



Feminist activism: between burnout and transformative exits

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Preface

This creative piece was the outcome of a two-month-long module taught at the University of Sussex named 'Reflective and Creative Practices for Social Change' in the academic year 2020/2021. The course unpacks the potential of creative, reflective and reflexive practices in groups, organisations and social movements. As part of the course, the discussions and readings aimed to explore the impact of various artistic interventions on social change such as: journaling, storytelling, movement, rituals and music. Starting with the self, the students were encouraged to pick a creative practice and stick to it for the course's duration while journaling the emotions and thoughts present throughout the process. Through in-depth discussions, peer-group support and mentoring sessions, the journals formed longer critical essays. This essay is a reflection on this journey using my creative practice back at the time, yoga.¹

Many of us are tired, burnt out, depressed, and angry, and many of us have gone through intense periods of crisis characterized by a breakdown in relationships, problems with our families, betrayals of trust, bitterness and deep hurt. [...] For a movement that has thrived on the slogan 'the personal is political, we have not reflected on how much of what we do and with one another is both 'personal' and 'political' (Barry and Djordjevic, 2007, p. 5).

The mat | a storytelling exercise

In January, I started 'reflective and creative practice for social change'. The second session was about voice, storytelling and oral cultures. We were asked to write a story about an object in our physical space, discuss the story in pairs and then retell it. I looked around, found my yoga mat and decided to write a letter to it. I told one of my classmates two versions of my story with the yoga mat. The first was about practising yoga in 2018, as part of my healing journey. Back then, I was diagnosed with mixed anxiety and depression disorder. It took a long time to fully recover and cut down medications. My therapist advised me to practice yoga as a daily exercise for body-mind awareness. Out of desperation or excitement, I bought a yoga mat and started practising in my spacious house in Cairo,

¹ Many thanks to Tessa Lewin and Helen Dixon, the instructors of the module, for their continuous support.

Egypt. Yoga was extremely beneficial in labelling what I felt, reconnecting with my body and taking some time off to recharge and rest.

The second version of the story was about my ruptured relationship with yoga. In March 2020, COVID-19 hit and Egypt was under a national lockdown. I felt the urge to go back to my yoga practice as one of the few tools I had to take care of myself, in other words, practice self-care to nourish my well-being. To my surprise, yoga did not bring me tranquillity or calmness, but rather a wave of anger. It was a moment of collective realization of how systemically unjust the world is. Yoga sounded like the wrong answer to the questions of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, poverty, lack of health services, etc. My anger came from questioning the meaning behind taking a deep breath, pausing, stretching and then going back to the same structured grievances. Handcuffed with the pandemic-induced worry, anxiety, uncertainty and insecurities, I stopped practising yoga. Yoga had previously equipped me with mindfulness and grounding when I was struggling with depression. I wondered why it did not work out for me that time. The invitation to develop a practice, journal about it and lean into it connected me to yoga once more. Approached with scepticism and frustration, I ‘hopped into something comfy’², rolled my mat out and started my practice.

Vinyasa yoga

At the beginning of my practice, I tried following long videos³ of power yoga⁴, and it turned out to be an epic failure. I was over-ambitious to think I could commit to such a challenging practice after being off the mat for so long. I was uneasy, irritated and annoyed with not finding the right flow, pace or perfect posture. Then, I realized that I was driven by a desire to control my body rather than to embrace it and authentically explore its potential. I decided after that to try Vinyasa yoga; as it is the slower version of power yoga, yet, still challenging and energetic. In Vinyasa, I reached that balance between moving at a speed that does not suit my body and that relaxed flow that makes my mind wander and doubt the process. Parallel to this mini-journey, my journaling was being unruly. I visualized a smooth writing process that is full of early revelations on wellbeing, healing, resilience and grounding. However, I found myself writing about burnout, exhaustion, trauma and fatigue. I thought I would be focusing on being present in the current moment, rather, I was so invested in understanding the past; my experience with depression. Just as there were two versions of my story about the yoga mat, there were two versions of my story with depression.

My story with depression went hand in hand with my feminist activism. I was managing a project that documents and archives testimonies of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Egypt. Besides management, I edited and archived testimonies on a broad range of topics as: gender violence, domestic violence, gender identity, FGM⁵, sexual and gender-based violence, etc. When I was on board, the project was expanding and reaching out to

² This is how ‘Adriene’ starts her videos on Youtube, advising whoever is watching to, ‘hop into something comfy’.

³ I practised yoga by following Youtube videos through a channel entitled ‘Yoga with Adriene’.

⁴ Power yoga is characterised by a faster speed and intense movements that makes it a popular workout.

⁵ Female Genital Mutilation

more marginalized communities. Meanwhile, my body was protesting my workload and its nature. I barely slept, I lost so much weight and I experienced panic attacks for the first time in my life. I kept ignoring these signs and one day, I could not get out of my bed and walk to the office. I could not read one more story, imagine one more survivor or communicate with any stakeholders. I thought, as my therapists told me, I was going through a mental health crisis. He recommended some tools to manage the crisis: taking time off, journaling and exercising in addition to medications. When reflecting on my journal entries back then, I saw implicit hints to burnout, which I ignored as much as I ignored the bodily signs of exhaustion. What I ignored back then in Cairo was very vivid in 2021 while reflecting on my Vinyasa yoga practice in the UK. Slowly, I started understanding the implications of burnout on me and my flawed understanding of self-care⁶.

Yoga for self-compassion

After finding the right flow for myself, I became more committed to my practice. My yoga sessions lasted longer as I realized that I do not have to rush it. Feeling entitled for long intervals of time only for myself made me feel vulnerable, contained and sorrowful. I felt self-contained as I was able to honour the baby steps and keep moving instead of stopping. I felt sad because I remembered all the times that I had pressured myself into running while I needed to stand still, into productivity while I needed a break, into rushed initiatives driven by the sense of urgency that Egypt throws on me while I needed to trust that others can also do it if I cannot. A huge gap was pointed out in this practice, it was about not practising what I often preach. My experience with burnout made me realize, in the hardest way, the importance of self-care. For some reason, this realization did not sink in. I became more obsessed with making sure that everybody else was taking care of themselves, but not me.

Accidentally, the stereotypes about heroic activists that are destined to 'save' others came to my head. I thought this is the standard that I am holding myself up to. Every time I managed to take a couple of days off after a stressful project, I felt overwhelmed with gratitude for my co-workers. I believed that by my absence I burdened everyone else. Another inconsistency that I saw through my practice is how I comprehend the resemblance between what is personal and political in my feminist work. I trusted the value of personal narratives to induce social change but I barely noticed my own story. I worked to combat gender-based violence while I forgot about the forms of violence I have witnessed in the public and private spaces. I thought that my activism was my way to deal with my trauma. Yoga reconnected me with a compassionate acceptance of my personal/political baggage. It took me a long time to permit myself to stop the practice when I felt I could not keep going. It trained me to adjust while moving with kindness and self-compassion. Getting curious one day and challenging my body is amazing, but having the courage to say 'not today' entails the same boldness.

⁶ I had a list hanging on my wall to check daily whether I am taking care of myself. The list had the following suggestions: moving, good deeds, pampering myself, spending time on a hobby and sitting with what I feel.

The self and the community

In yoga, the aim is to cultivate body awareness and make each movement with love and respect for other parts of the body. Crunches should not hurt the neck, folding forward should be gentle on the knees, Shavasana⁷ should not annoy the lower back and the movement should never affect the breath. I have never made it to the end of any practice without presence and connection to my 'self'. The connection between the body, mind and soul altogether forms what I call the 'self'. If the self is already a combination of three different parts, how does one conceptualise the self in relation to others? In my Global South part of the world, communities are characterized by strong social connections, interdependent relationships, mutual aid and shared survival skills. Particularly, there is no such thing as an individual self; distress, traumas and wounds are shared and divided between community members. The self in such a context has to be conceptualized as a relational self that perceives the surroundings and is perceived as a part of a bigger entity which is the community; a collective self (Horn, 2020, p. 91).

With this understanding of the self as a collective self, my practice made me realize that what I meant with self-care was indeed collective care. Collective care is defined as "a continuous, persistent, and usually contradictory and forgiving, attempt at improving or making more bearable a specific condition, situation or suffering" (Tironi and Rodríguez-Giralt, 2017, p. 92). It explained my resistance to self-care tips during the lock-down in the UK, that focussed on drinking tea and going for long walks. For me, such advice communicated once more that mental wellbeing was the sole responsibility of the individual. They also undermined the supportive role that others can play at times of crisis. Walks and tea parties helped when I was accompanied by colleagues, classmates and friends. We grumbled, laughed, complained and tried to make sense of our lives in a foreign country amidst a global pandemic. The more we connected, the more resourceful each one of us became and the more conflicts we had to deal with. We learned to navigate our differences and tensions only when we understood that there is no individual way out. Through such collective activities, we were able to take good care of each other, organise ourselves and share the burden of survival. Tea and long walks with others made me realise the need to re-conceptualise care, resulting in a slow reconciliation of my ruptured relationship with yoga.

While journaling, I recalled multiple tense conversations in therapy, in which I resisted the therapist's advice to look for the 'personal trigger' underlying my sadness towards collective events and traumas. Such talks aimed to support me with more resources to go back and situate myself within my realities with more awareness. But, what happens when one is dissatisfied with the already-existing reality? Western, medicalized, depoliticized and individualistic approaches to mental health rely implicitly on a just and good world that does not exist. Through activism, I realised that at the heart of all trauma is power, unjust structures, conflicts, patriarchy, racism and militarization. In other words, the world being unjust and bad is intertwined with every 'personal trauma'. It is the world that is causing the distress (Horn, 2020). So, the trauma was never personal in the first place to be healed from an individualistic approach. I conceptualised trauma as political distress while my therapists saw the mental health issues it caused as a dysfunctional individual

⁷ A relaxation pose in which one lies down on the ground towards the end of the practice.

disability. I sought politicized cures to that political distress while therapy was only able to provide medicalised and instrumentalised tools as a remedy.

Yoga for body inquiry

Just as I was trying to move in harmony and with respect for my body parts, I wanted to cultivate this awareness and move the same way within communities in my pursuit of collective care. I started my practice feeling frustrated that I had to do it alone but slowly it became my comfort zone. I tried joining collective practices via Zoom but I never made it to any class. As romanticized as collective care can sound, I know for sure that it is not. To elaborate, there is no transformation to collective care without deeply understanding the roots and practices that cause the suffering. In this pursuit, difficult questions should be asked, complicated emotions will come to the surface, messy processes shall be designed and enacted and underlying power dynamics ought to be addressed. To begin with, questioning how activist communities deal with burnout is essential. Within activist communities, burnouts, overworking and secondary traumas are badges of honour. Activists are just meant to fall silent and come back apologetically. Burnout is conceptually accepted, by activists and others, as a collateral price that should be paid for being involved in the public space (Sallam, 2020). On the other hand, a feminist activist tradition is to overlook the emotional baggage associated with activism. Feelings of isolation, solitude, fear, grief, anger and frustration, among other feelings, are part of the daily lives of activists. However, such feelings are rarely acknowledged in spaces of organising or seen as a legitimate motive to collective action. Emotions play a significant role in shaping how we problematise and politicize our daily experiences, relate to the issues of injustices and act accordingly (AbouZeid, 2020). However, they are often seen as insignificant in the holistic political context, even though both the personal and the political are connected (Barry and Djordjevic, 2007, p. 6).

A recurrent theme in my journaling was judging myself for needing that much time off. The celebratory attitude towards exhaustion was internalized within me. I judged myself still for feeling exhausted, tired or burnt out. I saw women around me who had done much more than I had and seemingly managed to go through it all powerfully and gracefully without resting. I had the privilege to be supported, loved, restful and lost with no major damages. As a result, I silenced myself, thinking that I would make more space for rightful grief, exhaustion and anger. My collective self and politicized traumas found no haven. My body inquiry yoga practice pointed out the feelings of confusion and guilt. I was trapped between an insufficient therapeutic understanding of my political traumas, and a lack of local collective care insights/practices centring on stories and emotions to validate my experience (Tironi and Rodríguez-Giralt, 2017, p. 100).

Yoga for uncertainty

In early May, I had an hour-long practice named 'yoga for uncertainty'. The instructor kept saying that the practice is about courage, belief in resilience and strength as a way to face uncertainty. Flowing through a set of challenging poses, I felt scared more than curious. Feeling fear was a new thing on the mat that I could not understand. During journaling, I realized that yoga had been reconciling my relationship with activism. I was slowly opening up to further engagement, organizing, strategizing and interacting with my local context.

Immediately, the ghost of exposing myself to the ugly face of reality chased me and left me terrified. While I never quit the public spaces, I maintained what I thought was a safe distance. I was trying to avoid that same end with all the possible means. My brain associated activism with burnout with no further investigations around the kind of practices that can lead to that. 'Yoga for uncertainty' was a reality check with the dark side of activism but it was also a reminder that it has another face that I almost forgot: a joyful one. It takes a lot of courage to decide to wear one's heart on their sleeve again. A part of this aspirated joy is formulating a meaning that does not necessarily come from normalizing injustices but from collective mourning and struggling.

When we only talk about burnouts, vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue, we forget how we got into activism in the first place. We overlook other questions and discussions around joyful activism, the agency in social change and meaningful acts. Working with women gave many activists, as well as myself, emotional resilience and strength. Egyptian women's rights defender Yara Sallam asked a diverse group of women activists about what keeps them going. Some mentioned the relationships that they formed within activist communities, sharing the same mindset, values and language. The access to knowledge, opportunities and exposure to life experiences measured up to what they had given to the public space (Sallam, 2020). Moreover, framing politicized activism as an inevitable road to people's misery does not serve any kind of collective action. It also assumes that the actors have no agency in choosing or leaving activism and no imagination in developing different and creative practices (Horn, 2020). On the mat, every video I stopped was a practice of agency. Every video that challenged me, but I got through it anyway, was also a choice. Every day that I kept my flow slow, or added resistance bands to it or skipped it even, was an active choice to reconnect with my-'self'. This deep connection shed light on my motives and frustrations equally, and both deserve a say in our collective spaces.

Another world is possible

Re-reading my journal entries to compile this essay made me realize how messy, complicated and uncomfortable the process was. It forced me to slowly unpack my journey with feminist activism and process its multi-dimensional nature. I thought a lot about the future, and how to develop practices that are conscious of our depleted energy, alienation, isolation and exhaustion resulting from the interlocking systems of oppression. Bearing in mind that, in my area of the world, choosing not to be an activist is a luxury we cannot afford. This does not mean that actors should be sacrificed in the process of social change. It rather means continuously investing in building resilient movements. There is a form of finding resilience in acknowledging the complexity of the issues and understanding its dimensions. Resilience goes beyond the limited individual practices of well-being and seeks to develop creative and empowering solutions. It is about being honest about our limitations as individuals, collectives and organizations. With this understanding, the efforts of self-care are not left to individuals but rather will be the responsibility of the collective. Movement resilience cannot be an after-work, it should be embedded in the organizing (Advaya, 2021).

Activism has no textbook, and its practices will always be shaped through constant interactions with the surrounding context. Along the process, I understood the limitation

of Western psychological understanding of trauma and the therapeutic approaches to its healing. I realised the importance of questioning the concepts and practices surrounding trauma and healing. I became even more curious to explore what other knowledge, ways of being and practices are there besides Western and Euro-centric approaches to healing. Re-looking at such approaches and re-conceptualising the self is an attempt to decolonise the dominant knowledge and practices of care, healing and organising. The knowledge was never individual, but communal, celebratory and resilient. Does the question become: how to decolonize healing?

One of the solutions is to adopt transformative practices around mental health and wellbeing that have in its core feminist values and decolonial approaches. By feminist praxis, the practices can be more mindful of the patriarchal norms within spaces, organizing around women's personal stories as a valid source of knowledge and based on collective action that is aware of the emotional labour of activism. With decolonial transformative approaches, the aim is to design practices that are based on the local understanding of the self, the community and the collective grief, in parallel to addressing the root causes of distress (Horn, 2020).

Seeking collective care and transformative practices require keeping an open eye and a curious mind within our communities. Advocating for community care without defining communities, understanding the messiness of any collective process or holding our communities accountable is destined to failure. A nuanced understanding of oppression and trauma requires enacting the world as we want to see it now in a prefigurative way; as it is all about the process of sharing, strategizing and healing from the injustices experienced daily. Building resilient movements is a task that needs to be started right away, yet it is all about trial and error. The process of iteration supports the emergence of new and innovative repertoires that can help the movement. Focusing on the process, learning from it, questioning its steps and trying out different practices are prefigurative elements. In prefiguration, the future is actualized now, and the politics are lived daily rather than looking forward to a future change (Maeckelbergh, 2011). In other words, "the means [...] 'mirror' the ends" (Van De Sande, 2013, p.230).

My practice was about fostering core values in the process and prefiguring the off-mat experience I wanted to see. The means were the ends. In the meantime, I realized that I, as much as everybody else, come to the 'mat' with my baggage and move from it to places carrying the heavy weight of my personal and political disappointments. It is not about moving places as much as it is about sitting together on the mat with kindness, integrity, compassion and regeneration. It is about having the honesty to ask and to be asked in a daily practice of accountability. In Audre Lorde's (1984) words, "I do not have to win in order to know that my dreams are valid, I just have to believe in the process of which I am a part" (as cited in Fuller and Russo, 2016, p. 182).

Community accountability takes a step away from the individualistic values ruling our world right now. It presumes a mutual responsibility between all actors to call out, prevent and intervene to shake the systems of oppression. While asking 'what can I do?' one becomes frustrated by how little they can make and often face burnout. However, in asking 'what can we do?' we can compile an arsenal of knowledge, skills and support that can

reach somewhere. It seeks to deconstruct the power lines between the ‘activists’ and the ‘community’ or the ‘supporter’ and the ‘supported’. By doing so, it addresses the extended harm caused by oppression on the community as a whole and recreates the power dynamics that rule it. While acknowledging that the process is messy, it is an attempt to practice the ‘impossible now’ and prefigure a feminist world (Fuller and Russo, 2016).

Yoga for the future

Between discussions, walks, calls and tears I moved uneasily while writing this essay. For me, I can say that it has been an authentic journey of exploration and learning. It was an exercise on how to navigate the difficult questions about myself, my networks and my communities. It was a humbling experience in its unique way of exposing me to vulnerability and forcing me to accept its soft power. It is difficult for us to tell stories about activism that are not heroic, successful or ideal. I argue that because we do not understand the complexity of the emotional baggage of activism, we do not tell. “Emotions make history [...] and motivate actions and practices” (Kumarasinghe, 2020, p. 330). Attempting to break the silence, I wrote this essay while dreaming of a different, kind and just world, and I will commit to not “making my dream my nightmare” (Advaya, 2021).

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