



Welcome to this starter pack—a guide to help you organise your very own *Making Kin: Ecofeminist Essays from Singapore* book club. Here's what you can find on this page:

- i. Excerpts from each chapter & discussion questions to help you get started
- ii. Book Club etiquette
- iii. Bonus Resources

I. CHAPTER EXCERPTS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

General Questions

1. What was something new or unexpected you learned from this essay?
2. What was your most important takeaway from this essay?
3. What was your favourite passage in the essay?
4. How did you feel while reading this essay?

Introduction

Excerpt

Annie Dillard writes of the essay:

“The essay is, and has been, all over the map. There’s nothing you cannot do with it; no subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your own structure every time, a structure that arises from the materials and best contains them. The material is the world itself, which, so far, keeps on keeping on. The thinking mind will analyze, and the creative imagination will link instances, and time itself will churn out scenes—scenes unnoticed and lost, or scenes remembered, written, and saved.”

- Consider Dillard’s description of the personal essay. How is it an apt form for making kin?

Excerpt

As an “assembling sort of word” then, kin-making reconnects us with other person-beings that share our planetary space as home, forcing us to rethink our place on earth along reciprocal, ecocentric rather than anthropocentric lines. *Making Kin* is our attempt at assembling kin and kind, at stretching the imagination and changing the story, from within the privacy of the home into pertinent, global conversations.

- How can we move away from anthropocentric ways of thinking, seeing and being towards an ecocentric worldview? How do you think we can assemble “kin and kind”?



The Field

Excerpt

Mary Oliver writes in *Upstream* that a writer's subject may just as well be what she "longs for and dreams about, in an unquenchable dream, in lush detail and harsh honesty." And yet, to long for the subject of this essay, the field of my childhood, is to long for a broken and irretrievable past. A place or habitation I can no longer enter in the physical sense though I keep returning to it in my dreams, in various iterations and permutations, the field changing each time, but still the same.

- How can memory and dreams bring us home, especially when these places are no longer around?

Excerpt

Apart from physical buildings that house our corporeal bodies, language too can be a way by which human beings attempt to build their dwelling places. In my waking moments, I turn to the language of poetry, writing poems about home and lost places, poems that ground me to the memories of my childhood field. In my sleep, my dreams speak to me in the language of signs and symbols, offering me fleeting, oneiric dwelling places and dream versions of home built from layers of loss and longing. These are the languages I know, and word by word, verse by verse, dream by dream, I build a womb-shaped dwelling place to keep me afloat on the waters of change.

- What are your thoughts about language and its potential for building and dwelling?

The Spell of the Forest

Excerpts

Bound to a changeless household where everything and everyone only decays, Bim becomes an honest literary representation of the caregiving experience: one that is loving and dutiful but painfully static; one that is honourable but pitied upon by the onlooking outsider.

What I once wished to escape from is now the same mystical, healing place I dream about escaping into. I am Bim, bound to my household, but I am also different from Bim as I venture outwards, untethering myself from my caregiving duties, even if just momentarily.

- What is our relationship with nature/natural spaces in the context of caregiving?

Excerpt

Every time a forest disappears, taking its treasure with it, the world narrows and dims. In the shadow of its departure, we are left with one less place to escape to. One less safe space to be ourselves again.

- What symbolic values does nature hold for you?



The Seven-Year Cycle

Excerpt

My first birth into this world was painful and difficult, but these days coming back to life seems to only get easier. The initial breaths are sweet vapour, fuel for the magic of change. Being alive in each moment is an adventure, and the cycle of life and death makes a perfect circle. And if it ever gets a little rough, I remember the words of the woman who made me flesh and blood, the trust on her face as she told me, “You are your own mother now.”

- What is the role and importance of mothering? Is this limited to gender?
- What is our relationship to our mothers, and how can we learn to mother ourselves

There Will Be Salvation Yet

Excerpt

Do you understand that you are a sinner?

You speak one word: Yes.

What you keep to yourself is the fact that you don't care.

You are a sinner. And you don't care.

It is possibly the most adult thought you've had till then, and it is exhilarating—your first brush with feeling free. It transforms you.

Intensifies your rage. Forces you unexpectedly into understanding.

Between broken belongings and a broken heart, you learn quickly: when they say something inside you needs casting out, it is you they are referring to.

And that is fine. Because you will cast yourself from this place. You will conquer the wilderness and become it. You will revel in your rage, be consumed by the jaws of your own wild hunger. And it will be delicious. And there will be salvation yet.

- How would you describe the way self-realisation occurs?

Coming Home: Healing from Intergenerational Trauma

Excerpt

Trauma is often inherited and can also be projected onto others. It is rooted in time and place, and is not simply a condition of a chemical imbalance in one's brain. How the mind is conditioned and how it later reacts to trauma and stimuli, unfortunately, also shapes how one's children are raised. Trauma teaches us defensive and protective mechanisms. For some people, teaching their children tough love and telling them not to cry, are ways in which they try to protect their children from pain. This applied to my parents as well, who would sometimes rebuke us for crying or complaining about our difficulties. I only came to understand as I got older that this was their own way of coping and processing their pain.

- How can we create a community of care to heal trauma?



Grappling

Excerpts

Fighting, and by extension, the pursuit of martial arts, is an interrogation of the self and the world around you. It asks, “How far can you push yourself?” It is a cross-examination of your knowledge and your beliefs about knowledge at a time where knowledge all too often becomes a checklist of buzzwords to pass an examination. As a woman, it also raises questions about your body.

The body that allows me to throw a person through the air and pin a person to the ground is of value only on the mats. Off the mats, there is confusion as to how to regard a body that is both soft but also strong.

- How can a sport, like martial arts, teach us about our bodies and how we relate to our place on earth?

Scheherazade’s Sea: Five Women and One

Excerpt

Through Lucy, situating me within the vast and complex interconnectedness of all sentience and materiality, I have found the meaning of Kinship. It is a shared connection at the very depths of our sentience, humble veneration for all unique embodiment, an empathic resonance and commitment of endeavour for the sake of one another, and a reverence for our positions in the vast tapestry of the universe. Who are my kinsfolk? We do not have to share the same DNA, we do not even have to be of one species, we simply need to embrace our interconnectedness with respect and gravity. Because of Lucy, despite my bumbling humanity, I am finally learning how to identify and make kin—and to forgive and wish love for those who cannot and will not be kin.

- How do we make kin?



The Sirenia Has Found Her Home

Excerpt

There is a disconnect between personal action and subsequent consequences on natural habitats and thereafter livelihoods and incomes. This is a fishing community that depends on clean and healthy ecosystems to bring back a good catch, yet they cannot seem to understand that their dumping waste into the waterways will have a negative impact on the fish they bring home. When asked about this, the standard response is that no one is doing anything about the big businesses and developers who are polluting their waters, destroying coastlines and burying vital natural habitats, so why go after them?

- How can we empower local rural communities to see value in conserving their homes/habitats/natural ecosystems? How can we support community efforts?

As Big as a House

Excerpt

My Naval Base experience also showed me that an intercultural community spirit can grow in a place where spontaneous, organic growth is permitted. The cheerlessness of our void decks today shows that social engineering via ethnic quotas for HDB blocks doesn't work. Imagine allowing the 80% of Singaporeans who live in HDB estates the freedom to decide where and with whom they want to live and also permit the estates to be managed by residents rather than by would-be politicians. I can see those who love cultural diversity gravitating towards areas with like-minded residents and cultivating rich intercultural energies and projects for the nation while others who choose to live with their own community, be it of race, ethnicity, class or age, would proliferate other niche cultures.

- What makes a community? Can multiculturalism in Singapore be cultivated more organically?

Travelling in Place

Excerpt

Boey's poem glows with possibility. What if his ancestor had also travelled down under instead of ending his journey in Malaya? What would his life and his father's life have been like then? It is an imagined connection born of hope for the future in a new land perhaps and a heartfelt desire by the immigrant for continuity with the past, for a meaningful narrative that justifies the present. The elasticity of time is what strikes me about this moment and I see the poem attempting to hold in delicate balance—just so—prolepsis and analepsis, flashback and flashforward. If we dwell in travel as James Clifford says, then connections and patterns are also for us to make with words and stories. We use stories of routes and turn them into our roots. In this way, we loop ourselves into different rhythms of travel and place-making.

- What role do family stories play in your life?



Marvels of Nature Just Outside My Window

Excerpt

My neighbour Rita comes around and we exchange our observations about the life of the bulbuls. She lives just a door away and it has taken us almost twelve years to form a relationship. We have bonded over our mutual interest and passion for plants and bird life. A friendship is cultivated, ideas are shared, food is exchanged and so begins the start of a community. This is so very important, in particular for a nation, forever moving, over and over again dislocated during the sixty years of our history when almost 80% of our population has been relocated to HDB estates. We haven't seen the end of this dislocation yet. So what can we hold on to for some sense of stability and even identity?

Rita and I have cultivated a little garden in the little space we have in front of our flats which has served to connect us. These are the ways of bringing a sense of community, optimism and positive energy into the neighbourhood. I have seen how they work to improve the environment from a depressed one to a more cheerful one.

- In what little ways may we build community in the spaces we inhabit?

The Bird Without a Name

Excerpt

To name a bird is to insist that we look more closely at “so much empty space” and “all this grass, just breeding mosquitoes.” To give a bird a name implies that we welcome the wild into our words, and into language, that most human and humanly fallible of entities. But when we ourselves refuse to learn the names that will allow birds to sit in our lives—and after all it is so much easier to say, “So many trees what, cut down also can plant some more”—we're saying that we know enough in order to remain ignorant. We're saying the human is all that matters, while we become less human for every bird that lacks a name.

- How can words, language and naming reconnect us to nature and in doing so, nurture empathy and care for the other?

Excerpt

But those who do make it outdoors are already in search of nature in their lives, and sometimes we assume that the wilderness is a faraway destination, when our seemingly concrete jungle is actually teeming with hidden biodiversity. If we are to allow birds into our lives, we must name them for how they are already here, amidst us. More than just pests, the avian denizens of our leafy suburbia have earned a reputation in their own way.

- How do you connect/relate to nature at your doorstep?



The Power of Small Actions

Excerpt

One concrete change that occurred in my life after my Antarctic trip was that I became a vegetarian. Since then, I have gone through occasional periods of being vegan, but I have also gone through some periods when I have eaten fish. Fish comes into my life because of some worries about not getting enough protein as I become older, although as a scientist, I know that I can get my full share of protein from just plant sources. The other reason for eating fish occasionally is because my husband persuades me to do so especially when he has cooked a delectable dish of fish curry. Of course, as a feminist, I should be able to stand my ground knowing that the personal is also the political but at the same time I realise that the essence of marriage is to give and take.

There are so many good reasons for becoming vegetarian. I am not religious and so that does not count for me. One reason that vegetarianism appeals to me is because I feel the connection to animals that move, breathe and possibly feel like we do. They are kindred spirits and the cruelty we inflict on them before we kill and cook them makes no sense to me. Also eating less meat is good for our environment.

Many of us talk and worry about climate change and the far-reaching environmental effects of increasing greenhouse gases but often we feel helpless in the face of hyper-capitalism and its rampant greed that fuel the climate problem. However, there is something we can all do to ameliorate the situation. We can become vegetarians. This course of action is simple and straightforward. We can do it without any fuss and empower ourselves to be agents of change in curbing the global temperature rise that is one of the hallmarks of the climate crisis.

- When and how should we compromise? Do you believe in the power of small actions?

Care is Revolutionary

Excerpt

Centring care work is revolutionary because capitalism has always taught us to demean it. To demean it because it does not produce exchange value on the market and therefore, does not contribute to profit accumulation. This is the same underlying force that drives our climate crisis—the relentless pursuit of profit that has perpetuated endless extraction of our Earth.

It is revolutionary too because it dismantles patriarchy and taking down patriarchy is essential to navigating the climate crisis. Because patriarchy teaches us that actions related to care, like caretaking of the land, each other and our more-than-human kin, are seen as less important or, 'not real work'. Whereas beliefs and actions that position humans as separate and superior to nature, that promote the conquering and exploiting of land, are coded as masculine and therefore more valuable. Because patriarchy and capitalism are mutually reinforcing systems.

- What are your thoughts in response to these quotes? How can we incorporate care into the work that we do?

Excerpt

Figuring out access is a way to practise revolutionary care. Access work refers to the labour involved in making things accessible for as many folks with differing disabilities and capacities as possible. Access work is not just a logistical task, not a list of boxes to check, not an ego boost, not charity. Mia Mingus, a disability justice activist, once said, "Access for the sake of access is not necessarily liberatory, but access for the sake of connection, justice, community, love and liberation is."

It is a practice of care that is grounded in solidarity, genuine relationships, mutual exchange, a shared commitment to labouring together in navigating access. Rooting access work in love also means it can be a deep source of joy; it is not about being 100% right but humbling oneself to the reality that access looks different for everyone, that it can even be conflicting, that it therefore needs to be a continuous conversation in our communities.

- How do you think centring accessibility in our daily lives can be beneficial and restorative for everyone?



Conquering Yeast

Excerpt

As the matriarch of my small family, I was custodian over everything that happened under my roof because it was my responsibility to prioritize our health over other needs. In turn, my family entrusted me with this power. This same scenario is replicated in trillions of households the world over, where the matriarch decides who eats what, when and how. Is this feminist? Is this ecological? It could very well be so.

If food was love, or the representation of one's love, food was also a language to communicate this love. My late mother often cooked the dishes her family loved—me, my brothers and my father would flock back to her hearth like homing pigeons that had strayed too far. Many mothers do the same. A mother's food is the daily bread for the embattled soldiers each one of us have become when we enter the war zone of work and school and that strange space in-between. We all harbour a wish to revisit a certain dish that someone we loved had made for us; a dish that could be simple or done without much thought, but becomes lodged inside someone's memory as something special.

- How strongly does the maternal role resonate with you? Is mothering different from parenting?

Finding a Home for Sebastien, My Autistic Son: From Peucang Island to Bali

Excerpt

Despite the differences in our upbringing—one from a rural background in which he was deeply rooted and the other from a cosmopolitan upbringing that had left her without a sense of roots, Bema and I bonded in a powerful way over our love for Sebastien. Unbelievably, against all hopes, I had found my substitute, a far better carer than I could have ever been. Although he did not receive any formal education, Bema possesses extraordinary psychological insights into how best to interact with Sebastien. Through his astute judgment and willingness to experiment, Bema has succeeded in toeing the fine line of helping Sebastien feel secure and pushing him to improve himself by carefully varying his routines and structures to expand his flexibility and tolerance of change.

- How do we connect with others despite differences? Do you believe in intuitive ways of knowing?

Semangat in Practice

Excerpt

To know oneself, is to know one's history. Singapore is a colonised country. Despite Bahasa Melayu being our National Language, English is our language of commerce and also the language we are most comfortable speaking in. Singapore prides itself as a city where 'East meets West', where we also celebrate our 'Asian' values. However, so much of our own history is unknown to us beyond the state-mandated narratives. I believe that the land has a spirit of its own, or more accurately, a semangat of its own. I believe that as the landscape changes, the semangat of the land mutes itself accordingly, with the histories it holds.

- How can we discover the semangat of the land? Is Singapore still a colonised country?

Excerpt

Ecofeminism asks us to think of our relations to the Earth and the environment, in all aspects of our lives—gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class. To know one's self is to know one's history. To know one's history is to know one's land. To know one's land is also to know one's sea. To honour the Earth—and all of its elements—as something alive, full of semangat, is to consider the imbalance we will cause to others and ourselves when we do not honour the very ground that we step on and the seas that surround and nourish us. To think of the seas as a shared connector is also to think beyond the often violently created borders of states and the needs of people outside our country who will be impacted by our wants.

- How can we make space for different histories of Singapore? How is the history of the self intertwined with the history of our land?



Liquid Emerald

Excerpt

My moyang learned the recipe from her mother, who learned it from her own mother. We are not sure how old the recipe is or how far it stretches back in the family tree, but we know it is a traditional medicinal oil that has only been made and passed down by women in the family. Not a single man has made our family's minyak lam. It is our own precious matrilineal heirloom.

- What are some kinships that are actively formed and maintained within your homes/families/cultures? How can we continue to nurture these kinships in the face of modernisation and alienation from the land?

Excerpt

But while the oil certainly has qualities that cannot be captured through provable science, it's important not to diminish the fact that it was conceived not through any mystical means, but with knowledge. Traditional medicine and cures are not simply to be understood within the diminutive binary of 'provable vs unprovable', 'modern vs traditional', 'real vs superstitious'. Such binaries are ultimately premised on the lasting colonial denigration and villainising of native and traditional forms of medicine and knowledge. The knowledge developed and accrued within traditional knowledge systems is not by any means entirely spiritual or mystical or random. Just like any body of knowledge, it is deep, systematic and has its experts. Traditional oils, medicines and cures like my family's minyak lam have been developed through this rich web of knowledge with expertise, and that is a large reason why it is so effective.

- How do we know what we know? How can knowledge systems foster greater care for our earth?



II. BOOK CLUB ETIQUETTE

Thank you to Group Reading Committee and Kei Franklin for helping to craft this section!

- **Establish a workable schedule:** Decide as a group how frequently you'd like to meet to talk about the book.
 - You could read the whole book together (e.g. 1-2 chapters every week/month);
 - Or, you could read specific chapters based on an agreed theme/topic;
 - Or, you might want to join a public reading group that is currently reading the book, and follow their schedule;

Deciding upon the level of commitment and schedule beforehand can help maximise engagement for all members of your book club.

- **Before the book club:** We recommend assigning someone in your group to facilitate the discussion. Most successful book clubs have a clearly defined 'host'—someone who can take the lead and direct the flow of conversation. The host can provide a general overview of the chapter/book, share discussion questions, and help to focus the conversation. This will make the session more engaging and meaningful.
- **During the book club:**
 - You might want to begin with some simple warm-up questions. If you have new members, introduce yourselves (name, age, favorite animal, pronoun, why they've joined the session, etc.). Do a Check-In by asking everyone to describe how they are feeling that day—you can be creative by inviting people to use colors / textures / types of weather to describe how they're feeling, rather than emotions. A good book club is also a fun social space.
 - At the first session, you may want to collectively agree on some discussion guidelines, which will help the space be inclusive and safe for all participants. Some suggested guidelines are:
 - Avoid using discriminatory language. (If you're not sure if something sounds discriminatory, it probably is.)
 - Avoid using difficult or inaccessible words and concepts. If you feel that certain terms are useful but it's possible that not everyone knows or understands them, explain them.
 - Agree that it is OK to ask for clarifications and that is also OK to make mistakes—we avoid shaming individuals for any reason.
 - We agree to speak from our own perspective, rather than attempting to represent the opinion of a larger group or anyone else.
 - As a 'host', try and be aware of group dynamics. Pay attention to how much space any one individual is taking up. Try to balance out who is speaking, and



provide openings for different people to contribute to the discussion. You can also include this in your discussion of group guidelines (e.g. We agree to 'share the mic').

- **At the end of each book club session:** We recommend doing a Check-Out—ask everyone to share how they feel, or any final thoughts they might have.
- **Considerations for online book clubs:** If you're holding your book club online, here are some extra tips for you.
 - Pick a convenient time so that folks from other time zones can join!
 - Mute audio when not speaking
 - For hearing people, the use of hand signs can be really useful to convey information to each other, without having to interrupt the speaker. Plus they're fun! [There are many hand signs you can use, and this video \(Signs #2, 4, 10 & 11\) is a good example of what we mean!](#) Feel free to come up with your own unique hand signs, and test them out before you start the discussion.
 - Have fun with virtual backgrounds (related to the topic or not)!



III. BONUS RESOURCES

Check out these additional resources if you'd like to learn more about kin-making practices across a range of issues, contexts and cultures.

FILMS

- *Seaspiracy* (2021), Ali Tabrizi
- *Islands of Faith* (2020), Chairun Nissa
- *Kiss the Ground* (2020), Joshua Tickell and Rebecca Harrell Tickell
- *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed
- *Lost World* (2018), Kalyanee Mam
- *Chasing Coral* (2017), Exposure Labs
- *Naledi: A Baby Elephant's Tale* (2016), Ben Bowie and Geoffrey Luck
- *The Ivory Game* (2016), Kief Davidson and Richard Ladkani
- *Virunga* (2014), Orlando von Einsiedel
- *Blackfish* (2013), Gabriela Cowperthwaite

BOOKS

- *Perspectives on Indigenous Issues: Essays on Science, Spirituality, Partnerships, and the Power of Words*, Ilarion (Larry) Mercurieff, Libby Roderick, Sharon (Shay) Sloan, Sumner Macleish and Galina Vladi
- *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Donna Haraway
- *Upstream*, Mary Oliver
- *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer
- *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals*, Lori Gruen
- *Guidebook to Relative Strangers: Journeys into Race, Motherhood, and History*, Camille T Dungy
- *The Nature of Home: Taking Root in a Place*, Greta Gaard
- *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh
- *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen
- *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing



ART

- [A Familiar Forest](#) by Zen Teh
- [We Were Farmers](#) by Ore Huiying
- [<earth, land, sky and sea as palimpsest>](#) by Zarina Muhammad and Zachary Chan
- [Symbiose Immaculee \(immaculate symbiosis\)](#), Tabita Rezaire
- [Endosymbiosis: Homage to Lynn Margulis](#), Shoshanah Dubiner
- [Science Friction: Living Among Companion Species](#), Shoshanah Dubiner
- [“Bee Orchid”](#), xkcd

MAGAZINES/JOURNALS

- [About Place Journal](#)
- [EcoTheo Collective: Review](#)
- [Emergence Magazine](#)
- [Orion Magazine](#)
- [Split Rock Review](#)
- [Terrain.org](#)
- [The Tiger Moth Review](#)

You can purchase a copy of *Making Kin: Ecofeminist Essays from Singapore* [here](#).

Thank you to Esther and Angelia for helping us develop this starter pack!