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DISSIDENCES

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Becoming Aurora: Translating the Story of Arshaluys Mardiganian

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The vexing silence in American culture and academic institutions surrounding Armenian literature in general, and particularly the literature produced as a response to the Armenian genocide, has been overwhelming. Ironically, this silence has persisted in the new and rapidly expanding interdisciplinary field of trauma studies, which remains an inhospitable space for the study of the lived experiences and representations of the trauma produced by the Armenian genocide. Using this confounding silence as a point of departure, I explore here the mediation of trauma through Ravished Armenia and the conditions of production, circulation, and reception of this extraordinary testimony by Arshaluys Mardiganian. More specifically, I examine how memory is negotiated through cultural trauma—the means and media through which this

experience (of genocide) has been remembered and represented—by conceptualizing the act of “writing trauma” as a mode of translation and by viewing traumatic experience as a foreign “text” that undergoes processes of domestication. And conversely, viewing translation as a virtual “place” where negotiations are eternally open, the closure of the dialectic eternally deferred, I discuss the possibilities of reconciling the loss of memory with the memory of loss. Since the majority of texts produced during and in the aftermath of the genocide were in Armenian—a minority language spoken by a small population—I also pay attention to the role of translation proper and the task of the translator in the mediation of this collective trauma.

Translation has been instrumental in the formation of languages, literary canons, theory, and philosophical thought. It has also accommodated what Walter Benjamin calls the “continuing life” and “renewal” of texts which have been contained and fixed in a certain language or culture. And while translation is deemed fundamental to the dissemination and preservation of textual inheritance, it is also understood to be an agent of language extinction, for translation, as Emily Apter suggests, especially in a world dominated by the languages of powerful economies and large populations, condemns minority languages to obsolescence (4).

According to Lawrence Venuti, translation is a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language which the translator provides. The effects of translation, Venuti argues, are felt both in its new milieu and back at home:

On the one hand, translation wields enormous power in the construction of national identities for foreign cultures, and hence it potentially figures in ethnic discrimination, geopolitical confrontations, colonialism, terrorism, war. On the other hand, translation enlists the foreign text in the maintenance or revision of literary canons in the target-

language culture, inscribing poetry and fiction, for example, with the various poetic and narrative discourses that compete for cultural dominance in the target language.

(Translator's Invisibility 19)

In Venuti's theorization, every translation submits the foreign text to a *domestic* interpretation, based on some kind of reconstruction, be it lexicographical, textual, or ideological, that answers to the needs of a particular interpretive occasion (Scandals 111). What further domestication, I inquire, do texts such as Ravished Armenia that "write trauma" undergo—trauma being a disruptive experience which, as Dominick LaCapra argues, "disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (41)?

As a disruptive experience, trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: "one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel" (LaCapra 41–42). Traumatic memories are not encoded like ordinary memories in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story, but they are reformulated through a paralyzed "language" with a shattered inner schemata that acts out the overwhelming moods and numbing symptoms of surrender. As Judith Herman explains, "the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness," which renders those experiences unspeakable or untranslatable into verbal communication—or any familiar system of representation—yet those experiences register in the human brain in complex ways and "refuse to be buried" (1).

Conceptualizing the verbal communication of traumatic experience, both through oral testimony and reconstructed narrative, as a kind of intersemiotic translation [1], I inquire into the violence that takes place during the forcible replacement of trauma with a text that has to be intelligible to the "target-language" reader. If the aim of translation is "to bring back a cultural

other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar” (Venuti Translator’s Invisibility 14), what are some of the domesticating choices that translators, consciously or unconsciously, make when appropriating trauma for “domestic” agendas—be they stylistic, cultural, or political? And conversely, if translation enlists the foreign text in the revision of dominant conceptual paradigms in target-language disciplines, how do traumatic symptoms—such as hyperarousal, intrusion, constriction or numbing, disordered and incomplete speech, elisions, gaps, and other kinds of linguistic breakdowns—function in their new milieu? The process of translation is further complicated by interlingual translation, or translation proper. Considering that most of the “texts” that appeared during and in the aftermath of the genocide were oral or written testimonies in Armenian, the representation of this historical trauma in transnational discourses has depended and still is dependent on their (re)translation into world languages, including hegemonic languages, such as English, that operate in conventions of uniformity, fluency, and representational reliability. Assuming that translations never simply communicate foreign texts and that notions of “fidelity” and “freedom” are historically determined categories, how, I inquire, has the experience of the Armenian genocide been inscribed with American intelligibilities and interests, and how have those effects transformed the representation of this “foreign” trauma? What domestic registers, discourses, and styles have been activated to transmit testimonies such as the iconic account of Aurora Mardiganian?

I am interested in Mardiganian’s testimony in particular, as it was one of the first narratives on genocide adapted for the silent screen; the historical film Auction of Souls (1919) was the earliest visual account of the Turkish atrocities during WWI. After losing her family and being forced into the death marches, during which she was captured and sold into the slave markets of Anatolia, and after escaping to the United States via Norway, Mardiganian was

approached by a New York-based screenwriter, Harvey Gates, who proposed to make her story into film. As media scholar Leshu Torchin notes, the genocide occurred at a transitional point when visual technologies, specifically the graphic magazine and film, developed alongside a discourse of international human rights campaign: “These new forms of media enabled more immediate contact with suffering at a distance, presenting trauma for the viewers ‘at home’. In the face of tragedy, a sense of moral obligation to those overseas—whether legally, politically, or charitably—came into play” (215). Moved by modern American evangelism set forth by such authorities as James L. Barton, who was then the director of Near East Relief [2], and following the humanist ideals of abolitionists who fought against slavery at home, Gates translated Mardiganian’s narrative using a remarkably unique domesticating method. The process of domestication was initiated with the translation of Mardiganian’s name. Appearing in the title page of Ravished Armenia as the translator, Gates wrote in the prologue: “Arshaluys—that means ‘The Light of the Morning.’ There is but one word in America into which the Armenian name can be translated—‘The Aurora’” (37). By replacing Arshaluys’s name with its anglicized form, Gates sought to eliminate the foreignness of both Mardiganian and her testimony in order to bring home a cultural other as the familiar. Yet, at the same time, both the narrative and the film were presented through sensationalized and exotic frames that intended to shock the audience, as the following advertisement illustrates: “This story of Aurora Mardiganian which is the most amazing narrative ever written has been reproduced for the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief in a tremendous motion picture spectacle “Ravished Armenia,” through which runs the thrilling yet tender romance of this Christian girl who survived the great massacres” (22). Mardiganian’s narrative was, of course, far from being a “tender romance,” in fact, it was a horrifying account of a seventeen-year-old girl who had escaped most cruel

atrocities. As film critic Anthony Slide comments, “both the book and the film are relatively sanitized versions of what Aurora Mardiganian actually suffered and witnessed” (5).

Mardiganian barely spoke English when Gates set up headquarters at New York’s Lantham Hotel, and Gates didn’t know any Armenian. In short oral installments Mardiganian recounted her story in Armenian, which was synchronously translated into English (by an uncredited interpreter), and transcribed and edited by Gates. In his attempt to create a compelling narrative, and to invoke both compassion and outrage in American audiences, Gates emphasized the religious dimension of Turkish atrocities committed against the Armenians. Weaving in various apostrophes to the reader that elicited empathy by way of connecting to a tradition of suffering in Christian iconography, Gates spoke for Mardiganian, personifying her and sometimes even Armenians as a race: “I often wonder if the good people of America know what the Armenians are—their character. . . . My people were among the first converts to Christ. They are a noble race and have a literature older than that of any other peoples in the world” (114); “[t]he plains across which I made my way that night were those which once formed the Garden of Eden, . . . [a]mong these same rocks through which I hurried along as fast as my strength would allow, Eve herself once had wandered” (195). Even the longer title given to Mardiganian’s narrative, Ravished Armenia, the Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl, Who Lived Through the Great Massacres, functioned as part of the campaign waged in the Christian register.

According to Barton, who authored seminal introductory studies that later became textbooks on the world’s evangelization, translation was one of the critical tools for the dissemination of American evangelism in the Orient and “the first step in the Christian conquest of any land [wa]s the conquest of its language” (81). As Edward Said has shown in Orientalism,

these first missionary institutions—the presses, schools, universities, hospitals, and later the orphanages of WWI—were imperialist in character and were supported by the United States government, which continued the Orientalizing policies set in place by their British and French counterparts. In this tradition, Ravished Armenia utilized images, figures of speech, and references that were part of a global network of information and humanitarian concern constructed over time by Christian organizations which had long been involved in forming a language of testimony and a global circuitry to move that testimony around the world (Torchin 215). In both rhetoric and structure, the relief effort around the Armenian crisis between 1915 and 1923 brought together an emerging human rights framework with an established mode of Christian organizing and also, I argue, abolitionist discourse.

When Ravished Armenia was published in 1918, most American readers were familiar with the testimonies of former African American slaves, which, according to John W. Blassingame, since the antebellum era were frequently dictated to, written or edited by white editors or publishers, many of whom were noted ministers, historians, and writers in the United States and England (xviii–xxi). Generally, the dictation was completed in a few weeks, the editor “read the story to the fugitive, asking for elaboration of certain points and clarification of confusing and contradictory details” (Blassingame xxii), after which he transcribed the narrative in first-person, following the genre of autobiography and simultaneously constructing a unique form of abolitionist discourse. The new interest and revival of this genre by Gates was arguably spurred on by the rise of the Jim Crow culture between 1919 and 1924 [3]. It is quite possible that by incorporating conventional structural elements from the slave narrative to convey Mardigian’s story, Gates was commenting on and implicitly responding to racism in America. The conventional slave narrative, according to William L. Andrews, contained prefatory and

sometimes appended messages by white abolitionists attesting to the reliability and good character of the narrator/author and called attention to what the narrative would reveal about the moral abominations of slavery. The narrator/author gave a detailed account of the extreme conditions of slavery, including physical, intellectual, and spiritual deprivation, and at the advent of a personal crisis undertook an arduous quest for freedom that climaxed in the former slave's arrival in the North (Andrews 16). In reality, the prefatory attestations trivialized the narrator/author's ethos, reducing the former slave to the status of a suspect in need of paternalistic figures to testify on his or her behalf. Likewise, Mardiganian's narrative, which was published under the auspices of Near East Relief, opened with an acknowledgment by Gates: "For verification of these amazing things, which little Aurora told me that I might tell them, in our own language, to all the world, I am indebted to Lord Bryce, formerly British Ambassador to the United States, who was commissioned by the British Government to investigate the massacres . . ." (25). The statement verifying the truth of "these amazing stories" actually did the opposite, casting doubt on the urgency, modernity, and reality of Mardiganian's experience, and diminishing the threat of genocide to humanity. Following the standard blueprint of the slave narrative, Ravished Armenia opened with a depiction of a relatively contented childhood foreshadowed by evil premonitions, and proceeded to chronologically chart the map of forced deportations, the loss of family members, the trials during the death marches, brutal rape and torture while enslaved in the harems, from which Mardiganian escaped using an "underground railroad"—the informal network of secret routes and safe houses of sympathetic Turks and Arabs.

In order to attract sensitive white American audiences and at the same time protect them from the explicit barbarities present in Mardiganian's story (and always already linked to the

realm of “the foreign”), Gates employed various euphemistic terms, such as “ravished,” “outraged,” or “betrothed” to signal acts of rape or other forms of sexual violence against Armenian girls and women during the genocide. A similar manipulation of phraseology can be seen in Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), where her editor, Lydia Maria Child, writes about unveiling “this peculiar phase of Slavery,” signifying the sexual exploitation of women and constructing the interior of plantations as a social space in the United States that was commonly imagined to contain “harems.” Like Jacobs’s narrative that employed euphemisms such as “the wrongs,” “degradation,” “the vices,” to censor the explicitness of the material, Ravished Armenia too was modeled to fit into and become assimilated to the taboos, codes and ideologies of American culture. While the text tried to sanitize the brutalities of the Turkish gendarmerie, the film went as far as to deliver a sensational exposé of sexual transgression that objectified women and girls, thus downplaying the gravity of the committed crimes. The film was promoted with the following headlines: “[Auction of Souls] to show real harems”; “With other naked girls, pretty Aurora Mardiganian was sold for eighty-five cents” (Slide 10). The purpose of the film, then, was to create an illusion that one was watching a documentary about “real harems”; it was not focused so much on the human crisis, but rather on an Orientalist desire to get a glimpse inside “real harems” and witness “Muslim barbarity.” It seemed to ignore, for instance, the barbarities of German officers mentioned in the narrative, and led to a reaffirmation that a Western conquest of the Orient was not conquest after all, but liberty (Said). Both the narrative and the film concluded with spiritually uplifting messages that America had undertaken the responsibility of saving the remnants of Armenians, which was perhaps one of the reasons why they were successfully received by different dominant American groups. According to Slide, as popular reading matter, Ravished Armenia had widespread

distribution in the United States and England, and while no numbers are available for the first printing, a reprint in 1934 boasted an alleged circulation of 360,000 copies (3).

Gates's translation aimed to construct a text that would read fluently, which he achieved by absencing the linguistic and stylistic peculiarities of Mardiganian's language and by giving the appearance that the narrative reflects her personality, intention, and essence, in short—creating an illusion that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the “original.” And when Mardiganian was asked to play “Aurora” in Auction of Souls, she was actually to copy a copy of herself—giving birth to an extraordinary icon—a likeness, a perfectly descriptive machine that offered all the signs of the real. While filming a scene in which she was required to jump from one roof to another, supposedly escaping from a Turkish harem, Mardiganian fell and broke her ankle. As Slide explains:

Shooting could not be suspended to permit the ankle to heal, and the girl was carried from one scene to another . . . Mardiganian asserts that there were scenes in the film in which the bandages around her ankle were clearly visible. Audiences were presumably expected to believe the bandages covered wounds inflicted by the Turks rather than the barbarians of Hollywood. (9)

Forced to re-experience the ordeal in order to reinvent her own “spectacular” trauma, reco(nc)iling, Arshaluys, had now become a “hyperreal” Aurora—a model, in the true Baudrillardian sense, “of a real without origin or reality” (169). The problematic incident of the broken ankle perhaps articulates best the brutalizing effects of a domesticating translation, manipulated by an invisible substitution of the signs of the real for the real itself. The Baudrillardian simulation, like the domesticated text, “begins with a liquidation of all referentials” (170). For now, the plains of the Dersim—“across which I made my way that night .

. . which once formed the Garden of Eden” (195), were recreated at the Selig Studios in Edendale with desert scenes filmed on the beach near Santa Monica and additional footage shot in Santa Barbara. The production of Auction of Souls was so hyperreal that when Mardiganian, clearly retraumatized by the experience, “saw all the people with the red fezzes and tassels, I got a shock. I thought, they fooled me. I thought they were going to give me to these Turks to finish my life” (9). After several nervous breakdowns, she was dismissed and sent to a convent, while her guardians hired seven “Aurora Mardiganian look-alikes” to present the film in the future.

In a more interrogative inquiry into Mardiganian’s story, Canadian-Armenian filmmaker Atom Egoyan and Turkish filmmaker Kutluğ Ataman made a collaborative video installation entitled Auroras/Testimony, which was shown at the Istanbul Biennale in 2007. Ataman’s video is a single-channel documentary interview between the artist and his aging former caretaker, a genocide survivor who cannot remember a central event in her life, (Fig. 1), while Egoyan’s video features the projected faces of seven actors, each giving her own carefully modulated performance of Mardiganian (Fig. 2). Through this juxtaposition of narrative voices, the artists unravel the physical experience of what is being negotiated in that space: “It’s not just a female voice, it is who is actually controlling that voice” (Egoyan, Conversation).



Figure 1. Stills from Kutluğ Ataman’s Testimony. Copyright Saatchi Magazine, June 2007.

In this metatranslation of Mardiganian’s story, the aim is to show the construction and mediation of a singular, authentic voice that legitimized Ravished Armenia and removed anything that was

irreconcilable to reason or regularity. The installation is constructed around a disparity, a difference; it interiorizes a dissimilitude akin to the Deleuzian simulacrum: “The simulacrum is not degraded copy, rather it contains a positive power which negates both original and copy, both model and reproduction” (53). The simulacra—the seven Auroras—scrutinize the nature of knowing and the way in which any particular “knowing” is circumstantially embedded.



Figure 2. Still from Atom Egoyan's *Auroras*. Copyright Saatchi Magazine, June 2007.

The discord of voices redirects our attention to the very fact that we don't have an “original” Aurora as earlier presumed, that Gates's Aurora as simulation designates the power to produce an effect “in the sense of ‘costume’, or even better, of masks, expressing a process of disguise where, behind each mask there is still another” (Deleuze 54). Egoyan's simulacra in juxtaposition with Ataman's non-iconic survivor bring to the fore the privileged position of Aurora's narrative and its erasure of Arshaluys. Ataman's subject articulates this other dimension of testimony which, unlike the literal and familiar account in *Ravished Armenia*, cannot be coherently recalled or retold in fixed detail and, in fact, is irrecoverably lost to us. The two videos respond sonically to each other, trying to negotiate a space that is filled, on the one hand, with elisions, gaps, and discontinuities, and on the other hand, with seven precise voices that try to reconcile the deviations of testimony. By bringing to our attention the issues of “originality” and “filtration” that have obsessively marked *Ravished Armenia*, Ataman and Egoyan shift the perception of catastrophe from a merely voyeuristic, consumptive gaze to a

more active engagement with hybridized memory, inviting audiences to participate more critically in the processes of filling in the rupture between the experience and its translations.

Notes

[1]. In his essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” Roman Jakobson identifies and defines intersemiotic translation or transmutation as the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.

[2]. The American Committee for Relief in the Near East (Near East Relief), founded in 1915 by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, provided assistance to Armenians and other Christians in Ottoman Turkey.

[3]. A period when, as Ron Eyerman points out, America “suffered some of the worst race riots in its history” (88–89). The Klan, having been refounded in 1915, exploited new mass media, including film, to produce and promote mythologizing and glorifying images of white supremacy epitomized in films such as *The Birth of a Nation*.

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