer and the seen, they do not indicate an idealized unity. The perceiver and the perceived retain their difference in the course of the reciprocal gaze in which they are endlessly redefined. Michael

[8] Though a comparison between Cézanne's (1839-1906) paintings of Mount Saint-Victoire and Adnan's Tamalpais series goes beyond the scope of this article, Adnan's later reflections on Cézanne, who she describes as "sacred monster," registering his patriarchal and western ways, are very much the extensions of her meditations on nature, art, and women, evident in *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (1993, pp. 14-28).

[9] This process is meant solely in the physical sense. It nevertheless brings to mind Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage," a possible correspondence between Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, which never took place. For a discussion on this, see Direk (2015, pp. 464-481).

Sanders underlines that the perceiver is neither absolute nor can be imagined as preceding the perceived (2014, p. 148). In this sense, the perceiver and perceived both remain external to each other: "'I' and 'Other' exist as temporally proximal . . . one is always irreducible to the other" (2014, p. 149). In fact, seeing and touching becomes the act of experiencing one body's difference from the other. Reversibility, in other words, "functions precisely as interval, as rupture, as break" against an undifferentiated sameness (2014, p. 149). Galen A. Johnson illustrates the irreconcilable difference or otherness with reference to overlapping boundaries and proximity, subtly acknowledging Merleau-Ponty's attention to painting: "The lines of my life are overlaid with the 'dotted lines' inscribed by others. […] So we are drawn, and in a double sense. We are *drawn upon* by Others as they shape our lives, and we are *drawn toward* Others as we encounter them in our world" (2010, p. 155). Flesh, then, connects the seer and the seen in the act of perception. Far from being an obstacle, flesh makes the perception of otherness possible (Gökyaran, 2003, p. 69). In the same line of thought, Fred Evans reflects that, "We can only be the 'outside' of each other's 'inside,' and not the inside for each other. But for this reason we have the richness of our different perspectives upon the same visibles, and thus something special to offer one another. Reversibility, the mere imminence of unity, is not a lack but a gift" (2014, p. 192). So, the impossibility of unity and the irreducibility of difference, in the final analysis, imply both a moral and an aesthetic foundation. It is moral because it demands a treatment of all flesh as equal, and aesthetic because it spreads "out before us its oneiric universe of carnal essences, efficacious resemblances, muted meanings" and a "new visibility."

Operating on the fringes of the body, perception is a means of communication. The ontology of exchanges among bodies thus offers a whole new order of relationships: crisscrossing, chiasmic, intertwining structures. In the context of artistic expression, the artist is not the absolute beholder in stasis; she is the chiasm. Memory's inscape infiltrates the surface through processes unconscious to the artist. The chiasm of inscape and landscape is especially evident in Adnan's assertion that "the space of the painting" is "the space of memory": "When our eyes are closed, the widest fields occupy a screen of a few inches. We paint that screen on a canvas which, in its turn, refers to our memory back to the world at large" (1986, p. 30). Her inscapes are projections of her memory onto Mount Tamalpais, and equally Mount Tamalpais, including the associations with the Lebanese mountains, to echo Merleau-Ponty's words above, "inscribes" itself and creates its "resemblance" in verbal and visual modes. Adnan's text is doubly in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's concepts: The

mountain is recreated both in verbal and visual images. She says, "it seems to me that I write what I see, and paint what I am" (1986, p. 31). In this interesting chiasm, Adnan points at an expression on transverse planes. In "I write what I see," the relationship between the visible and the verbally expressed does not operate on straight representational lines, but has a tangential and fractal structure. Likewise, "I paint what I am" points at a tangential, convolutional, elastic relation between "what I paint" and "what I am." It is a new visibility of self, an invented self-image.

Foregrounding Adnan's personal history

At this point, the historical circumstances that led to Adnan's self-image in *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* take on significance. Native to the ruined Arab culture in the Levantine, Adnan is born in Beirut to a high ranking Ottoman military officer of Syrian origin, and a Greek woman from Smyrna, and grew in the French-occupied Beirut of her time.[10] With Turkish trapped into a narrow domestic space, Arabic widely spoken but banned at school, and French being the official language of power, she grew up trilingual.[11] At school, "Arabic was equated with backwardness and shame," an attitude that angered her father who attempted to teach her to draw "lines and lines in a language which was for [her] neither foreign nor familiar" (Adnan, p. 1996).[12] Later, she would reflect that her formal education was designed to produce "cultural bastards" (Adnan, 2006, p. 11). Ironically, it was in those imperialist institutions that Adnan discovered her inclination to poetry.[13] Against the narrow possibilities for a woman in Lebanon, she felt that poetry was "a counter-profession . . . a revolution, and a permanent voyage" (Adnan, 1990, p. 17-18). She left Beirut to study philosophy at Sorbonne University in 1949, then moving to the United States to pursue a doctoral degree at Harvard University, eventually landing at the University of California at Berkeley in 1956 but soon abandoning academic degrees altogether. She started teaching philosophy of art. It was also the time of the French

[10] Since the late 19th century until the Lebanese Civil War, Beirut was a surprisingly multicultural city. For an extensive analysis of its urban history, see the dissertation manuscript by Maria B. Abunnasr (2013).

[11] Türkiye is marked in Adnan's life as her parents' mother country, and through a familiarity with language and culture. Thanks to Serhan Ada, *The Arab Apocalypse* (*Arap Kıyameti*, Metis, 2012) and a comprehensive collection of her prose works (*Etel Adnan*, Everest, 2021) are available in Turkish.

[12] For an insightful comment on how Adnan kept the gestures and impressions of calligraphy, see Fattal (2002, p. 89).

[13] At École Supérieure des Lettres de Beyrouth, she attended the classes of Gabriele Bounoure, who was an articulate critic of French interventions in the Arab world. Though Adnan was influenced by the French poets, she became aware of cultural imperialism and the ways of resistance that poetry opens up (Adnan, 1990, pp. 17-19).

war against Algerian independence, which brought Adnan, a francophone exile, at an impasse because she felt she "couldn't write freely in a language [French] that faced [her] with a deep conflict" ("To Write"). Ann O'Hanlon's suggestion that Adnan painted offered freedom from the perpetrator's language. Adnan thereby discovered a whole new "language": "I was going to paint in Arabic" (Adnan 1996).

When she moved to the United States, she "fell in love with the American language" (Adnan, 1996). American landscape provided an intellectual and physical initiation for Adnan: "Riding in a car on the American highways was like writing poetry with one's whole body" (1996). Her declaration of becoming an Arab American poet came with writing antiwar poems which found their ways in the small press publications. Scappettone contrasts this allegiance "through poetry composed in an American idiom" with the official ceremony of "ventriloquizing the hypocritical rhetoric of the very nation-becoming-empire" (2020, p. 24). For Adnan, her anti-imperialism was meaningful in relation to the revolutionary movements in the Arab world against French rule. By the early 1970s, the news from the Arab geography indicated that "America did decisively participate in the destruction of the Arabs, or their dreams and their lands, and I experienced terror, a terror that my surroundings were not sharing, and I started losing ground, getting not confused, but wounded, isolated, detached although still attached" (Adnan, 2006, p. 7). Alienated from the adapted culture for a second time, in 1972, she left the United States for Beirut, which she "had left as a voyager and … was coming back in exile" (2006, p. 7). She worked as a cultural editor for daily papers, connecting with a community of writers and artists.[14] This cultural and artistic flourishing was to be destroyed shortly with blunt divisions imposed by Lebanese civil war, the primary means of operation of which were censorship and torture. One of the civil war's most devastating moments was the 59-day-long bombing of the Palestinian refugee camp in Tell Zaatar, which Adnan could see from her balcony (Ruschkowski, 2017, p. 79). The sights and emotions of this event was to be the setting for *The Arab Apocalypse*, also containing 59 poems.

[14] Adnan not only met the Syrian artist Simone Fattal, her life-long companion but also got acquainted with Abdellatif Laabi, who she correctly suspected to be a former student of Bounoure, just like herself (Adnan, 2015). This community was mostly affiliated with the major leftist and nationalist periodical, *Souffles-Anfas* (1966-1972), which today stands as a rich archive of modern secular aesthetics of Arab culture (Harrison and Villa-Ignacio, 2016).

Adnan witnessed several surges of loss, each more irretrievable than the former. Recognizing the motion around her, she felt, "At this point, instead of me leaving, it was Beirut which was leaving me, and, we know it now, forever" (Adnan, 2016, p. 8). She realized that manifestations of exile are multiple and that the defining questions are more nuanced:

> The different forms of exile created by the Lebanese civil war exacerbated my awareness of the conditions under which exiled people, and sometimes whole nations, live. Are not also to be considered as exiles not only people displaced from their native lands, but those who live under diverse forms of oppression, this oppression coming from foreign occupation or from their own governments? (2016, p. 8)

Due to the life-threatening environment in Beirut, Adnan, together with Fattal, had to leave her birth place, this time as an exile in the most serious sense of the word. Her family members either separated or deceased, her personal past disappeared without a trace. Not even a photograph but just her memory to hold on to, Adnan had to cope with the feeling of becoming an alien in her mother country, and with the disappearance of the places and the people she called her own. In the United States, Adnan affiliated herself with the Native and African Americans on the grounds that their irremediable linguistic, spiritual and spatial estrangement and dispossession resonated with her own.

Approaching Mount Tamalpais

Composed nearly in two decades from mid-1960s to mid 1980s as Fattal reveals, Adnan's essay was partly inspired by a workshop, in which a group of artists painted in the open fields around Mount Tamalpais (2002, p. 95). The text is loosely structured with sections indicated by breaks and capitalized sentences. With the interspersed drawings of the mountain,[15] some of them with brush and some with pen, some showing partial, some full view, some more figurative and some closer to abstract, the essay is a culmination of a wide ranging yet related topics. Adnan's comments on the organization for the section on painting, perception and poesis (1986, p. 28-38) can be applied to the whole essay: "I noted down some fleeting trajectories of thoughts, questions, intuitions, of inner and outer events, noted things

[15] The 1986 edition of the book is designed by Fattal, the publisher of the Post-Apollo Press, who says that her choice of the 16 drawings in black and white was deliberate: "I did not want to use color plates for I did not want the color to interfere with the reading of a text, and the text had to be with black and white characters" (2002, p. 95).

as they come. There is no system to Perception. Its randomness is its secret" (1986, p. 30). Pointing at the absence of a disciplined method, "randomness" also signifies an openness and attentiveness to "inner and outer events." An inner event could be, for example, a restless October night dream in which Tamalpais appeared as "a thick, greenish glass, with long and rusty streaks of kelp within it. I was lying over it, looking in, and discovering Indians telling me with sign language and impatient gestures that they were imprisoned for centuries" (1986, p. 23). Or an outer event might be as ordinary as watching the news headlines: "Television was overpowering. We saw Neil Armstrong put his feet on the moon. / Then incredibly, the news switched to the faces of some young Vietnamese convicts who were freed and used by the U.S. Army as infiltrators" (1986, p. 41). Even such an "outer" and impersonal event, which denies a moment of reflection, takes a personal turn as Adnan remarks: "There was an ugly happiness on their faces, a determination to stay alive at all cost, that sent shivers along my spine" (1986, p. 41). Filtered through her attention to the prices paid for integrity and resistance during military conflicts, the images of Mount Tamalpais, the Vietnam War, the Space Age, Native Americans, all come together to attest to a new visibility of the mountain.

The first observation in the essay is the construction of the highway driving away the birds, and the disappearance of the condor. In contrast to the blindness of the highway builders to the consequences of their action, the sight of these wild birds is boundless, even as far as the future, "they take in the widest landscapes, they even foresee the space age" (1986, p. 9). As the unawares majority live in the narrow ranges of perception, Adnan, as the speaker, registers "the big mountain sen[ding] a wild smell of crushed herbs into the air making everything slightly off" (9). The difference between two worlds is established depending on what is perceived, and how it is perceived. The naming of the mountain itself evinces that different perceptions are rooted in different world views: "The Indian called the Mountain Tamal-Pa, 'The One close to the Sea.' The Spaniard called it Mal-Pais, 'Bad Country'! The difference between the native and the conqueror is readable in these two perceptions of the same reality" (15). The two different *imago mundi* also mark their ideological differences. Adnan declares her own allegiance: "Let us be Indian and let be! What is close to the sea shall remain close to the sea" (15-16). Her own exile and witness of the "apocalypse" in her motherland give her the license to align herself with the Native Americans and the exiled condor. Her odyssey is an archetypal one that could belong to any immigrant: "Like a chorus, the warm breeze had come all the way from Athens and Baghdad, to the Bay, by the Pacific Route, its longest journey. It is the energy of

these winds that I used, when I came to these shores, obsessed, followed by my home-made furies, erinyes, and such potent creatures" (9). However, she makes that archetypal journey her own by choosing Mount Tamalpais as the center of meaning in her life that implicitly corresponds to her "home-made furies": "And I fell in love with the immense blue eyes of the Pacific: I saw its red algae, its blood-colored cliffs, its pulsating breath. The ocean led me to the mountain" (9). The personalized animism in the ocean's depiction is throbbing with life: the ocean with its algae, oxygen reservoir, "leads to" the cliffs in "blood-colored" flesh.

The image sequence that follows this introduction tells of the aftermath of an actual California fire: "[The steam] is an animal risen from the sea. A sea-creature landed, earth-bound, earth-oriented, maddened by its solidity. / The world around has the darkness of battle-ships, leaveless trees are spearbearers, armor bearers, swords and pikes, the mountain looks at us with tears coming down its slopes" (1986, p. 13). In Adnan's cosmology, apocalypse is life, stripped to its bare essence; an answer to the question of what remains after the strife.[16] It is like the battlefield after the battle, with "leaveless trees" resembling dead warriors, still upright, suggesting a persisting resistance. Before this scenery, tinged with her own memory, Adnan comes to terms with mortality: "O impermanence! What a lovely word and a sad feeling. What a fight with termination, with lives that fall into death like cliffs" (13). This might partially be a lamentation; however, apocalypse also provides the opportunity to perceive the life of the moment for the surviving witness: "Standing on Mount Tamalpais I am in the rhythms of the world. Everything seems right as it is, I am in harmony with the stars, for the better or the worst. I know, I know, I know" (13). Fatalistic though it may sound, when read as a death-rebirth cycle (13-14), it is clear that Adnan nurtures the life that remains after destruction. For Adnan, war, and the lives perished by the war, are not the end of the story, as she states elsewhere, "Whatever is destroyed should enter, in order to be meaningful, other emerging entities" (50). The story ends if one is left without memory; that invisible impulse which contains the past, grounds the present, retains the story, and maps the future.

[16] The etymological root of apocalypse comes from Greek, with the negative prefix, apo- (un-) and kaluptein, which means to cover. Apocalypse is actually an uncovering, a revelation. See Toufic (2006). It can also be considered in relation to Adnan's comment that "The destruction of Beirut acted on me (and on so many others) as a revelatory factor… Beirut's destruction did force me to move but also brought a sharp light on the whole of my life. I started looking back … realizing things that had never occurred to me…" (2006, p. 9).

The memory of the vanished and the vanquished is washed anew and it washes the present moment anew. The seemingly lifeless battlefield will be overrun by a springtime which will hold "despair at bay. . . . Memories are fresh as cool water and a cool breeze floats over one's fever" (1986, p. 13). Memories of the disappeared cities, nations, and individuals return as stories of resistance, and soothe the witness of the apocalypse. "The moment is accepted," and what remains is to tell the tale that would signify the experience: "The mountain slopes converge to the top as if for a tribal gathering. Up there, the open but filled mouth of the volcano speaks back to the sky a tale of past disorder. The fire has left for its own origins: it returned to the sun. The mountain remains in blue silence, in purple desertion, in agony, and nobody knows" (13). The tales of the disappeared are yet to be expressed in the logic of myths and dreams in which a "blue silence" or a "purple desertion" can make sense. This logic can produce a language that can weave the tale of the condor, the great California fires, the forgotten, and the deserted.

Despite the agony and the "past disorder" fused into the memory of the mountain-speaker, a new life emerges: the flora "are the last chance of the earth and they all make a thick and permanent coat, a cover, a bath of perfume, a touch of healing, a royal procession, music and fanfare, they rise and talk to Tamalpais, and sing lullabyes [sic] and songs of love" (1986, p. 14). The activity of life of the nonhuman elements is ultimately the salvation and an expression of love in Adnan's eyes. The allusion to the prison activist George Jackson[17] just after the observation of life's festivity shows that for Adnan, that natural festivity is closely linked with the idea of revolution. Jackson is registered in Adnan's "journey to Mount Tamalpais" through the echo of his "many voices blended into one," carried over the radio waves, as he utters the special word: "… his voice slides between his lips, and his longest word, his most important one, the one pronounced with a long, burning, agonizing, pleading, and ever sure voice, is the word of love" (14). Not only the African American struggle which has taken a more radical turn by the 1970s, but also Native American activism under the name of AIM (American Indian Movement) is within Adnan's radar.[18] In addition to her reverence of Native American cultures for the value they

[17] Jackson (1941-1971) transformed himself into an intellectual by reading mainly third-world Marxist literature during his unjustly prolonged prison time. The abusive prison administration led to racist riots and Jackson's eventual murder led to the 1971 Attica Uprising. For more on Jackson, see his manifesto-autobiography, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson.*

[18] For a detailed account of the Alcatraz occupation, led by Richard Oakes (1942-1972), who, not unlike George Jackson, was criminalized and murdered, see Blansett (2018).

attach to vision and dream, Adnan notes the grassroots movement, which was very much visible on the San Francisco streets: "The radio says that the voyage to the moon is a hoax and that it happened over the Nevada Desert. Did they forget that in the summer of 1969 the White Man went to the Moon and the Red Man to Alcatraz?" (1986, p. 22). In Adnan's moral universe, Tamalpais starts the mountain range that symbolizes all the revolutions and struggles of human history:

> Tamalpais is the first of the mountains that constitute the convulsive spine of the American continent, all the way to Tierra del Fuego. It is the beginning of the chain of these green coated mountains, guerilla-green mountains, green volcanoes, which give their fire and color to revolutions. Tamalpais is their peaceful kin. It is their starting point. Its peace is needed to understand the fire, for nothing can be outside a binary system … It all is as if the equator of human destiny were foreign to the geological equator: the equator of human history is the latitude on which stands this Mountain that looks like an elephant and feeds on green grass (17).

Adnan animates the mountain, and gives it a character by associating it with "human destiny," and "human history," though not in a strictly anthropomorphic way. This animation respects the mountain's presence on its own terms, "that looks like an elephant and feeds on green grass." Geologically thinking, mountain ranges as "spines" would hardly be farfetched, yet Adnan goes further to define them in relation to human activity. It would be misleading to read "human destiny" and "human history" as fatalisms since Adnan views the warm and cool colors of the mountains, "guerilla-green mountains, green volcanoes," leave their imprint on revolutions. If there is any determinism about "human destiny," it is a determinism about resistance, resilience and struggle against oppression. The small community of artists in the Tamalpais workshop, Adnan feels, is one of the participants of this larger human destiny, "in the prophetic spirit of a decade" of the 1960s: "This time a whole nation was again being involved in a Great Experiment, unabashedly, through street marches, music, songs, underground movies, and millions of silent events which tried to uproot a culture and plant a new one, a new forest" (37). Adnan's own repertory of activism, such as her involvement with the cultural scene in Lebanon, among "millions of silent events," give color to her vision of Mount Tamalpais as the peaceful starting point of the "convulsive spine" of revolutions. She contributes to this "Great Experiment" from her small corner on the western American shore.

Image-making, the chiasm of the internal and the external, the practice of perception as Merleau-Ponty defines, is, in its fundamentals, the activity of poesis, whatever the artist's tool—be it the pigment, the sound wave, or the sign system: "The rape of materials is a joy. To break, to squeeze, manipulate, transform, build, open, force, make . . . all this is a sport and is a moment of love" (Adnan, 1986, p. 28). This view of poesis as "the rape of materials" echoes the Russian formalist definition of poetic language being an organized violence on ordinary speech and linguistic norms but as an artist who has always experienced art in the form of political engagement, Adnan adds an ontological tail end to this theoretical claim, and breaks from aestheticized formalisms: "Hell will belong to the folklore of the past, and suffering will feel monstrous, out of place, if we say paradise now, and use our hands" (1986, p. 28). For Adnan, then, like Merleau-Ponty, this activity is a joyful entanglement with the outside world, "a magical relation" that is found in following movements and contours, in lending one's self to be inscribed upon.

Adnan's impressions of the mountain and her contemplation on poesis and perception amount to a new visibility of Mount Tamalpais which inhabits a "counter-place" where "perceptions are enhanced, refreshed, brought to some real perspective. It is there that we see shadows as solid as granite, trees reproducing the contours of clouds, the solid grounds of eternity giving meaning to our transiency" (Adnan, 1986, p. 47). Here, foreground and background are equally expressive, shadows gain solidity, eternity is punctuated by the transient moment. Shadow is solid as the light waves are obstructed; tree crowns define the contours of the clouds when background shifts to the fore. This "counter-place" corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh that textures the world, "a concretion of visibility" that defines it (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 394). In the flesh of the world, "there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and visible, which is encrusted in it" (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 396). Content as the infringing, encroaching and encrusted flesh, Adnan-as-the-speaker observes with a friend as they walk around Mount Tamalpais that it "was sliding. It was a big sail and it was going. . . . The eucalyptus, which make a tall forest all around, were marching, faithful army of the county. Tamalpais has posted her guards and they were following her" (1986, p. 63). It is the "pulsating breath" of the world as Adnan evoked at the beginning of her essay, or "the respiration of Being," in Merleau-Ponty's words, both quoted earlier.

Though the images and topics are random, one motif runs through the text like an "equator of human history." The new visibility of Mount Tamalpais is gendered as Adnan names Mount Tamalpais "Old Woman" twice in the essay. The image is established in the opening statement: "Sometimes, they open a new highway, and let it roll, open wide the earth, shake trees from their roots. The Old Woman suffers once more" (1986, p. 9). Later on, the mountain again appears in the image of a scarred woman: "The mountain is an animal wounded on its way to the sea, its limbs grasping the earth. I call it 'The Woman'" (19). The next appearance of this association is a bit indirect: "We are occupied by winter and the affairs of the Hemisphere, while, among many catastrophes, the Kurdish woman in Beirut carries her headless son through the streets. The human race, though, is a single tribe. Tamalpais is the head of the tribe." The ontology of pain and suffering implies a morality of interdependence in which the well-being of the speaker is bound to that of the other on the other hemisphere. Inflicted by war and displacement, the Kurdish woman carrying the mutilated body of her own flesh is a member of the same race, same substance, with the speaker and with the mountain. "The journey to Mount Tamalpais" is accomplished with the acknowledgment that

> Each woman is a mountain. I remember those barren hills, ochre, yellow, amber-like, dry and crissing under the feet, quivering on warm nights, shrieking pain in summers of sunlike violence. I remember orange-colored mountains worshipped silently by dissident tribes. I remember plateaus fornicating with wind and dust, burning with desire, exploding in volcanoes under earthly malediction. I remember that mountains are women (63).

In the circular time, the past is planted into the present; the journey ends at the remembrance. The moment the journey culminates in the proposition that "each woman is a mountain," memory is triggered: "I remember . . ." The journey leads to the rediscovery of an old, forgotten lore, a memory about the wounded women transfigured as Mount Tamalpais in its new visibility. Each sensual female body is connected to the other in her wilderness, in her untamable capacity that varies from praying to malediction, from yielding to passion to bearing pain. In the closing statement, the pronoun changes evidently from the singular "I" to the plural "we," as the speaker cultivates the identification of women and the mountain: "We are, because it is stable and ever changing. Our identity is the series of the mountain's becomings, our peace is its stubborn existence" (63).

Conclusion

From Beirut to Sausalito, Adnan's languages and "becomings" are folded in her journey to Mount Tamalpais. The text comprises the memory of colonial wars, as it sets out to capture Tamalpais in a series of images. Usually in the immigrant experience, the immediate kinship is defining for the subject who undertakes the journey, but in *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, the speaking subject omits the parental figures and invents herself in connection with the mountain. Inspired by the mountain's "stubborn existence," its ontological fact simultaneously becomes her beginning and arriving point. Reflecting a strong kinship with Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary and thinking, Adnan proceeds in her journey until she captures the flesh of the world with its chiasmic structures. In this acknowledgement, the act of seeing intertwines the seer with the seen, the woman speaker with the mountain, so that the mountain becomes the speaking-woman-mountain, embodying the memory of George Jackson, Alcatraz, the sound of a Koranic prayer, the Navajo song, and the condor's flight. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodied perception offers fruitful readings of Adnan's text with regards to the intertwining of art with nature and memory. Analogous to the logic of Merleau-Ponty's concept of opening up to the world, dehiscence, Adnan devises an ontology of moving "forward into" nature, rather than a proverbial "back to nature," animating all life, and locating her singular (as an exile and a witness) and anonymous (shifting from "I" to "we") self among other bodies. She assigns an archetypal, maternal role to the mountain, without objectifying it as a tool for self-discovery or resorting to naïve pastoralism. In this journey, not only Adnan's memory of "a past disorder" finds a peaceful household in the mountain but also the mountain is reborn in its new visibility.

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Summary

The Lebanese American painter and poet Etel Adnan (1925-2021) was, and remains, an exceptional witness to the social and political events, such as the Lebanese civil war, the social uprisings of the Arab countries against French colonial rule and the countercultural movements in the United States, all happening during the three decades that followed World War Two. Born in Beirut, to a Christian Greek mother and a Muslim Ottoman father, both exiled from Smyrna after World War One, Adnan was educated in the French-ruled convent schools, which privileged Western philosophy and secular culture over the Arabic. Nevertheless, she nurtured an appreciation for the Arab and Muslim culture through her father, and identified herself as such. Leaving her motherland at a young age, she first made Paris and then Sausalito her home, only to come back to Beirut during the buildup to the Lebanese civil war, engaged with a community of leftist intellectuals, artists and poets. As the socialist and nationalist movements were growing in the United States, and in the countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia, she felt a part of them, fighting for a democratic Arab unity. The civil war, followed by oppressive surges, shattered all the collective struggle she was engaged in, and this time, she experienced exile for real. The people and the city that populated her world turned into memories in tragic and brutal ways.

In the literary context, Adnan's fiercely political work which directly references the civil war has attracted the most prominent critical scholarship. Issues of gender, exile, and diaspora understood in post-structuralist and postcolonial terms constitute the immediate theoretical frames in which her work has been located. *Journey to Mount Tamalpais: An Essay* (1986, reissued in 2021), however, has received very few and brief critical recognition. Marking the fact that the mountain image permeates much of her work, this article seeks to analyze *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* as a key text in her oeuvre reflecting an inner journey towards peace, and a text that both counterpoints and complements her other war-related work. This article also highlights the cultural and historical context in which Adnan's perception has developed—i.e. through a series of engagements with and estrangements from multiple cultures and languages, such as Arabic, French and English, as she faced the consequences of colonial wars that interfered with the Arab world.

As an essay that comprises philosophical ruminations on perception, art and nature, interspersed with the sketches of Mount Tamalpais of San Francisco, CA, *Journey to Tamalpais* demonstrates a kinship with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy on perception. Descriptive and tentative, Merleau-Ponty's later thinking breaks from the traditional Western model by centralizing the body as the locus of perception. Perception proposes an active and shifting relation between the seer and the seen, the perceiver and the perceived as perception is a mutual activity; the perceiver is also perceived. In this sense, bodies are in a reflexive relationship with each other, constantly reversing the positions of the perceiver and the perceived. Neither body is privileged as the subject, nor is reified as the object. The subject and object positions are thus destabilized in the moment of perception. The perceiver and the perceived, active and passive, and the knower and the known cease to qualify bodies in a one-sided manner. The subject becomes the object as its gaze is returned, and the former-object projects its gaze and thus becomes the perceiver. Reading Adnan's essay in terms of Merleau-Ponty's concepts of "reversibility," "chiasm," "dehiscence," and "flesh" regarding perception and painting, reveals an aesthetics intertwined with politics that emanate from Adnan's first-hand knowledge of civil war, occupation, death and exile. An embodied intertwining, or chiasm, to use Merleau-Ponty's term, is implied in Adnan's text both on the conceptual level

and on the practical level. Adnan's materializing perception, filtering her attention through her in-built knowledge of war and exile, ultimately attests to a new visibility of the mountain. Dreams, references, and images about strife, dispossessed cultures and women scarred by wars configure Adnan's vision of Mount Tamalpais. Adnan's is neither a mimetic nor an abstract expressive way of approaching Mount Tamalpais. With regards to her focus on the act of perception and the necessary acknowledgement of her personal history, Merleau-Ponty's terminology best explains the ways in which *Journey to Tamalpais* relates to art, nature and memory.

As one who started from the Levantine shore and ended on the westernmost American shore, Adnan perceives her own sense of exile as resonant with the vanished and vanquished life on the planet. The ultimate manifestation of Mount Tamalpais turns out to be the image of a wise and wounded old woman. When the process of perception that produces this image is analyzed from Merleau-Ponty's perspective, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* reveals a way of thinking about the chiasm of art, nature and memory in which the boundaries between subject and object, perceiver and perceived, and background and foreground collapse. Usually in the immigrant experience, the immediate kinship is defining for the subject who undertakes the journey, but in *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, the speaking subject omits the parental figures and invents herself in connection with the mountain. In this acknowledgement, the act of seeing intertwines the seer with the seen, the woman speaker with the mountain, so that the mountain becomes the speaking-woman-mountain. Analogous to the logic of Merleau-Ponty's concept of opening up to the world, dehiscence, Adnan devises an ontology of moving "forward into" nature, rather than a proverbial "back to nature," animating all life, and growing into a collective being. She assigns an archetypal, maternal role to the mountain, without objectifying it as a tool for self-discovery or resorting to naïve pastoralism. In this journey, not only Adnan's memory of destruction and oppression finds a peaceful household in the mountain but also the mountain is reborn in its new visibility.