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# Traumatic Infidelities: Translating the Literature of the Armenian Genocide

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# TRAUMATIC INFIDELITIES: TRANSLATING THE LITERATURE OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Shushan Avagyan

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This dissertation argues that any engagement with the diasporic literature of the Armenian genocide entails raising the question of translatability, developing critical lenses for reading against domesticating effects, and locating discontinuities that expose the translation as being a replacement of inassimilable experience with language(s).

Chapter one lays the ground for a translational approach to the study of the literature of the Armenian genocide on several levels: first, a text must be recognized as a site of verbal translation, or the replacement of the “foreign” experience with an intelligible language; second, it must be analyzed as a site of intralingual translation, which often entails the euphemization of expressions within the same linguistic system; and finally, it needs to be examined as a site of interlingual translation, or translation proper.

Chapter two explores the ideological interests, literary norms, and other factors that have conditioned the translation and representation of trauma in Mabel Elliott’s *Beginning Again at Ararat* (1924), Zabel Yesayan’s *Among the Ruins* (1911), and Arshaluys Mardiganian’s *Ravished Armenia* (1918). It analyzes the domesticating effects of Elliott’s and Mardiganian’s texts that, in the former, solidify uniform and mutually

unrelatable experiences in “the Orient” and “America,” and in the latter, sensationalize and commodify traumatic experience, while it argues that Yesayan’s translation violates the fluency of language in order to signify the foreignness of traumatic experience.

Chapter three analyzes the ways in which Micheline Aharonian Marcom’s novel *The Daydreaming Boy* (2004) conveys traumatic survival through a “foreignizing” translation of the experience of genocide orphans and problematizes American missionary progressivism and its disciplinary ideology of “character building.” The chapter discusses how Marcom interrogatively mediates, akin to William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, a history of silenced voices.

The final chapter focuses on a translation-centered pedagogy and offers modes for rethinking the design of global and comparative literature courses in such a way that requires a double orientation, centering not only on the foreign experience and culture, but also the invisible power relations and hierarchies within the translating culture.



TRAUMATIC INFIDELITIES: TRANSLATING THE LITERATURE  
OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

SHUSHAN AVAGYAN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

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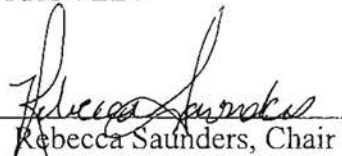
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SHUSHAN AVAGYAN

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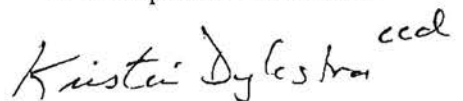
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S. A.

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## CHAPTER I

### EXTREME FOREIGNNESS: TRAUMA AND TRANSLATION

#### Introduction

This dissertation focuses on a body of multidisciplinary texts that, from varying cultural, historical, and linguistic perspectives, respond to the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. My study concentrates predominantly on texts produced after 1915—during and after the genocide of one and a half million Armenians—but also draws on select texts from events that led up to the genocide, such as the Hamidian massacres of 1894-96 and the Cilician massacres of 1909.<sup>1</sup> Much of the scholarship on the literature of the Armenian genocide has been centered on the formation of Armenian diasporic identities, based on the forced dispersion from the historical homeland in Anatolia.<sup>2</sup> I enter this critical discourse from the position of both a translator and literary scholar interested in the role of translation and the representation of this historical trauma, which has often been described as profoundly untranslatable, incomprehensible, and infinitely foreign. My study examines the mediation of trauma through narrative in testimonial, fictional, and cinematic texts of the Armenian genocide,

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<sup>1</sup> The massacres of 1894-96 were the first series of atrocities in the Ottoman Empire organized by Abdul Hamid II as a response to Armenian protests against discriminatory laws. During the Hamidian massacres, 100,000 to 300,000 Armenians were killed in towns and villages throughout the Ottoman Empire. In 1909, during the Turkish Constitutional Revolution, in which many Armenians took part, nearly 30,000 Armenians were massacred in Cilicia by both Hamid's supporters and the troops of the newly formed Committee of Union and Progress. The culprits of these massacres were never punished and after 1909, an extreme nationalist political movement promoting a policy of Pan-Turkism led to the murder of 1.5 million Armenians during World War I. For more on this history see Akçam; Miller; Power; Suny; Winter.

<sup>2</sup> See Tölölyan; Nishanian; Perroomian.



and their conditions of production, circulation, and reception. More specifically, I explore the means and media through which this event has been remembered and represented by conceptualizing the writing of trauma as an act of translation, and by viewing trauma as a foreign experience that undergoes processes of domestication as it is translated into language(s). In order to critically analyze the translation of this experience into the English language and into American culture, I frequently compare the Armenian experience of trauma with the American experience of slavery, as the two have more in common than previously recognized. In the American context, the foreignness of the former and the perceived familiarity of the latter not only provide rich comparative insights, but also interrogate the intersections of trauma, the foreign, and the familiar. Because the majority of texts produced during and in the aftermath of the genocide are in Armenian—a minority language spoken by a small population—I pay equal attention to the role of translation proper and the task of the translator in the mediation of this collective trauma. I explore in these layered translations—from trauma into language and from one language into another—the conceptions of fidelity (conventionally understood as being bound to an original) and of betrayal (conventionally associated with freedom and license), and examine how they affect the perception of traumatic events such as the Armenian genocide.

Translation has been instrumental in the formation of languages, literary canons, cultural theory, and philosophical thought. It has also enabled what Walter Benjamin calls the “continuing life” and “renewal” of texts which have been contained and fixed in a certain language or culture (16-19). But while translation is fundamental to the dissemination and preservation of textual inheritances, it is also potentially an agent of

language extinction, for, as Emily Apter suggests, especially in a world dominated by the languages of powerful economies and large populations, translation condemns minority languages to obsolescence (4). It is particularly relevant, then, to locate this study on the literature of the Armenian diaspora in what Apter calls “a translation zone,” in which transnation and translation connect through a “translational transnationalism” and depart at points of cultural caesurae—“a trans——ation” brought about by, in this case, a traumatic rupture and linguistic untranslatability (5).

According to Lawrence Venuti, translation is a process by which the translator replaces the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text by a chain of signifiers in the target language. 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 domesticating 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 that “write trauma” undergo, trauma being a disruptive experience that, according to Dominick LaCapra, “disarticulates the

self and creates holes in existence” (41)? Translating trauma, I suggest, bridges the gap between individual memory of an event and its representation, and may thereby be a means of “bearing witness to, enacting, and, to some extent, working over and through trauma whether personally experienced, transmitted from intimates, or sensed in one’s larger social and cultural setting” (LaCapra 105).

As theorists such as LaCapra, Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart have demonstrated, trauma is a profoundly disruptive experience that 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).<sup>3</sup> Traumatic memories are not encoded like ordinary memories in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story, but 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 postulates, “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness,” rendering those experiences unspeakable—or untranslatable into verbal communication—but ineradicable within memory (1). Such memories are retained in the human brain in complex ways and, in Herman’s words, “refuse to be buried” (1).

Conceptualizing the spoken or written communication of traumatic experience as “verbal translation” (which I distinguish from other processes of translation below), I inquire into the changes that take place during the replacement of traumatic memory with a text that has to be intelligible to a “target-language” audience—a heterogeneous

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<sup>3</sup> In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra focuses on the problems posed by trauma in historical representation and understanding; Herman analyzes the effects of trauma on survivors of domestic violence and veterans of the Vietnam War in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992); while van der Kolk and van der Hart explore the neurobiology of traumatic memory and its difference from ordinary memory processing in “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma” (1995).

community of people who share a common language and who are called upon to bear witness to the traumatic experience. For the language of trauma is always disruptive and disrupted, alien to consciousness and to a society that is governed by ordered and normalizing systems of thought.<sup>4</sup> If the aim of translation, as Venuti argues, “is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar,” I ask, what are some of the domesticating strategies or choices that the “translators”—here survivors, witnesses, and writers—consciously or unconsciously, make when appropriating trauma for “domestic” agendas, be they cultural, economic, or political (*Translator's Invisibility* 18)? And conversely, if translation enlists a “foreign” experience in the revision of dominant conceptual paradigms, research methodologies, and practices in target-language disciplines and traditions, how do symptoms that “originate” with trauma—such as 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 what Roman Jakobson has called “interlingual translation”—translation proper—as well as by “intralingual translation,” the replacement of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. Considering the fact that most of the texts that were written and circulated during and in the aftermath of the genocide were in Armenian, the representation of this historical trauma in transnational discourses has depended and still *is* heavily dependent on the translation of these texts into world languages, including hegemonic languages, such as English, which demand compliance with conventions of transparency and fluency. In the absence of a systematic study of the role of translation in the representation of trauma in the context of the Armenian genocide, this project aims to

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<sup>4</sup> See Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary society in *Discipline and Punish*.

critically analyze how specific translations—what I am distinguishing as “verbal,” “interlingual,” and “intralingual” forms of translation—have affected the memory of this catastrophe, particularly within American culture. Assuming that translations never simply communicate foreign texts and that notions of fidelity and betrayal are idiosyncratically determined categories, I inquire how the experience of the Armenian genocide has been inscribed within American intelligibilities and interests, and how those inscriptions have transformed the understanding of the Armenian trauma. What domestic terms, dialects, registers, discourses, and styles have been activated to produce a body of literature that refers to the Armenian genocide?

#### Verbal Translation: (De)Scribing a Traumatic Foreignness

In his essay “Catastrophic Mourning,” which focuses on Zabel Yesayan’s chronicle of the Cilician massacres of 1909 (*Among the Ruins*, 1911), literary critic Marc Nichanian writes about the impossibility of grasping or verbalizing the “nameless terror” that Yesayan called the “*aghed*” [catastrophe]. In her chronicle, Yesayan described this unspeakable terror: “Those who lived through it are also incapable of recounting it as a whole. Everyone stammers, sighs, weeps, and can bring out only bits of pieces of the events” (qtd. in Nichanian, “Catastrophic Mourning” 112). “In essence,” Nichanian writes, “the event is such that beyond it there remains only a speech in pieces, splinters and fragments” (112). Throughout his work on the testimonial literature of the Armenian genocide, Nichanian persistently returns to the notion of the unrepresentability of trauma and the impotence of verbal signs in translating the “irreparable in the Catastrophe” (115). Viewed in the paradigm of the Italian adage “*traduttore, traditore*”—literally,

“translator, traitor”—to speak of trauma is to betray the traumatic experience, as well as expose the shame of victimization, indignity, and inability to fight back. To speak, to translate through words and sentences, to regulate trauma through everyday language may also seem to betray the nonsymbolic nature of traumatic memory. For the “literality” of traumatic memory, as literary critic Cathy Caruth insists, “points toward its enigmatic core: the delay and incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event” (5). Nonetheless, a vast body of literature on the genocide attempts to (re)articulate that experience, and each such translation effects a replacement of inassimilable experience with language that is inevitably both a loss of meaning and an interpolation of new meaning.

The problem of trauma has received renewed interest in the United States since the Vietnam War and was recognized under the term “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD) in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association, which defined PTSD as a response to an event “outside the range of a usual human experience” (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 3rd ed., 236). This definition included the symptoms of what had previously been known as shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis, and covered responses to both human and natural catastrophes. In recent years, scholars from various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, history, and literature, have attempted to explain and understand the cognitive, social, historical, and linguistic ruptures created by the phenomenon of trauma. Drawing on Freud’s interpretation of melancholy as failed mourning and writing of the melancholic for whom it is impossible to recall or mourn a traumatic event, psychoanalyst and literary critic

Julia Kristeva, for example, connects the psychomotor paralysis characteristic of trauma with a symbolic breakdown.<sup>5</sup> In her analysis, the speech of melancholics becomes repetitive and monotonous, as faced with the “impossibility of concentrating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill” (33), thus culminating in a “spectacular collapse of meaning” (53).<sup>6</sup> The melancholic, who I am here associating with the traumatized, “appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos” (33). But even when one is determined to tell and to mourn a traumatic experience, as psychoanalyst Dori Laub writes, “There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought*, *memory*, and *speech*” (63). In its very nature, then, the idiom of trauma is characterized by an extreme foreignness—an encounter with loss and ultimately death, which, according to literary scholar Rebecca Saunders, “is often figured as a stranger, as something that comes from the outside (*foras*), as not belonging, or as improper” (*Lamentation* 73). Consequently, as we speak of traumatic untranslatability, we attest to a condition that necessitates a (de)scribing, a refusal to linguistically appropriate, a resistance to betray, the foreign experience.

Theorizing collective trauma and the role it plays in the formation of collective identity, Jeffrey C. Alexander analyzes the forms of mediation through which social crises are translated into cultural comprehensibility. He conceives the bridging of the gap between traumatic event and its symbolic representation as the “trauma process,” which

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<sup>5</sup> In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) Freud differentiates between the pathological logic of melancholia (*Melancholie*), which hinders the process of grieving through an internalization of and self-destructive loyalty to the object of loss, and the conscious act of mourning (*Trauer*), which enables grieving through a recognition of and separation from the object of loss.

<sup>6</sup> For Kristeva, this is a specific reference to a breakdown in the Symbolic Order, as per Jacques Lacan.



he compares to a speech act. In this framework, the goal of collective agents, such as political elites or religious leaders “who have particular discursive talents,” is “persuasively to project the trauma claim to the audience-public” (11-12). Trauma, in Alexander’s sense, is never “available” in some unmediated form, as any representation is always an interpretation of its object. What lay trauma theory seems to ignore, Alexander argues, is the “symbolically structured and sociologically determined” interpretive grid through which all “facts” about trauma are mediated, emotionally, cognitively, and morally (201). What further needs to be brought to attention in this act of persuasion, I contend, is the mode of translation in relation to conceptions of fidelity. For if a “compelling” representation of trauma must convince—in other words, convert the unbelieving, “the infidels”—the audience into believing in the trauma claim, the bridging of the gap will always necessitate a certain degree of betrayal of the traumatic experience through appropriation into language. Because the translation process, from the selection of facts to the development and execution of translation strategies, is mediated by heterogeneous values and interests that circulate in the target language in some hierarchical order, a compelling representation of trauma might be bound to the dictates of language, but also, to varying degrees, to the foreign experience of trauma.

### Intralingual Translation: Rewording

According to Roman Jakobson, one of the ways of interpreting a verbal sign is through intralingual translation or rewording, where verbal signs are replaced by other signs of the same language. The intralingual translation of a word uses synonymous or related words, circumlocutions or euphemisms, which, of course, are never identical in



meaning. Translation within the same language occurs most often between dialects belonging to the same linguistic group (such as Eastern and Western Armenian), which often require a complete or partial translation. Speakers belonging to different social classes, separated by education, privilege, and power can often understand each other only by means of similar mediation. As German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher notes, “Indeed, are we not often required to translate another’s speech for ourselves, even if he is our equal in all respects, but possesses a different frame of mind or feeling?” (142). Intralingual translation also occurs when the same event is renarrated and reworded, which always involves a slight variation based on individual idiolect, memory, education, or even a different stage of life. Meaning is always in flux as an effect of relations and differences among signifiers and speakers. Surely, as Venuti and others have argued, a translation cannot be judged according to a mathematics-based conception of semantic equivalence or one-to-one correlation, because meaning is comprised of plural and contingent relations, and the foreign text is the site of various semantic possibilities that are fixed only provisionally in any one translation, depending on the cultural assumptions and interpretive choices of a translator, and the specific social and historical moments in which s/he writes.<sup>7</sup>

### Interlingual Translation: Reimagining in English

Whereas some contemporary testimonies of the Armenian genocide were promptly translated into English, as, for example, in Viscount James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee’s *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire* (1916) or Arshaluys Mardiganian’s *Ravished Armenia* (1918), many important texts by survivors of the

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<sup>7</sup> See Spivak; Jakobson; Lefevere; Venuti.

genocide were translated long after their original appearance; many others have never been translated into English.<sup>8</sup> For example, one of the seminal texts on the Armenian genocide by Grigoris Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha* (1922) wasn't translated until eighty-seven years later in 2009, by Peter Balakian and Aris Sevag. Similarly, Ara Stepan Melkonian's translation of Yervant Odian's compelling memoir *Accursed Years: My Exile and Return from Der Zor, 1914-1919* did not appear until 2009, approximately ninety years after its original publication. Only three chapters have been translated from one of the first critical accounts of the Cilician massacres, Zabel Yesayan's *Among the Ruins* (1911), which appeared in English ninety-one years after its original publication as part of Nichanian's *Writers of Disasters: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century* (2002). And Hagop Oshagan's unfinished magnum opus, *Mnatsortats* [*The Remnants*], an eighteen-hundred-page novel written between 1928 and 1934, is only now, over seventy years later, being translated by Geoffrey Goshgarian. Most of these translation projects have been undertaken by the post-genocide generation and only recently become available in English both because the generation of "postmemory" is attempting to understand and connect to an inherited trauma and because the cultural conditions in the United States have become more open to such productions.<sup>9</sup>

Part of this is due to the status of translation, its growing visibility and influence.

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<sup>8</sup> In 1916 Viscount James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee were commissioned by the British Parliament to prepare the Blue Book, which is formally known as *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-1916*. Toynbee carefully compiled and verified dozens of eyewitness accounts from different parts of the Ottoman Empire. These accounts provided the basis for Bryce's thesis on the government-planned program of annihilation, published while the crime was still in progress. The book includes eyewitness accounts from United States consular and missionary sources, as well as the testimony of German, Italian, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Greek, Kurdish, and Armenian witnesses. While the original publication was full of blanks, the names of many people and places were obscured in order to safeguard sources still in the Ottoman Empire, the second edition (2005) of the Blue Book restored all the names.

<sup>9</sup> I borrow the term "postmemory" from Marianne Hirsch to describe the relationship of the second and third generations "to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (103).

In recent years there has been a critical shift in translation studies in the United States stemming from a movement in the 1980s and early 1990s by critics such as André Lefevere, Gideon Toury, Edwin Gentzler, and Lawrence Venuti, who made translation an autonomous discipline grounded in cultural and postcolonial theory. This shift can be seen in the appearance of university translation studies programs, the rising number of journals dedicated to translations and translation theory, and the distribution of funds for translation through organizations such as the PEN American Center, the Modern Language Association, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Some of these changes have directly affected the translation of the literature of the Armenian genocide; for example, Goshgarian's translation of Hagop Oshagan's eighteen-hundred-page novel, *The Remnants*, would not have been possible without a 2009 grant from the PEN translation fund.

#### (In)Fidelities: Methods of Translation

In an 1813 lecture, Schleiermacher classified two approaches to translation: "Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him. Or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward him" (149). Schleiermacher's identification of these alternatives reaches back at least as far as Cicero's distinction between "*ut interpretes*" (word-for-word translation, like an interpreter) and "*ut orator*" (persuasive translation, like an orator) (Baker, *Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* 163). Traditionally associated either with the literal and faithful or with freedom and creativity, this basic binarism reappears in more recent pairs such as "imitation" versus "metaphrase" (Dryden), "literal" versus

“paraphrase” (Nabokov), “formal” versus “dynamic” (Nida), and “resistant” versus “transparent” (Venuti). Many translation theorists have suggested a series of middling strategies, yet the dichotomy remains, and in this schema in which fidelity is understood as literal proximity to the original, free translation, understood as more distant in meaning from the original, can only be read as betrayal.

According to Venuti, translation throughout the history of the United States has been double-edged in its social functions and effects. On the one hand, translation enabled the colonization, dispossession, and assimilation of Native Americans and continues to support American political and economic hegemony across the globe. On the other hand, it contributed to the formation of a definably “American” identity. So, for example, projects such as *A Key to the Language of America* (1643), a dictionary in the Narragansett language that aimed to “to assist the colonist whatever the occasion be,” symbolized the expansionist goals of gradually dispossessing and displacing the native tribes (qtd. in Baker, *Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* 399). Nineteenth century projects such as the fourteen-volume anthology of translations from European languages, *Specimens of Foreign Standard Literature*, edited by George Ripley, constructed a model that conformed to the cultural values of the elite intellectual minority, which subscribed to an Anglo-European canon and thus consolidated these values as fundamental to American identity. Methods of translation were determined by cultural hierarchies: literal or faithful translation was required when representing the expression of “civilized” cultures within the Western worldview, whereas less fidelity and expertise were required when translating “less civilized” texts. This principle is exemplified best by a statement made by the English poet Edward Fitzgerald, translator of Omar Khayyam, in a letter to

his friend E. B. Cowell in 1857: “It is an amusement for me to take what Liberties I like with these Persians, who (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do want a little Art to shape them” (qtd. in Lefevere, *Translation/History/ Culture* 4).

British and American translators often shared translation strategies and standards based on cultural hierarchies, and a knowledge of foreign languages was not always considered necessary for making judgments about translation. Comparing American to early Soviet methods of translation, Lauren G. Leighton points to an odd tendency in American translation that “poets commonly convey poetry into English without possessing a knowledge of its original language” (16). This method, usually employed in the translation of poetry, incorporated the work of two individuals, a translator (or the so-called “native informant”) who provided an interlinear translation, and a poet who manipulated the interlinear text to recreate the foreign work in the target language. As I will show below, this method undermines the presence and labor of the native translator without whom the translation would not have been possible in the first place. By contrast, the Soviet translation school not only emphasized “the integrity of the original text [as] sacred and translation [as] an art,” and required that “a text be submitted to exhaustive analysis by an artist having the best possible command of both the native and foreign language” (Leighton 14), but also viewed the editor’s and publisher’s task as equally critical to the presentation of a foreign text. As Soviet critic Ivan Kashkin wrote in 1959, the editor “must perhaps know even more than the translator. In the first place, the language—or more precisely, both languages. This is axiomatic” (qtd. in Leighton 55). Another Soviet translation editor, Marya Lorie, contended that the editor must ensure that

the translator has not omitted anything from the text and has not invented anything, as the task of the editor is “to bring the translation as close to the original as is possible, help the translator faithfully convey a foreign-language work in its unity of form and content” (qtd. in Leighton 55). Cautious of censorship, Lorie argued that the editor has no right to make changes: “Ideally, the editor must not touch a single word of the text himself, but only *point out* where the translator has in one way or another departed from fidelity to the original” (qtd. in Leighton 56). This view runs counter to the American school that not only assumed that “a poet’s talent need not contend with linguistic nuances of a foreign poem” (Leighton 16) but also, I would argue, constructed a hierarchy of skills—the construction of the poet as “translator” and the “native informant” as assistant to the translator. In Arshaluys Mardignian’s *Ravished Armenia*, for instance, discussed in depth in the following chapter, the name of the Armenian interpreter does not appear in any part of the book, while the transcriber—screenwriter Robert Gates—appears as the translator of the text. Another instance of the erasure of the native translator can be seen in one of the earliest translation projects of Armenian literature, the anthology *Armenian Poems* published in 1896 by Alice Stone Blackwell. The anthology presented classical, medieval, and nineteenth century Armenian poets to the English-language audience for the first time, functioning as a cultural emissary introduced in the context of the Hamidian massacres of 1894-96. The volume was expanded and reprinted in 1917 as part of the fundraising and relief efforts during World War I. In her preface to the second volume, Blackwell reasoned that “the sympathy felt for the Armenians in the unspeakable sufferings at the hands of the Turks would be deepened by an acquaintance with the temper and genius of the people, as shown in their poetry” (i). Another primary reason

for the publication was “the fact that Armenian poetic literature, while well worthy to be known, was practically inaccessible to English-speaking readers. Its treasures are locked up in an almost unknown language” (i). While Blackwell, who did not know Armenian, acknowledged in her preface Ohannes Chatschumian and Bedros Keljik, among others, who had rendered the poems in “literal translation in prose,” she appears as the translator of the anthology (i). Such seemingly insignificant gestures nonetheless establish the imbalance between the “native informant” as a lower class (and underpaid) laborer and the “translator” as a skilled and acknowledged artisan. Furthermore, they institute the notion that literal translation should be less valued, as it requires less artistic talent, while it upholds free translation as a more inventive and thus privileged method.<sup>10</sup> By obscuring the foreign presence of the native translators, Blackwell’s volume thus concealed the numerous stages of the translation process (starting with the selection of authors and works, for example) and the conditions under which the translation was made.

In *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Venuti examines the rhetoric of reviews by critics, writers, and academics who unanimously and consistently construct a dominance of *fluency* in English-language translations that renders the translator invisible. A fluent translation, according to Venuti, is easily recognizable, made familiar, “domesticated” so that the audience has an unobstructed entrance into the foreign text; the translator works to make his or her mediation “invisible,” “producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion,” thus creating a sensation of “naturalness” that obliterates foreignness or unfamiliarity (5). The effect of transparency is produced by minimizing polysemy or the disruptive play of signifiers, and by pursuing

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<sup>10</sup> Schleiermacher establishes this rather elitist view in his 1813 lecture: “The translator of newspaper articles and the common literature of travel remains in close proximity to the interpreter and risks becoming ridiculous when his work begins to make larger claims and he wants to be recognized as an artist” (143).



linear syntax, univocal meaning, current usage, and linguistic consistency. Fluency thus results in an effacement of the multiple determinations and effects of translation. The translator's invisibility is further indoctrinated by the conception of authorship as individualistic, as an original and transparent self-representation, "unmediated by transindividual determinants (linguistic, cultural, social) that might complicate authorial originality" (6). In this schema, translation is, on the one hand, defined as a second-rate representation that is derivative and dependent upon the foreign text, which, in turn, is considered an authentic or true representation of the author's intention, and on the other hand, judged by its ability to efface its second-rate status by producing the illusion that it is, in fact, the original. Consequently, the translator's invisibility is a mechanism of self-discipline and self-effacement that reproduces the marginal status of translation in American culture.

Through the illusory dictates of the translator's invisibility, the concomitant domestication of the foreign text and replacement of difference, translation then becomes an act of ideological violence, in which its aim is to bring back a cultural other as the recognizable and the familiar. Thus the translator, Venuti proposes, should consciously try to move away from domesticating strategies and employ a "foreignizing" methodology, which he, following Schleiermacher, defines as "an ethnodeviant pressure on [target-language cultural] values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad" (*Translator's Invisibility* 20). Conceptually analogous to Viktor Shklovsky's theory of *ostranenie* [defamiliarization], a "foreignizing" translation allows for a disruption and revision of codes and norms that prevail in the target language and culture. I find this method especially useful in my



analysis of the various translation projects of the Armenian experience, as it lays bare the heterogeneous interests and interpretative choices of various agents involved in translating the Armenian genocide and how those choices have affected both Armenian and American perceptions of this event. In addition, the majority of texts on which this study builds are translations, many of which are noncanonical and understudied, and my twofold goal is to bring attention both to the status of translated texts and to works that are germane to the study of the Armenian genocide.

By applying a “foreignizing” method to my own analysis, then, I devise a practice of interpretation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural otherness of the Armenian experience. This method affords what Venuti calls “a symptomatic reading” which, unlike the “humanist method” of reading that advocates a transparency or invisibility of communication, locates discontinuities at the level of articulation, syntax, or discourse, exposes the translation as being a violent rewriting of the foreign text, and strategically intervenes in the target-language culture in order to transgress and critique its discursive values and methodologies (*Translator’s Invisibility* 25). From this perspective, a translation must offer something innovative and never-yet-experienced to the target-language culture; it must succeed in providing a new experience or knowledge that disrupts habitual perception and cultural assumptions. This foreignizing methodology necessarily poses a critical question: to what degree can a translator “foreignize” the translation of an extremely foreign experience such as trauma without risking illegibility or incomprehensibility? For if the language of trauma is not verbal, but indeed language-destroying, resistant to complete sentences, linear narratives

or standard grammatical outlines, how might a foreignizing translation—which is both a verbal and interlingual translation—convey trauma within the semantic field of *logos*?

### Armenian Literature in Translation

One of the earliest translations of Armenian literature into English appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1893, where folklorist A. G. Seklemian introduced American scholars to his translation of the Armenian fairy tale “The Youngest of the Three.” Another tale, “The Wicked Stepmother,” was translated and published in the same journal in 1897. The following year Seklemian published an anthology, *The Golden Maiden and Other Folk Tales and Fairy Stories Told in Armenia*, which was introduced by Alice Stone Blackwell who, as mentioned earlier, had collaborated with Armenian scholars on the translation of Armenian poetry. *The Golden Maiden* included twenty-eight tales and a tragic ballad about two young lovers, “Sia-Manto and Guje-Zare,” which was versified by Blackwell. Blackwell’s introduction to *The Golden Maiden* was set against the backdrop of the Hamidian massacres of 1894-96, as was her own anthology of *Armenian Poems* (1896), and aimed to draw attention to the plight of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. In this context it is not surprising to read an introduction that says nothing about the literary merit of the tales, but rather offers an ethnographic summary of the Armenians as a “race.” The introduction traces the origins and history of Armenians, testifying that “they are of Aryan race, and of pure Caucasian blood,” and cites various travelers who “have been struck by the ability of the Armenians, and by the marked difference between them and other Oriental races” (xi). Blackwell quotes English explorer Isabella Bird Bishop who wrote, “It is not possible to deny that they are the most

capable, energetic, enterprising and pushing [*sic*] race in Western Asia, physically superior and intellectually acute; and above all they are a race which can be raised in all respects to our own level" (xii). Such racializing descriptions not only rendered Armenians as inferior to Anglo-Europeans, but also indoctrinated irreconcilable differences between Armenians and other ethnicities of the Near East. In addition, it doomed the mixing between "superior" and "inferior" races, as is "evident" from the tragic union between the Armenian youth Sia-Manto and the Kurdish maiden Guje-Zare, which is strategically placed at the end of the anthology. An interrogative reader, however, might read against this translation that painstakingly portrays the Armenians as "a pure race," as Seklemian's preface, "The Story-Teller to his Audience," underscores the hybridity of Armenian culture as evinced in the folk tales:

Although all the tales contained in this volume are taken directly from the lips of the Armenians, it will be noticed that some of them bear traces of Persian, Arabic and Turkish influence. This, of course, was naturally to be expected, as the Armenians have been ruled successively by these nations. (xviii)

Despite Seklemian's recognition of "foreign" influences, Blackwell's construction of the purity, as well as physical and intellectual superiority of Armenians, was a strategy for mediating the trauma befalling them, one that aimed to persuade the targeted American audience to become involved in relief efforts for the victims of the Hamidian massacres who, being "the Anglo-Saxons of Eastern Turkey," were "like us" (xi). This strategy functioned as part of what Alexander calls "a complex and multivalent symbolic process" meant to convince an audience that it too had become traumatized by the experience (12). However, Blackwell's assimilative reading of Armenians and their fairy tales muted the

complex cross-ethnic relationships of the source culture at the same time that it set up an ethnocentric hierarchy that ensured the dominance of Anglo-Saxon culture over others. These strategic gestures, as I will argue in the following pages, not only reveal the domestic interests vested in Armenian-English translation projects at the turn of the century, but also helped popularize the Armenian cause through literature in the unique context of ethnic and cultural annihilation.

A wave of renewed interest in Armenian literature grew during the crisis of World War I and more translation projects were initiated or commissioned by individuals and groups who were involved in the organization of humanitarian relief. The anthology *Armenian Legends and Poems* (1916) was one such project in which the selection of works was motivated by topical proximity to the genocide and the tradition of lamentation and elegy. The translator of the anthology, British-Armenian poet Zabelle C. Boyajian wrote in the preface: “In preparing this book of Armenian legends and poems my principal object was to publish it as a Memorial to an unhappy nation. The book does not claim to represent Armenian poetry adequately. Many gifted and well-known authors have been omitted, partly from considerations of space, and partly because of the scope of the work” (ix). In his introduction to the anthology, Viscount James Bryce, who was simultaneously involved in preparing a record of eyewitness accounts of the genocide, further constructed a cultural rationale for humanitarian involvement:

Few among us have acquired their language, one of the most ancient forms of human speech that possess a literature. Still fewer have studied their art or read their poetry even in translations. There is, therefore, an ample field for a book which shall present to those Englishmen and Frenchmen, whose interest in

Armenia has been awakened by the sufferings to which its love of freedom and its loyalty to its Christian faith have exposed it, some account of Armenian art and Armenian poetical literature.

If Boyajian cast her translations as a mode of commemoration, Bryce used the occasion to draw in a select group of Europeans who were already familiar with the Armenian people through the crisis in the Ottoman Empire. In other words, the collection was not presented as a literary endeavor, nor was it marketed to a literary or a scholarly community, but rather promoted through the frame of the genocide. The cursory survey of literature included hastily and indiscriminately arranged Armenian folk songs, medieval legends, and poems ranging from fifth- to early twentieth-century poets, as well as works about Armenia, such as the fourteenth-century English poet John Gower's "The Tale of Rosiphelee," with scant historical and cultural contextualization, which undermined the serious study of this body of literature. Blackwell's second volume of *Armenian Poems* came out the following year, in 1917, with an expanded list of works including contemporary socialist poets Shushanik Kurghinian and Hovhannes Hovhannesian.

That same year, the daughter of an American missionary, Jane S. Wingate, who had grown up in Marsovan in Ottoman Turkey, translated Armenian novelist Raffi's *The Fool*, further building on this body of literature that was being framed through the unique context of the genocide.<sup>11</sup> Wingate grew up in a community of Protestant Armenians, where she studied Armenian and translated in order to improve her knowledge of the language. She devoted herself to the study of ancient and modern Armenian literatures, and commenced translating folktales, which she sent to the Folklore Society of England,

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<sup>11</sup> Raffi is the pen name of the Eastern Armenian novelist Hakob Melik Hakobian (1835-1888).

of which she was a member. Several of these translations were published in a Boston-based journal *Armenia* in 1910, while others appeared in the British Folklore Society's journal *Folklore* in 1911 and 1912. However her most widely read and popular work was the translation of Raffi's *The Fool* (1917). Originally published in 1881, this short novel on the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-78 depicted the pogroms against the Armenians in Bayazet and their struggle against Ottoman oppression. Wingate probably selected this novel for translation because it portrayed scenes of atrocity in Armenian villages similar to what she was witnessing during World War I. She may also have seen it as an important text for understanding the historical context of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Not only did *The Fool* show a long and continuous history of a state-endorsed program of ethnic cleansing that preceded the genocide, but it also unleashed a scathing critique of the state of the Armenian Church and its clergy, and implicitly defended Protestantism. In this sense, the selection and translation of the text served as persuasive evidence for the necessity of American missionary involvement in rescuing Armenians from both the corruption of their own church and annihilation by Muslims.

Wingate's English version of the novel, however, included a variety of disparities that change critical scenes and "regulate" cultural, ideological, and political realities that were intentionally constructed as contradictory in the original. For example, the name of one of the characters Ստեփանիկ (Stepanik) or "little Stepan"—a male name—becomes "Stephanie" in Wingate's translation. While Wingate follows Raffi's description of this character as an Armenian villager's "youngest son" who resembled "Joseph, the beloved," she nonetheless hints at a discrepancy by choosing a feminine name: "The youngest son of Khacho was unmarried, being a lad of sixteen, who was called Stephanie

[sic]" (Wingate's translation, Ch. 5). As a result, a crucial revelation in the novel is completely lost due to this free translation, for the character initially presented as the young man Stepanik, turns out, toward the middle of the novel, to be a young woman named Lala. The English translation thus erased the character's gender ambiguity, and diminished both the tension of the situation she found herself in and the impact of the exposure. Cross-dressing was not unusual in Ottoman Armenian households; Armenian girls were occasionally disguised as boys in order not to attract the attention of Turkish gendarmes, Kurdish tribesmen, or Circassian militiamen, who used systematic rape and forced impregnation as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing. Later on, during World War I, this form of resistance was adopted by many Armenian women who applied strategies like cutting their own hair, rubbing coal or dirt on their faces, and wearing ragged clothing to appear unattractive, to avoid sexual violence or "a fate worse than dying"—sexual enslavement (Bjørnlund 25).<sup>12</sup> In his construction of one such act of resistance, Raffi paid particular attention to his portrayal of the cross-dressed Lala, carefully dressing her up in masculine traits and passing her off as a handsome young man. Betraying her gender, in the context of the novel, literally meant risking her life and exposing her to a danger to which her older sister, Sona, had fallen victim:

Sona's death left her father so oppressed with grief that he had a foreboding that his other daughter would suffer the same fate. His anxiety was not without grounds, especially in his country, where he had known of many and many a young girl carried off by Turks or Kurds. Consequently he wished to have Lala grow up as a boy till she became of age. . . . The secret had been kept most

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<sup>12</sup> On gender-specific violence during the Armenian massacres and genocide, see Bjørnlund; Dadrian; Katharine Derderian; Watenpaugh.



scrupulously. Outside the family only three persons knew the fact: the village priest, and the godfather and godmother who were no longer living. (Wingate's translation, Ch. 13)

In this passage and the following chapter, where Raffi further explores the predicament of the character as a cross-dressed woman, he stresses the "unnaturalness" of her condition through the main hero, Vartan, thus drawing attention to the normalizing gaze:

Vartan had long known that Stephanie [*sic*] was a girl. He surmised, also, the reasons why her parents had been obliged to dress her as a boy, and to have her grow up as a boy. It was these circumstances that had attracted the attention of the young man to the unfortunate girl, and filled him with a heroic desire to rescue her from her unnatural condition. (Wingate's translation, Ch. 14)

The revelation that "Stephanie" *is* "a girl" in Wingate's translation comes as no surprise and doesn't draw attention to the "unnatural condition," which Raffi tries to problematize in the original novel. Wingate's strategy to give Lala a female pseudonym, Stephanie, expunges the strangeness of the circumstances in which many Armenian girls and women found themselves and neutralizes the novel's turning point, which is marked by the gender revelation. Driven perhaps by a discomfort of having to deal with a cross-dressed woman or possibly trying to spare her audience the "gender trouble" caused by Raffi's destabilization of assumptions about gender identity, Wingate's domestication constructed a heteronormative anticipation of what Judith Butler calls a "gendered essence" (xv).<sup>13</sup>

Other discursive choices made by Wingate further misconstrue the Armenian text

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<sup>13</sup> In *Gender Trouble*, Butler analyzes how heteronormative expectations and regulations concerning gender produce distinct "essences" that men and women are expected to reproduce through certain bodily acts of naturalized gestures.



and its critique of parochial values and mores that, according to Raffi, were widespread especially in Armenian villages under strict Ottoman rule. For example, the original text employs a profusion of proverbs (such as “If you can’t cut the hand of a villain, you must kiss it”) that perform the submission of Ottoman subjects to the duplicitous policies of the government.<sup>14</sup> As the central character, Vartan, explains, “To talk with these people you must know hundreds of proverbs and anecdotes” (Wingate’s translation, Ch. 17). Raffi strategically places three proverbs as epigraphs to the novel, which in their own way parody and negate the proverbial or metaphorical language of “the wise.” The first two proverbs construct “the fool” as a troublemaker and a shrewd trickster: “The fool rolled a stone into the pit; a hundred wise men came to the rescue but could not draw it out” and “While the wise man ponders, the fool crosses the river” (my translation). And the last proverb “Խեղճից—ուղիղ պատասխան” (“The fool will always give a straight answer,” my translation) directly refers to Vartan’s discourse, or the discourse of “the fool” as he is nicknamed in the novel, and is juxtaposed to the proverbial language of the Turkish authorities and the Armenian subjects who mechanically reproduce the language through which they are oppressed. While Wingate faithfully translates the first two epigraphs, she reverses the meaning of the last one, rendering it as “The replies of a fool become the proverbs of the people,” allowing for a slippage of the differentiation between “the language of the fool”—straightforwardness, frankness, literality—and other discourses. It further undermines Raffi’s ironic overuse of proverbs, enlisted in the text to reveal the language of imprecise utterances and vague promises by authorities to reform the social conditions of Armenians living as colonial subjects of the Ottoman Empire.

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<sup>14</sup> My translation, Ch. 17.

In other instances, Wingate's choices can be described at best as arbitrarily unfaithful to the source material, as “մարդկային մարմիններ” (“human bodies”) becomes “putrid bodies”; “ստուգի տատը” (“old grandmother”) becomes “old granddad”; “լալախաղացի օգնական” (“tightrope walker's assistant”) becomes “a clown or a juggler's assistant”; “անձնապաշտպանություն” (“self-defense”) becomes “self-preservation”; “Նա իր զավակին հանձնեց ֆրերների միաբանությանը, իսկ ինքը անհետացավ” (“He left his son to a brotherhood of Frères and disappeared”) becomes “He committed his son to a brotherhood of Frères, but he himself became an infidel”; “Եթե հավաքելու լինեմք վերջին 20-30-50 տարիների ընթացքում կատարված փաստերը” (“If we look at the facts from the past twenty, thirty, or fifty years”) becomes “If we collect together the proofs of this during the past thirty-five years,” and so on. Other infidelities to the original appear to be motivated by an anti-socialist sentiment, as Wingate omits large sections of the novel on the socialist revolutionary Levon Salman, who is characterized by Vartan as “a skilled guide in life,” and who, “apart from being an intellectual, is a very kind and honest man.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, some of Salman's progressive feminist ideas, which are both original and far ahead of his time, are attributed to Vartan, the eponymous hero of the novel, who in the original seems less interested in women's emancipation:

“It is necessary to draw on their strength which is confined within their four walls, then we shall surely succeed,” Salman often said.

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<sup>15</sup> My translation, from an omitted section in Ch. 19.

“It is early yet,” replied Vartan, “they need preparation first. [The following words belong to Salman in the original] No reform in the life of a people is possible without the assistance of women. If our people have remained static the principal reason for it is because women have had no share in public affairs. The strength, the energizing force which has lain abortive within their four walls has yielded no results.” (Wingate’s translation, Ch. 23)

Although this passage is inconsistent with Vartan’s view on women’s rights and appears contradictory to his character, Wingate may have wanted to construct Vartan as more progressive than he appears in the original novel to make him more sophisticated for the target-language audience. Despite these inconsistencies, Wingate faithfully translates what is perhaps to her the most important message of this text (ironically, pronounced by the socialist Salman)—the uncanny continuity of the government-endorsed plan of annihilation in the late nineteenth century and of the genocide of World War I:

“We looked at the disorder, corruption and barbarity practiced, but we did not see the hellish machinery hidden beneath all this. We saw oppression, murder, forcible change of religion, all the wickedness committed by neighboring tribes. We considered all that as temporary and accidental and did not know that these irregularities were secretly encouraged and fomented by men of high degree. We blamed the government, considering it simply weak and unable to control its lawless subjects. We did not know that government officials themselves excited these barbarians against the Armenians, in order to destroy the Christian element. . . . Here the principal nationality that threatens the partition of that portion of the empire, is the Armenian. Therefore, in order to stop the noise of the European

Governments [Turkey] must show them that no Armenians remain in Armenia.”

(Wingate’s translation, Ch. 21)

In her attempt to alert the English-speaking world of the crimes that she was witnessing in modern-day Turkey, Wingate turned to Raffi to show the continuous mechanism of ethnic cleansing that neither started nor ended with the Armenian genocide. By producing a translation rather than a text of her own, Wingate was invoking the authority of Raffi’s text and inherently drawing attention to Armenian literature, along with Seklemian, Blackwell, Boyajian, Bryce, and others, through the frame of the genocide. Translations from Armenian at the turn of the century, then, unavoidably bore the mark of this historical event and, consequently, studying the literature of the Armenian genocide entails developing a critical lens for reading against these domesticating effects, locating the discontinuities that expose the translation as being a rewriting of the foreign text, and reconsidering dominant perceptions in the target-language culture.

Translation, as Lefevere argues, implies authority, legitimacy and, ultimately, power, and nations have always sought translators they could entrust with a faithful reproduction of their own values, ideologies, and traditions, which often means that trust in the translator has been more important than fidelity to the original (2-3). To Schleiermacher, for example, this meant that translators should only translate from a foreign language into their own, as anything else would be “an act that runs counter to both nature and morality” and would mean “to become a deserter to one’s own mother tongue and to give oneself to another” (qtd. in Lefevere, *Translation/History/Culture* 5). From this perspective, where one is expected to remain faithful to his or her native language and cultural ideologies, it would seem impossible to remain at the same time

faithful to a foreign text if its values and ideologies do not coincide with those in the translator's native culture. One would always be, if not consciously, then, unconsciously, domesticating a foreign text, which is evident, as I have argued, in Wingate's translation of Raffi's *The Fool*, where the translator remains faithful only to those elements that are not contrary to her own situated knowledge, ideology, and values. By "naturalizing" the gender ambiguities, for example, or by eliminating the socialist elements, Wingate created a fluent account that would comfortably fit into the dominant conceptions of heteronormativity and capitalism in the United States. Notions of fidelity, then, are always in constant flux and invoke different answers, depending on cultural dictates and the politics of the translator, to Jakobson's famous questions: "Translator of what messages? Betrayer of what values?" (118).

### Conclusion

The translation of the Armenian experience and popularization of Armenian literature in the United States has predominantly been shaped through a domestication of trauma by individuals and groups who pursued various, often incongruous, interests. Whether it was to commemorate one's own trauma, to sympathize with a foreign nation, or to recruit humanitarian sentiment, the translation of the Armenian experience was contested by an irreversible disruption, an asymbolia, to which, it seems, it would be impossible to remain faithful. In focusing on the various kinds of infidelities that become sites of ethical contention between the two opposing principles of translatability and untranslatability, I seek to revise our modes of reading and to devise a subversive method of approaching translations of the Armenian genocide that raises levels of awareness—

both of others' practices and our own. To that end, I examine in the following chapters the various kinds of texts and translations that have conditioned the understanding of the Armenian genocide in the United States.

In chapter two, I explore how ideological interests and affiliations, literary norms, and other factors have conditioned the translation and representation of trauma in testimonial accounts such as Mabel Elliott's *Beginning Again at Ararat* (1924), Zabel Yesayan's *Among the Ruins* (1911) and Arshaluys Mardiganian's *Ravished Armenia* (1918). I analyze how the experience of the Armenian genocide, in Elliott's translation of events, acquires a tone of optimism that signals a future-oriented renewal, while constructing ethnocentric national identities of both the translated and translating cultures. By contrast, Yesayan's translation of traumatic experience, I argue, preserves a sense of the other's alterity by foreignizing her own language. Finally, I demonstrate the ways in which the translation of Arshaluys Mardiganian's testimony—perhaps one of the most controversial cases in translation history—employed American abolitionist strategies to critique slavery and racism in the Ottoman Empire, while constructing a complex domesticating framework that sensationalized the cultural peculiarities of Mardiganian's story.

Chapter three undertakes an analysis of the role of American missions in the translation of the Armenian genocide. I examine how these mission institutions helped to publicize the genocide and bring it to international attention, while engaging in specific forms of domestication and discipline of both survivors and their stories. I subsequently explore the ways in which Micheline Aharonian Marcom's novel *The Daydreaming Boy* (2004) conveys traumatic survival through a "foreignizing" translation of the experience

of genocide orphans and problematizes missionary progressivism and its disciplinary ideology of “character building.” While Marcom’s text is written in English, I situate it in a “translation zone” to show how she interrogatively mediates, akin to William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, a history of silenced voices. I connect the experiences of the Armenian genocide and the American institution of slavery by exposing the disconnection between the experiences of what Marcom terms “the unclanned” and “official history” in the United States.

Given the unavoidability of translation in the production of diasporic literatures, such as the literature of the Armenian genocide, I contend in my final chapter that any engagement with this body of literature calls for a critical analysis of the role of translation. I argue for the necessity of a translational approach to the study of the literature of the Armenian genocide in global and comparative literature classrooms on several levels. First, a text has to be recognized as a site of verbal translation or the replacement of the foreign discourse of the catastrophic experience with an intelligible language. Second, it is imperative to explore the text as a site of intralingual translation, which often entails euphemizing expressions. And finally, the text needs to be examined as a site of interlingual translation, or translation proper. I discuss and analyze the results of translation-centered pedagogical experiments in a course at Illinois State University in the United States and in a literary workshop in Yerevan, Armenia. Based on these analyses, I offer approaches for rethinking the design of literature courses and syllabi in a way that requires a double orientation, encompassing the experience of both a foreign culture, and the seemingly “familiar” culture that translates it.

## CHAPTER II

### TESTIMONY: THE EXPERIENCE AND ITS TRANSLATIONS IN MABEL ELLIOTT, ZABEL YESAYAN, AND ARSHALUYS MARDIGANIAN

#### Introduction

Traumatic events pose multiple challenges to both narration and translation. And yet testimony has been instrumental in reconstructing the unrepresentable realities of unimaginable occurrences. Writing about Holocaust testimonies and their contested place in history (and, specifically, responding to historians' claims of their empirical unreliability), Dominick LaCapra argues that testimonies are significant in the attempt to understand traumatic experience and its aftermath for reasons other than for the derivation of purely documentary knowledge (86-91). Testimonial narrative, even though always mediated, lays bare the mechanisms of traumatic memory and its lapses, as it exposes what Judith Herman has called the "dialectic of trauma"—"the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them" (1). Describing the nature of traumatic memory and the distortions, disguises, and other permutations it undergoes when translated into narrative (as well as the mechanisms of repression, denial, dissociation, and compulsive repetition it may condition), LaCapra acknowledges that:

Traumatic *Dasein* haunts or possesses the self, is acted out or compulsively repeated and may not be adequately symbolized or accessible in language, at least in any critically mediated, controlled, self-reflexive manner. Words may be



uttered but seem to repeat what was said then and function as speech acts wherein speech itself is possessed or haunted by the past and acts as reenactment or an acting out. (90)

Language nonetheless becomes a critical device for translating and working through the trauma. Writing from a clinical standpoint, Judith Herman stresses that the work of therapists is geared predominantly toward helping survivors verbalize their experience in symbolic terms.<sup>1</sup> From the standpoint of literary theory, LaCapra explains that language functions to provide a measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective, which then initiates the arduous process of working through the trauma. This process, as LaCapra argues, may “never bring full transcendence of acting out (or being haunted by revenants and reliving the past in its shattered intensity)” but it may enable “processes of judgment and at least limited liability and ethically responsible agency” (90).

In this chapter, I contribute to the discussion through an analysis of the images, characterizations, and discursive choices made by those who have translated the testimony of the Armenian genocide, and the effects that those choices have had on the (re)construction of a collective trauma. For, as I have established earlier, the symbolic representation of trauma, or what Jeffrey Alexander calls the “trauma process,” is enacted through various (often simultaneous) kinds of translation, among them, verbal translation, where the traumatic experience is put into words by survivors themselves or witnesses, intralingual translation or the euphemization of expressions within the same linguistic system, and translation proper.

While scholarship on the Armenian genocide has mainly focused on the reconstruction and definitions of the original event or on the formation of Armenian

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<sup>1</sup> See Herman, Ch. 9.

diasporic identities, my focus, by contrast, shifts to what André Lefevere has called the “refractions” of the event, found in the different kinds of translation described above or in less obvious forms of commentary, historiography, or in any media that involve interpretation and influence perception. For example, I analyze how American medical doctor Mabel Elliott’s discursive choices in her chronicle *Beginning Again at Ararat* (1924) domesticate—i.e., formulate in domestic terms and ideologies—the foreign experience of the Armenian genocide. I juxtapose her domesticating translation of testimonies to Ottoman-Armenian novelist Zabel Yesayan’s foreignizing method of verbal translation in *Among the Ruins* (1911). Yesayan, I argue, employs a genre of nonfiction, heretofore foreign to her oeuvre, and “improper” use of ellipses to faithfully translate the foreignness of the traumatic experience. Finally, I turn to Arshaluys Mardiganian’s testimony *Ravished Armenia* (1918) to locate and analyze the various domesticating strategies used to persuasively translate the trauma caused by the genocide. Perceiving translation as a virtual site where negotiations are eternally open, the closure of the dialectic eternally deferred, I address here the possibilities of reconciling the loss of memory with the memory of loss.

#### Mabel Elliott: Accounts from the Scutari Rescue Home

Published by the Fleming H. Revell Company in 1924, Mabel Elliott’s *Beginning Again at Ararat* is a first-hand account of the Kemalist war, the siege of Marash, and Elliott’s exodus with thousands of Ottoman Armenians to Soviet Armenia in 1921, where she helped set up hospitals and orphanages.<sup>2</sup> It is an account of a selfless physician who,

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<sup>2</sup> Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s War of Independence between 1919 and 1923 was a nationalist movement to establish the Republic of Turkey and it was aimed against the partitioning of Turkey by the Allies after

at the risk of losing her own life, helped save thousands from destruction and played a critical role in rebuilding the lives of orphaned children. While *Beginning Again* has been an important source for understanding the extent of devastation and the relief work involved in saving the victims of the genocide, the account is channeled through American missionary discourse, I argue, constructs a mythical “Orient” and an equally illusive “America.”

Framed as an Homeric odyssey, Elliott’s narrative is first introduced by the Commissioner for the American Red Cross, John H. Finley, as a “story of wandering and suffering after a world war” (4), in which World War I is compared to the Trojan War, and, oddly, the exiles from Asia Minor to Odysseus. Finley makes use of these epic images in order to introduce the foreignness of the Armenian story to the reader through familiar textual signs: the reality of the modern “tragic story” that unfolds in *Beginning Again* is associated with the fictional “halls of Circe” and the ancient “caves of Calypso.” Despite the egregious differences between the adventures of Odysseus and the forced death marches of Armenians, the readers are nonetheless prompted to think of them in parallel terms, in a manner that maps the real experience onto the register of fiction, i.e., a fantastical adventure with fictional characters happening in an inconceivably distant place. Furthermore, the introduction (as well as the narrative itself) is replete with references to another canonical text—the Bible. “Ararat,” writes Finley, “is more than the name of a mountain in the geography of Genesis. It stands in the geography of Geneva and Lausanne sharply against the background of Noah and Prometheus, as real and as

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World War I. However the movement was also aimed against the remaining Greek, Assyrian, and Armenian citizens, which culminated in the 1922 massacres of Smyrna where thousands of Greeks and Armenians were annihilated by Atatürk’s troops. As Mark H. Ward of Near East Relief, who was stationed in Harput after the armistice, reported in *The Times* on June 8, 1922, “The Turkish policy is extermination of these Christian minorities.”

imposing as Mont Blanc. . . . Political orologists have a good reason to look upon it as the centre of the earth's present-day problems" (4). Finley here alludes to the Geneva Conventions of 1864 and 1906 that established the standards of international law for humanitarian treatment of war victims and to the peace treaty signed in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1923, thus using biblical imagery to convey political messages. Using coded language in the wartime period was by no means unusual, as most correspondences, especially that of the foreign missionaries stationed in Turkey, were censored by the Turkish government. To subvert the constraints of censorship, missionaries devised strategies to improve communication with the outside world. According to Susan Billington Harper, for example, they utilized "references to past experiences and to commonly recognized biblical and literary figures in order to pass news of death to worried friends outside" (225). However once the persecutions became more systematic and large-scale, the cryptic language used in the chaotic days leading up to the deportation was abandoned and, by 1919, as Harper explains, descriptions of the events "no longer allow[ed] much ambiguity as to the genocidal plan and purpose behind the deportations" (234). Thus the references employed in *Beginning Again* were subordinated to a different kind of ideological regulation, one that was perhaps consistent with the expectations and considerations of Elliott's American publisher.

Founded in 1870 and currently a division of Baker Publishing Group, the Fleming H. Revell Company was one of the most significant publishers and patrons of evangelical texts in the United States and was known for publishing the works of American missionaries stationed abroad. The company was established by Dwight Lyman Moody, a youth evangelist in Chicago, and his brother-in-law Revell who "saw the need for

practical books that would help bring the Christian faith to everyday life.”<sup>3</sup> Among other texts, the press published the seminal works of James Barton, the Foreign Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, who subsequently became the chairman of the Near East Relief, founded by the American Board in 1915 and the same organization that recruited Elliott to work in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> *Beginning Again* was written and published as part of this discursive network and operated within the visions and parameters set by the Fleming H. Revell Company and, ultimately, the American Board for Foreign Missions, which dominated the relief effort and functioned within the framework of calculated pragmatism and Christian propaganda.

Following Finley’s introduction to *Beginning Again*, Grace N. Kimball, then President of the Medical Women’s National Association, contributed a “Note of Appreciation,” in which she compares Mabel Elliott to another celebrated figure, the English nurse and writer Florence Nightingale, who, like Elliott, wrote the annals of a war—the Crimean war in Nightingale’s case. The realities of the Ottoman Armenians, three-fourths of whom had been decimated by 1924, were historically and politically different from the realities of the wounded British soldiers of the Crimean war. Elliott’s mission might have been more aptly compared to the work of her compatriot Clara Barton, who had traveled to the Ottoman Empire in 1896 as part of the first American International Red Cross campaign to aid the Armenian survivors of the Hamidian

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<sup>3</sup> From the publisher’s website: “The History of Fleming H. Revell,” <[www.revellbooks.com](http://www.revellbooks.com)>, accessed on February 3, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> The American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, renamed to Near East Relief in 1919, provided assistance to Armenians and other Christian minorities in Ottoman Turkey during World War I and its aftermath. It was the only foreign agency allowed to operate in the Caucasus after the Sovietization of the region. NER left Armenia and the seventeen thousand children in its care in 1929, after being expelled by the Soviet government.

massacres.<sup>5</sup> This comparison would have been only reasonable, because Kimball herself had been a missionary physician in the Armenian quarter of Van during the Hamidian massacres and was part of the American relief network. But oddly, neither Kimball's work in Van, nor Clara Barton's campaign are ever mentioned in *Beginning Again*. One of the reasons for this bizarre omission might be that *Beginning Again* was written at a time when the trials of the Turkish leaders responsible for the Armenian massacres had been abandoned, the Allied forces, faced with the Kemalist takeover of Turkey, had resigned, the Mandate for Armenia had failed, and it became politically advantageous to redirect the reader's attention from the massacres to reconstruction. Mentioning the fact that Elliott was part of the same international relief network as Barton and Kimball would have underscored the massacres as an organized program of annihilation, which could have been detrimental at a time when the United States was initiating a new foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Voting against the proposed War Crimes Commission at the Peace Conference in Paris, American statesmen were eager to reconcile the differences with their Turkish counterparts and embark on a new policy geared to promoting American business interests.<sup>6</sup>

The comparative gestures in the prefatory notes, as innocent as they might seem, construct the landscape or what Lefevere has called the "conceptual and textual grids" of a particular text:

An educated member of any culture in the West, for instance (as we might describe someone who has more or less successfully survived the socialization process), will know that certain texts are supposed to contain certain markers

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<sup>5</sup> See Peter Balakian Ch. 7; Clara Barton 275-356; Curti 120-33.

<sup>6</sup> See Peter Balakian 363-72.

designed to elicit certain reactions on the reader's part, and that the success of communication depends on both the writer and the reader of the text agreeing to play their assigned parts in connection with those markers. The writer is supposed to put them in, the reader is supposed to recognize them. ("Composing the Other" 76)

The markers that construct the textual grid of Elliott's narrative are derived from the Western canon and anything outside of this grid is relegated to the foreign, which is always constructed in relation to the domestic or the familiar and, according to Rebecca Saunders, is "outside of proper meaning" ("Agony and Allegory" 219). Banishing atrocities from the boundaries of the familiar, Elliott constructs the events and anything connected to those events as "*unfamiliar, uncanny, unnatural, unauthorized, incomprehensible, inappropriate, improper*" (Saunders, "Agony and Allegory" 218). The conceptual grid that produced the realities of Armenian survivors after the armistice, further constructed the stage of action as a foreign place, as suggested by the title of Elliott's second chapter, "Asia the Incomprehensible." The chapter opens with a description of the domes and minarets of Constantinople "left behind in Europe" and Elliott's arrival in Scutari, the "large Asiatic suburb of Constantinople, which nonetheless appears less Asiatic than the city of which it is a suburb" (20).<sup>7</sup> And yet it was in Scutari, Elliott continues, "in the antiseptic cleanliness of a modern operating room, that I was given my first glimpse of Asia, the real Asia, beneath its outward colour" (20). Here, in the Scutari Rescue Home, Elliott, as Medical Director of the Near East Relief, was to examine and treat one hundred and fifty Armenian girls rescued from Turkish harems by

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<sup>7</sup> Scutari(on) was the medieval Greek name for the district of Istanbul now known as Üsküdar, located on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus.



the British forces.<sup>8</sup> As she spent hours upon hours listening to the survivors and helping them verbalize their experiences, Elliott recorded some of the testimonies in her book, sometimes quoting directly, at other times paraphrasing, and making observations:

The things that I heard were unbelievable. A doctor sees more deeply into the abysses of human society than any other person except a priest, but I know only America. This was Asia, *strange, bestial, incomprehensible*. It was my first personal encounter with such things—the things that human beings can do, carelessly, without rancour, laughing, to other human beings. . . . We cannot grasp it, for there is no reason in it; the facts those girls told were like *revelations of the mind of a madman*” (my emphasis, 21-22, 24).

My inquiry here is not about what the survivors told Elliott, as it would be quite impossible to recover the original (oral) interviews in Elliott’s consultation room, but rather how Elliott transcribed the testimonies, and the kinds of cultural markers she employed to form the conceptual and textual grids of *Beginning Again*. In both the passage above and elsewhere, Elliott rather explicitly constructs a discourse that separates the similar from the strange, the familiar from the foreign, the orderly from the chaotic, consistently treating foreignness as a deviation needing regulation, a wild terrain needing domestication. The conflation of Asia with strangeness, bestiality, and incomprehensibility affixes a negative marker onto the entire geographic region, thus designating it as beyond the “proper” Western mind, at the same time that it erases the difference between the victims and their executioners because they both inhabit the region. In various parts of the narrative, Western values or worldviews (“the Western

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of the rescue program administered by the special Commission of the League of Nations immediately after the armistice of 1918, see Watenpaugh.



world of stenographers' reports and way bills seemed to me more romantic") are consistently juxtaposed with Eastern ones ("than the East with its camel caravans and blue bead charms against the Evil Eye" 219). Not only were the stories of the girls from the Scutari Rescue Home "strange" in their taking "for granted a mingling of patriarchal laws and anarchy" that were "as foreign to our life as some story of conditions on Mars" (32), but "these people of Asia Minor" took for granted "a world of religious and racial hatreds" (33), something that Elliott claimed was alien to her society: "without thinking of it or questioning it, we take for granted an orderly organization of society with its mixing of many races in our cities and on our unguarded farms, arrival of letters, ringing of the telephone, church services of many creeds on peaceful Sunday mornings" (33-34). These portrayals of a contented, harmonious American society were, of course, illusory. They masked both the racial divisions of the era and functioned as propaganda to solidify a particular vision of both "the Orient" and "America." The misleading references to a uniform society effaced the lived experiences of black Americans, for example, who, during the Progressive Era, especially after the passage of Jim Crow laws and the emergence of the second Klan in 1915, had been systematically suffering racially motivated persecutions and, as a result, migrating *en masse* to the North only to encounter hostility and tensions with European immigrants. While showing the absolute madness provoked by the "Armenian policy" of the Ittihadist regime,<sup>9</sup> Elliott's comparison below further marks anything associated with "butchery" as opposed to "*our minds*":

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<sup>9</sup> In a conversation with American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, Turkish Minister of the Interior Mehmet Talaat was recorded saying: "I have asked you to come here so as to let you know that our Armenian policy is absolutely fixed and that nothing can change it. We will not have the Armenians anywhere in Anatolia" (*Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* 338).

We read of wholesale massacre ordered by a government, and whatever our horror, our minds picture something like an orderly butchery. But there was no organization, no orderliness, in Turkey; all the passions and policies and hatreds of millions of human beings were turned loose, unrestrained. (24)

Even so, Elliott goes on to tell the story of one of her patients, whose eye had been surgically mutilated by a Turkish doctor in order to punish and subdue her. The account, which Elliott repeats in shock, not only contradicts her construction of a “disorderly” butchery, but in fact testifies to the meticulousness and modernity of these atrocities. Elliott obviously condemns the Turkish barbarities, but she draws on the familiar and widely accepted discourse on “the Orient” as the place of the “unrestrained” and symptomatically depicts American society as ordered, dispassionate, restrained, and immune to “butchery.” Apparently Elliott’s familiarity with segregation and racially motivated crimes in the United States had become so naturalized that her perception of racism at home had lost its palpability. “As for me,” Elliott writes, “I could hear their stories only objectively; I had not yet seen massacre or slavery, and I could not remember to take for granted, as these girls did, that slavery and massacre are part of the *normal scheme of things, like thunderstorms*” (emphasis mine, 31).

And yet none of these experiences were “normal” or “natural” for the girls at the Scutari Home because, as Elliott’s records make clear, the trauma of the girls was manifested in erratic, dissociative, apparently “mad” behavior, as “for the first time their reticence was disturbed, necessarily, by professional questions, and when they had begun to speak it was as though they could not stop” (21). Describing the “temperament” of the girls as they testified to the terrors they had gone through, Elliott notes how “[s]ome sat

quietly, with folded hands, talking on and on in a low voice, growing whiter and whiter until there was no blood in their lips,” while “[o]thers became excited, little by little lost their self-control, and ended screaming and sobbing” (22). Clearly, in their testimonies, the girls from the Scutari Home were reliving the traumatic events in the act of retelling and were possessed by the past, which according to LaCapra is the most difficult part of testimony for the survivor, the interviewer, and the audience of testimonies (97).

However, the ethnographic language that Elliott employs to record and also *speak for* her patients transmits an objectively controlled voice, which, in its attempt to represent traumatic experience disciplines, and, to an extent, erases the “madness” of the occurrences. Elliott’s translation of the genocide, however powerful, maintained the familiar textual and conceptual grids of the target-language culture and, as a result, largely lost the meaning of the new and unrestrained terror lurking in both the original trauma and the testimonies of those who experienced it.

### The Ellipsis in Zabel Yesayan

Writing approximately a decade before Mabel Elliott, Ottoman-Armenian writer Zabel Yesayan, who, incidentally, was born in Scutari, produced one of the most compelling narratives on the Armenian massacres in Cilicia before the eruption of World War I, which she titled *Averagnerun mej* [Among the Ruins, 1911].<sup>10</sup> In June 1909, Yesayan traveled to Cilicia as a member of a delegation sent by the Armenian Patriarchate in Constantinople to bear witness to the destruction, assess the losses, and provide immediate material aid to the survivors. As literary critic Rubina Perroomian

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<sup>10</sup> A very short segment of this book (Chapters 2 and 3, together with excerpts from Chapter 4) was translated by Geoffrey Goshgarian in Marc Nichanian’s *Writers of Disaster*. The translation here is mine.

notes in *Literary Responses to Catastrophe*, the literature of catastrophe produced by Yesayan was far removed from her earlier works, which were predominantly works of fiction.<sup>11</sup> Like Elliot's *Beginning Again*, Yesayan's *Among the Ruins* is a first-person account that incorporates survivor testimony taken in the form of interviews and provides the reader with comments and observations. However, as the title suggests, the tone of Yesayan's narrative is somber, yet charged with emotion, echoing back as if from the ruins of Armenian homes and churches and the human remnants that she encountered in Cilicia in the aftermath of the massacres. Yesayan too invokes the concept of foreignness, but here it functions as an estrangement from herself and, in a larger sense—a humanity that has become bereft of its own humanity, a citizenry divested of empathy. She writes in the preface: "My task then is to let all our people, as well as our [Turkish] compatriots, who have remained strangers to our intuition and our pain, partake in [*haghordakits ēnel*] the infinite suffering through which I lived during these three dark months" (8).<sup>12</sup>

Yesayan suggests here that reconciliation between Armenians and Turks can take place only through the recognition of the trauma caused by what she calls "the catastrophe" and through a joint work of mourning. However, she signals in the preface and throughout the book that mourning seems impossible as she is confronted with "the perverse gaze of the criminals who remain unpunished" (7). This criminal gaze refutes the traumatic reality

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<sup>11</sup> Yesayan uses the word *aghed* [catastrophe] to designate the massacres. The term "genocide" was coined later by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish lawyer of Jewish descent, who used it for the first time in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944), in which he defined genocide as a subject of international law and which later became the blueprint for the UN's Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide on December 9, 1948. The term was directly connected to the Armenian case, as Lemkin had studied and was influenced by Soghomon Tehlirian's trial in Berlin. In a 1949 CBS interview with Quincy Howe, Lemkin stated: "I became interested in genocide because it happened so many times . . . It happened to the Armenians, after Armenians Hitler took action."

<sup>12</sup> While Yesayan was not physically present during the massacres of 1909, she nonetheless writes "through which I lived" [*abretsa*] rather than "witnessed," by which she brings herself closer to the experience of trauma, and uncannily foretells the course of her own fate in 1915, when she narrowly escapes arrest and deportation.

and places an interdiction on mourning through the nonrecognition of the deaths, their significance, and the bereavement they have caused. As Herman writes, “After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on” (8). Historically, both Abdul Hamid who had incited the massacres of 1894-96 and the new government of the Young Turk Party that took part in the Cilician massacres of 1909 maintained a policy of denial and refusal of accountability. Ironically, Yesayan was only writing of the Cilician massacres, the atrocities of which would be repeated more methodically and on a much larger scale after the publication of her book and which Elliot would record between 1919 and 1924. The proximity and modernity of the place of catastrophe in Yesayan are in sharp contrast to the conceptually remote and historically antiquated “Asia” in Elliott. While *Beginning Again* keeps the reader at a comfortable distance, *Among the Ruins* moves the reader closer to the foreignness of the occurrences and of the trauma itself. Employing a “foreignizing” method of verbal translation, Yesayan abstains from familiar references or writing practices, starting with the very genre of the text. She abandons fiction in order to explore a terrain that is foreign to her—the realm of nonfiction.

The first chapter, titled “To Cilicia,” opens with a description of the night before the delegation’s arrival at Mersin: “The more we approached the threshold of catastrophe, the more reality escaped my perception and I earnestly couldn’t believe that tomorrow morning we would arrive in Mersin. Adana . . . Cilicia . . . ! For weeks those names had been lodged in a corner of our mind—there was an open wound and when you touched it, your whole being shuddered with a throbbing pain” (10). Besides being the literal

translation of the Greek word *τραῦμα*, the trope of the wound invokes Freud's conception of psychical trauma as a *Kränkung*, an injury or mortification—"a foreign body" within one's mind. The opening in Yesayan's testimony is suggestive of an arrival, which strangely resembles a flight *from* a traumatic landscape, a desire to postpone witnessing of the catastrophe, and hence a deferral of the encounter with trauma. For the descriptions that follow this statement are nothing if not uncanny in the Freudian sense—Yesayan is filled both with an "impatience" (11) to see and witness the ruins after the catastrophe and a foreboding sense of horror, which she paradoxically anticipates, as though it were something already familiar. For her, Cilicia, former home to many Armenians, has now acquired a new quality of unhomeliness: both literally—homes have been destroyed, families have been murdered, and figuratively the name Cilicia is now metonymically associated with trauma. Yesayan's ambivalent anticipation of her encounter with the survivors, who had suffered unspeakable atrocities, is also conditioned by a presentiment of the inevitability, indeed, impossibility of escaping from the catastrophe that would engulf all of Anatolia in 1915.

One of the most striking features of Yesayan's text is its repetitious interruption by ellipses, especially in passages where the subject matter becomes too overwhelming to translate into language. Structurally, the ellipses function on three levels: first, they reproduce the linguistic paralysis of the interviewees, whose accounts Yesayan quotes directly: "We laid his little body on this very table . . . it was completely unrecognizable from the injuries, but the mother recognized it . . . gazing, perplexed and bewildered, at her child . . ." (49). Second, they are employed by Yesayan as narrator to describe the emotions of others: "She fell silent for a moment and her lips twisted in a peculiar

grimace . . . indescribable memories were passing through her mind . . .” (49). And third, they are used by Yesayan the witness to express her own overwhelming emotion: “And feeling shame when thinking of those who are loved and happy in the world, as if blaming myself for the sorrow of this child, I wept, gripped by an inconsolable pain . . .” (67). Page after page the ellipses repeat, afflicting and disrupting the sentences with omissions, deficient utterances, caesuras, in other words, testifying to the inadequacy of language to translate the affect, and to reconstruct the experience, of trauma.

From time to time Yesayan returns to the pervasive and shameless gaze of those who had committed the crimes and to the shame of the survivors who were called on to testify to their own dehumanization. In *The Historiographic Perversion*, Marc Nichanian analyzes testimony as the confession of shame, proposing that “shame itself is its own testimony” (118). Here too one is confronted with strangeness, a strangely intimate emotion, when one is asked to reveal a wound, to show it in public: “One can try to say of what one is ashamed, but shame itself, how could one say it, communicate it verbally? It can come to the surface in the form of a blushing, a terror. It can invade me, seize me, no longer leave me” (Nichanian 118). Yesayan describes such a scene in her fourth chapter on the orphans, in which she narrates her encounter with an eight-year old girl who had been raped. Feeling utterly “bewildered and shamed,” Yesayan holds the child’s hand “without asking any questions” (41). Asking the girl for a testimony is, for Yesayan, “something as monstrous as complicity in the crime” (41). The discourse of testimony, as Nichanian argues, is the discourse of the executioner defying the victim to prove her trauma, over and over again, only to refute it. Yesayan as witness declares that we cannot exclude this child from humanity and from truth if she cannot produce words to testify;



there is no need to repeat the details, one only need to look into the eyes of the child to see her suffering:

Oh, the slight, pain stricken . . . forsaken creature! Where in that little body had the terrible sorrow made its nest? How her muscles were still throbbing, nerve by nerve, with revolt at the abuse that she had suffered . . .

A stupefying heat surged into my brain.

—*Mother . . . ! Mother . . . !*

Was it her, who enunciated that supreme call, like the other orphans, who often sought their mothers when they were in pain or homesick? Or was it my voice uttering those words? I do not know. I took her in my arms, rocking her weightless body on my knees, so that in my frantic sorrow, she might at least momentarily forget her own, forget herself . . . (my translation, 43-44)

The testimony of the girl is literally inaudible and illegible here. Yesayan breaks the boundaries between self and other in order to step outside of herself and to show unconditional empathy in an instance of what Kaja Silverman, following Max Scheler, has called “heteropathic identification” (Silverman 22).<sup>13</sup> In this shared moment of solemnity, Yesayan offers her own voice to mourn for the girl’s loss, so “she might at least momentarily forget” that which is impossible to describe or transcribe. Yesayan, in other words, testifies to the impossibility of testifying in language. She does not attempt to translate the experience into language, and in fact reinforces or signals the gap between

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Nature of Sympathy*, the German philosopher Max Scheler differentiates two mutually exclusive kinds of identification, “idiopathic,” which effects through a “total eclipse and absorption of another self by one’s own” (18) and “heteropathic,” where “‘I’ (the formal subject) am so overwhelmed and hypnotically bound and fettered by the other ‘I’ (the concrete individual), that my formal status as a subject is usurped by the other’s personality, with all *its* characteristic aspects; in such a case, I live, not in ‘myself’, but entirely in ‘him’, the other person—(in and through him, as it were)” (19).



experience and language by an excess of ellipses—the nonverbal manifestations of trauma that impede the flow of the narrative. This excess betrays the difficulty or even impossibility of verbal translation, marking a limit that has been reached in language.

Perhaps it is due to the “inappropriateness” of Yesayan’s excess that the ellipses have mostly been removed in Geoffrey Goshgarian’s English translation (of three chapters that appear in Nichanian’s *Writers of Disaster*). The eighteen ellipses in Chapter 2, “Among the Ruins,” have been reduced to a mere six; the thirty-five in Chapter 3, “The Church Service,” are cut down to five; while of a hundred and sixty ellipses in Chapter 4, “The Orphans,” only thirty-eight remain.<sup>14</sup>

The ellipses in Yesayan act as the brittle line between reason and unreason, humanity and bestiality, life and death, crossed and re-crossed by those who perpetrated the crimes and those who suffered them. The mad frenzy of the uniformed and disciplined Turkish soldiers who used their bayonets to mutilate the bodies of the dead is juxtaposed with the madness of mothers who witnessed the death of their own children. The bestiality of the executioners is juxtaposed with the reduction of victims, especially women and children, to the state of animals. The life granted to a group of orphans under the care of a foreign consulate is juxtaposed with the deathliness of those very same children. By marking this line, Yesayan articulates the madness brought by the “Armenian policy”—the plot to exterminate all members of the group regardless of age, gender, or political affiliation. This madness is total; it invades, it cannot be contained or quarantined, it affects the victim and witness alike, as in the case of Yesayan’s experience in the presence of the eight-year-old survivor.

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<sup>14</sup> Chapter 4 has been translated partially and the number of ellipses here refers to those passages only.

Yesayan herself was on the verge of a nervous breakdown in 1915, when, after escaping her own arrest and fleeing from Constantinople to Baku, she was yet again gathering testimonies, while at the same time refusing to write her own account. She spent ten to twelve hours a day reading and classifying testimonies of massacre, rape and other extreme forms of atrocity, and translating them into French for the French press. On 25 November 1916, Yesayan wrote in a letter to her friend, the editor Arshag Chobanian: “My nerves are so agitated, that if I do not appeal to all the forces of my will I will go mad. I work ceaselessly not to have the time to think” (*Namakner* 137). In February 1917, in a monthly magazine called *Gorts*, she published the testimony of Haig Toroyan, who had been employed as an interpreter for a German officer and who had passed through all the deportation camps in Ras-ul-Ain, Meskene, Rakka, and Der Zor. The German officer, who had been taking photographs of the deportation camps along the way succumbs to madness and commits suicide. The discourse of madness is consistently present in testimonies, if only as something nonliteral, nonverbal, or improper as in the case of Yesayan’s ellipses that thwart the linear progression and continuity of the narrative. In her translation of the catastrophe, Yesayan ventures into foreign territory in her choice of genre and foreignizes expository language through her “inappropriate” and excessive use of ellipses—the image of the unspeakable. Her experimentation and innovative use of language, seeking to match the expressive stresses of the traumatic experience, testifies to Yesayan’s resistance to and subversion of the interdiction of mourning and the logic of denial.

The texts discussed in the previous two sections mediate the voices of hundreds of survivors, whose translations of the catastrophe are never identical, as the traumatic experience is the site of various semantic possibilities that are fixed only provisionally in any verbal translation. The testimony that was published as *Ravished Armenia* in 1918 is a unique text that centers on the experience of one survivor, Arshaluys Mardiganian. Unlike Elliott's and Yesayan's texts, it gives a name and a face to the survivor who until then had mostly remained unidentified. A complex palimpsest of translations, Mardiganian's oral testimony in Armenian was translated into English by an uncredited interpreter, transcribed by the screenwriter Harvey Gates and published as a book, which was soon after adapted into a silent film, *Auction of Souls* (1919), scripted by Nora Waln and directed by Oscar Apfel. Among other forms of domestication, *Ravished Armenia* employed missionary discourse as well as the genre of the American slave narrative, while the film sensationalized the story by exploiting the conventional Orientalisms of the time.<sup>15</sup>

Mardiganian's narrative was a unique testimony on genocide that was adapted for the silent screen—the first of a number of motion pictures made by the Near East Relief about Armenian survivors. 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 the New York-based screenwriter, Harvey Gates, who proposed to make her story into film. As

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<sup>15</sup> The original text was published in English language first as *Ravished Armenia* by Kingfield Press in New York in 1918 and as *The Auction of Souls* in London by Odhams Press in 1919. It was retranslated into Armenian as *Hokineru achurte* [The Auction of Souls] by Martiros Kushakjian and published in 1965 in Beirut.

media scholar Leshu Torchin notes, the genocide occurred at a transitional point when visual technologies—the graphic magazine and film—were developing alongside a discourse of international human rights: “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 as set forth by such authorities as James Barton, then chairman of the Near East Relief, and following the humanist ideals of abolitionists who fought against slavery at home, Gates translated Mardiganian’s narrative using remarkably complex domesticating strategies. 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 text and the film were presented through sensationalized and exotic frames that intended to shock the audience as the following advertisement shows: “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.” It was, in fact, a horrifying account of a teenage girl who

had experienced extremely 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).<sup>16</sup>

Mardiganian barely spoke English when Gates set up headquarters at New York’s Lantham Hotel, and Gates didn’t know Armenian. In short oral installments, Mardiganian recounted her story in Armenian, which was simultaneously translated into English by an uncredited interpreter, and transcribed and edited by Gates. According to Nora Waln, the narration often had to be interrupted by “intervals of rest of several days, because her suffering had so unnerved her” (*Ravished Armenia* 28). 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). He introduced comparisons that set the narrative in a clearly Biblical landscape: “The plains across which I made my way that night were those which once formed the Garden of Eden, according to the teachings of the priests and our Sunday school books. . . . Among these same rocks through which I hurried along as fast as my strength would allow, Eve herself once had wandered” (195). Even the subtitle of the narrative, *The Story of Aurora*

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<sup>16</sup> Mardiganian is fourteen at the beginning of the narrative and turns sixteen at the end of the book, when she arrives in New York. She is seventeen when she is first interviewed by Nora Waln.

*Mardiganian, the Christian Girl Who Lived Through the Great Massacres*, functioned as part of the campaign waged in the Christian register, as it framed the massacres in the light of religious warfare and martyrdom.

According to Barton, who authored seminal introductory studies that later became textbooks on world 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 argued in *Orientalism*, these first missionary institutions—the presses, schools, universities, hospitals, and later the orphanages of World War I—were imperialist in character, supported by the United States government, and 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 organized around the Armenian crisis between 1915 and 1923 brought together an emerging human rights framework with an established mode of missionary organizing.

Among the groups involved in the relief efforts to save the Armenians, according to Peter Balakian, were also suffragists and abolitionists, and their descendents such as Alice Stone Blackwell and William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., who started a New England movement called “Friends of Armenia,” which was presided over by Julia Ward Howe.<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the translation of Mardiganian’s story incorporated elements

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<sup>17</sup> See Peter Balakian 17-33, 93-102.

of this newly emerging international human rights framework. When *Ravished Armenia* was published in 1918, many American readers were familiar with the testimonies of former African American slaves, which, 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.<sup>18</sup> Most often these testimonies were orally dictated by a former slave and transcribed by a second person, as in the case of Mardiganian's testimony. 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 s/he transcribed the narrative in first-person, following the genre of autobiography and simultaneously constructing a unique form of abolitionist literature. The new interest and revival of this genre by Gates was arguably spurred on by the increasing violence of Jim Crow culture between 1919 and 1924.<sup>19</sup> It is quite possible that by incorporating conventional structural elements from the slave narrative to convey Mardiganian's story, Gates was implicitly responding to racism in America. And he was certainly drawing on a familiar American discourse through which the story of Mardiganian would be easily relatable and condemnable.

The conventional slave narrative, according to William L. Andrews, contained prefatory or appended messages by white abolitionists attesting to the reliability and good character of the narrator and calling attention to what the narrative revealed about the moral abominations of slavery. The narrator customarily gave a detailed account of the

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<sup>18</sup> See Blassingame xviii–xxi.

<sup>19</sup> 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* (1915).



extreme conditions of slavery including physical, intellectual, and spiritual deprivations, described the advent of a personal crisis, and, subsequently, an arduous quest for freedom that climaxed in the former slave's arrival in the North (Andrews 16). Although the prefatory attestations aimed to legitimize the narrative, they also had the effect of trivializing the narrator's *ethos*, diminishing him or her to the status of a child in need of a paternalistic figure to testify on his or her behalf. Similarly, Gates presents Mardiganian as a little girl, incapable of self-articulation and in need of male authorities to verify her experience, even though she was seventeen at the time of the interviews: "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; to Dr. Clarence Ussher, of whom Aurora speaks in her story, and who witnessed the massacres at Van; and to Dr. MacCallum, who rescued Aurora at Erzeroum and made possible her coming to America" (25). The statement verifying the truth of "these amazing stories" actually did quite the opposite, casting doubt on the veracity and reality of Mardiganian's experience and inadvertently undermining her testimony. 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, adversities during the death marches, her 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 American audiences and at the same time protect them from the explicit barbarities present on practically every page of Mardiganian's story, Gates employed various intralingual translations—euphemistic terms—such as “ravished,” “outraged,” or “betrothed” to signal acts of rape and 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.”<sup>20</sup> Like Jacobs's narrative that employed intralingual translations such as “wrongs,” “degradation,” or “vices” of slavery to refer to sexual violence, censoring the explicitness of the material, *Ravished Armenia* too was modeled to fit fluently into the codes and taboos of American culture.

While the text tried to sanitize the brutalities of the Turkish gendarmerie, the film “Auction of Souls” promised a sensational exposé of sexual transgression, which objectified women and girls and trivialized the gravity of the crimes committed against them. For example, it was promoted with the following titillating headlines: “[*Auction of Souls*] to show real harems”; “With other naked girls, pretty Aurora Mardiganian was sold for eighty-five cents” (Slide 10). Clearly, the film was focused less on the human crisis and more on the Orientalist desire to get a glimpse inside “real harems” and witness “Muslim barbarity.” Both the narrative and the film downplayed the crimes committed by the Turkish government, which utilized the empire's highly efficient war machine to annihilate its own citizens, and concluded with spiritually uplifting messages that

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<sup>20</sup> See Greeson 277-78.

America had undertaken the responsibility of saving the remnants of the Armenian people. This was perhaps one of the reasons why Mardiganian's narrative was successfully received not only by supporters of the Near East Relief, but also by New York society members, American industrialists, diplomats and senators, members of the peace and feminist movements. According to Slide, as popular reading matter, the book had widespread distribution in the United States and while no numbers are available for the first printing, a reprint in 1934 boasted a circulation of 360,000 copies.<sup>21</sup>

The success of Mardiganian's narrative was partly due to Gates's fluent translation that effaced the linguistic and stylistic peculiarities of Arshaluys's Armenian, as well as produced an effect that the translation was not in fact a translation, but the "original." And when Mardiganian was asked to play "Aurora" in *Auction of Souls*, she was in fact expected to copy a copy of herself—giving birth to an extraordinary icon—a likeness twice removed, a perfectly descriptive machine that offered all the signs of the unmediated real. Forced to re-experience her 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). To deliver a message about her own suffering and that of the Ottoman Armenians, Arshaluys had to *reconcile* herself to the processes of representation, and consciously relive a trauma from which she literally *recoiled* in pain. 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

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<sup>21</sup> In *Ravished Armenia*, Slide's Introduction 3.

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)

This clearly problematic incident of the broken ankle perhaps best exemplifies 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 or film, “begins with a liquidation of all referentials” (170)—which in this case was Arshaluys herself. The plains of the Dersim, across which Arshaluys walked and “which once formed the Garden of Eden” (195), moreover, were now 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 the actors in their costumes and red fezzes, she was shaken: “I thought, they fooled me. I thought they were going to give me to these Turks to finish my life” (9). Exhausted from the filming and later from endless public presentations, Arshaluys went through several nervous breakdowns, and was finally dismissed and sent to a boarding school, while her guardians hired seven “Aurora Mardiganian look-alikes” to present the film at future fundraising events.<sup>22</sup>

In a more interrogative engagement with Mardiganian’s story, Turkish filmmaker Kutluğ Ataman and Canadian-Armenian writer-director Atom Egoyan constructed a 2007 collaborative video installation in two adjoining rooms entitled *Auroras/Testimony*, which was shown at the Istanbul Biennale. Ataman’s video features the artist’s interview of his 105-year-old former nanny, Kevser Abla, a genocide survivor (Fig. 1), while

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<sup>22</sup> Both the text and the film generated funds for NER and its various relief stations abroad.

Egoyan's is a multi-panel video showing close-ups of seven different actresses, each giving her own carefully modulated performance of Mardiganian, all telling the same story (Fig. 2).<sup>23</sup> While Ataman's nanny is painstakingly trying to and cannot or does not want to remember a central event in her life, Egoyan's Auroras recite sentences from *Ravished Armenia*, sometimes completing each other's sentences and occasionally overlapping. 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). The video installation is a brilliant visualization of the multiple stages of translation that an experience undergoes, starting with verbal translation—the verbalization of the traumatic experience; intralingual translation—the introduction of euphemisms and replacement of signifiers with alternative signifiers of the same language; and translation proper—the replacement of signifiers of one language with signifiers of another language.



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

<sup>23</sup> *Abla* in Turkish means older sister or is a respectful title used when addressing a woman.

In this metatranslation of Mardiganian's story, the aim, then, becomes to show the construction and mediation of the singular, "authentic" voice of "Aurora" and the way in which it removed anything that was irreconcilably foreign. The illusion of an original voice that characterized the book and film conceals the loss of elements in Arshaluys's oral testimony, the choices made by the Armenian interpreters who translated for Gates, the American ideologies that were inscribed into the written narrative, the conventions that guided the creation of a film script, and the various voices directing how Arshaluys should behave on the stage. Egoyan's *Auroras* is constructed around a disparity, a difference; it interiorizes a dissimilitude akin to the Deleuzian simulacrum: "The simulacrum is not a 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 and ideologically constructed.

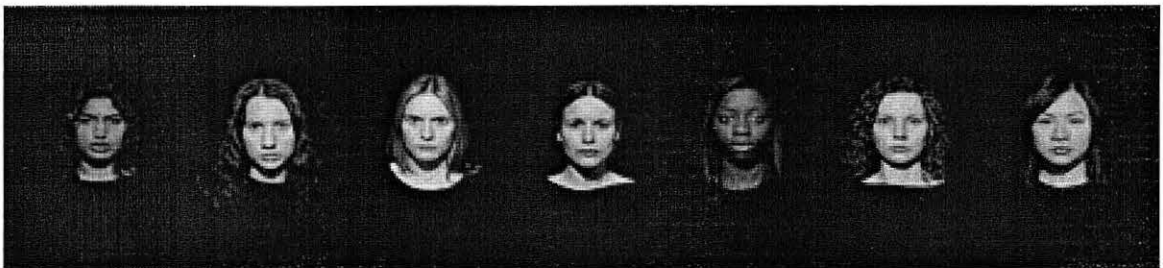


Figure 2. Still from Atom Egoyan's *Auroras*. Copyright Saatchi Magazine, June 2007.

The discord of voices redirects our attention to the fact that we don't have an "original" Aurora, and that Gates's Aurora produces 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 noniconic survivor bring to the fore the privileged position of Aurora's narrative. Ataman's subject articulates another dimension of testimony which, unlike the literal and seemingly familiar account in *Ravished Armenia*, cannot be coherently recalled or retold in fixed detail and, in fact, is irrecoverably lost to us. Kevser Ablā, as Ataman's interview suggests, is only but one of the many survivors who was unable to escape her captors and adopting the language (and ultimately the ideology) of the executioner, denied her own experience, altering the memory and anything connected to it. In the video, Ataman, who was told that his nanny was *Ermeni* or Armenian, and was cautioned, at the same time, by his mother never to speak about it, shows old family photographs to ask Kevser Ablā about the past. She remembers some pictures but others seem to confuse her. Questions about her Armenian background seem to be deliberately ignored: "God knows when I'll remember," she says amiably. In his artist's statement, Ataman says: "*Testimony* expresses my own darkness, with the voice of Kevser Ablā guiding me. It is about me as much as it is about her." 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 the interpretive grids 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.

## Conclusion

In translation—the process of reconstruction—experiences, languages, texts, and cultures always undergo some degree and form of exclusion, reduction, and inscription that reflect the cultural situation in the translating language. And while the dominant conception of language as transparent and utilitarian has effectively constructed translation as a simple communicative act, the analysis of the translation of traumatic experience in this study points to the invisible power relations that are at work in the process of replacing signs with other signs. If the experience of the Armenian genocide in Elliott's translation acquires a tone of progressive optimism that signals a future-oriented renewal, it also censors the heterogeneity of experience both in the foreign-language and target-language cultures. Yesayan's translation of traumatic experience, by contrast, akin to Ataman's and Egoyan's installation, preserves a sense of the other's alterity, while at the same time allowing that difference to alter her own language and sense of identity. Finally, the translation of Arshaluys Mardiganian's testimony, perhaps one of the most controversial cases in translation history, employed human rights and abolitionist discourses to condemn racism and slavery in the Ottoman Empire, while simultaneously fabricating a complex domesticating framework that commodified and sensationalized Mardiganian's experience.

## CHAPTER III

### (UN)DISCIPLINING TRAUMA

#### Introduction

At the end of World War I, thousands of Armenian survivors, mainly women and children, streamed out of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire into the cities of bordering countries in search of surviving family members and shelter.<sup>1</sup> Having marched for hundreds of miles on foot across the plains of Anatolia, prodded on by the Turkish gendarmes through bitter cold and insufferable heat, the remains of these tortured human caravans arrived starved and completely exhausted, often only to perish in the streets of foreign cities. Many children orphaned during the genocide, some held captive for years in camps or harems, as discussed in the previous chapter, were rescued by allied officers, relief workers, and missionaries, transported to safe zones and, under the threat of renewed massacres during the Kemalist war, transported from Turkey to special orphanages in the Caucasus and Eastern Mediterranean region. The administration of these orphanages was primarily carried out by the Near East Relief and supported by various organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation, the American Red Cross, and the Armenian General Benevolent Union. In addition to providing relief work, members of these organizations also played a critical role in recording the scenes of atrocity

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<sup>1</sup> Some paragraphs in this chapter are drawn directly from my article co-written with Rebecca Saunders, “(Un)Disciplining Traumatic Memory: Mission Orphanages and the Afterlife of Genocide in Micheline Aharonian Marcom’s *The Daydreaming Boy*” in *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 4.3 (2010).



through eyewitness reports and photography, which were crucial in documenting the massacres of Armenians and the aftermath of World War I. In *Beginning Again at Ararat*, Mabel Elliott described the human catastrophe in 1921 Alexandrapol (Gyumri) as having produced “the largest orphanage of the world”:

There can be no other sight like it in the world. The earth becomes alive with little white figures, as an anthill is alive with ants. Long lines of them cross and crisscross, linking the buildings together. Thousands of them scatter between the lines, each following his own direction over the rolling plain, a little individual lost in the mass-effect of tumultuous motion. . . . There were more than twenty-five thousand orphaned Armenian children in the three posts at Alexandrapol, and each one of them had a human story of terror and flight, of murder and death from exhaustion on refugee-marches, of being lost and cold and hungry and sick.

(Elliott 172-73)

Between 1916 and 1929, Near East Relief opened, staffed, and operated around two hundred orphanages as well as twenty shelters for women rescued from harems. By the early 1930s, more than one hundred thousand orphans had graduated from these institutions.<sup>2</sup> Micheline Aharonian Marcom’s novel *The Daydreaming Boy* (2004), which I discuss in the latter half of this chapter, depicts survival in one such orphanage and draws on first-person accounts of genocide survivors as well as on memoirs of the staff of mission orphanages.

One of the earliest accounts of the condition of the orphans appeared in Zabel Yesayan’s *Among the Ruins* (1911), a testimony that not only bore witness to the

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<sup>2</sup> For a description of the rescue program administered by the special Commission of the League of Nations immediately after the armistice of 1918, see Grabill 233; Watenpugh.

desperate plight of Armenian survivors, but also drew attention to the first missionary orphanages to house Armenian orphans from the Cilician massacres of 1909. By 1916, the few who were able to escape the infernal interior of Anatolia began publishing their first-person accounts of the genocide in Armenian papers and journals in Russia, Europe, and the Americas. A decade later, reports of the mission orphanages written by staff and administrators appeared, significant among them Elliott's *Beginning Again at Ararat* (1924) and James Barton's *Story of Near East Relief* (1930). However, it was not until much later that the critical perspective of adult survivors of the orphanages emerged in memoirs such as Andranik Zaroukian's *Men Without Childhood* (1955).<sup>3</sup>

The literature of the first generation of writers who lived through the Armenian genocide, most prolific among them being Yesayan and Hagop Oshagan (1883-1948), was marked by a discontinuity, namely, the untranslatability of the experience. Both Yesayan and Oshagan who, according to Marc Nichanian and Rubina Perroomian, intended to translate the experience of the catastrophe, couldn't bring themselves to write about the central event of their lives.<sup>4</sup> If Yesayan had been able to chronicle the destruction brought about by the Cilician massacres in *Among the Ruins*, she never wrote about her own experience of the genocide. As Oshagan wrote: "[Yesayan's] miraculous escape from Constantinople was all the inspiration she would need to formulate the outline of her novel. She did not write, as I myself did not write the novel, which was to cover events that were beyond any imagination" (qtd. in Perroomian 169). Oshagan, who had fled Turkey in 1922, began his novel *The Remnants* in 1931, which was to recount the events of the genocide. However he abandoned it after having written two volumes,

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<sup>3</sup> Translated into English and published only in 1985.

<sup>4</sup> See Nichanian, *Writers of Disaster*, 194-98, 228-33; Perroomian 168-71, 273-75.

“Through the Womb” and “Through Blood”; the projected third volume, “The Hell,” stops at the threshold of the 1915 deportations and Oshagan never returned to it (Perroomian 296). Among the most compelling of contemporary Armenian diaspora writers, Marcom assumes this legacy in a body of fiction that explores the painfully intimate, quotidian, and often obscure aftereffects of the genocide in the lives of survivors and their descendants.

*The Daydreaming Boy* renders life in a mission orphanage through the shattered memory of one of its former inmates, Vahé Tcheubjian, a “sad desperate boy who’s become a sad desperate man” (201). Middle-aged, married, and living in Beirut in the 1960s, Vahé struggles to smooth out the traumatic memories that progressively pucker the veneer of his middle-class life. However, the repressed returns in repetitive memory fragments of an orphanage called the “Bird’s Nest,” a disaffected marriage, and a disturbing fixation on the neighbor’s servant girl.<sup>5</sup> Through Vahé’s disruptive memories, Marcom portrays the disciplinary structure of the mission orphanage, which corresponds remarkably, I argue, to the kinds of regulatory mechanisms that Michel Foucault traces in schools, factories, the military, and the prison. I analyze the ways in which American missionary discourse, which I began to trace in the previous chapter, disciplined trauma and employed strategies aimed at smoothing out traumatic memory by translating it into a progressive narrative. These strategies, however, were not only unable to efface traumatic memory but often retraumatized the subjects in their charge. In my analysis of Marcom’s experimental linguistic and narrative techniques, which, I argue, perform traumatic

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<sup>5</sup> Marcom’s orphanage is modeled on the Bird’s Nest Orphanage, established and administered by Near East Relief from 1922 to 1928 in Jbeil, Lebanon (modern Byblos), and later purchased and operated by the Danish Women’s Missionary Workers Organization (Kvindelige Missions Arbejdere). Marcom draws on actual incidents described in Zaroukian’s autobiographical book *Men Without Childhood* (1955).

memory, I show how Marcom problematizes the discourse of domestication that assimilates trauma into a redemptive narrative. I further suggest that in her foreignizing translation of traumatic experience Marcom draws on literary portrayals of American historical traumas, such as the experience of slavery and its aftermath, depicted by such authors as William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, in order to mediate a new understanding of trauma—simultaneously Armenian and American. These intertextual gestures are critical for developing what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “a dialogic encounter,” encompassing the experience of both a foreign culture, and the seemingly “familiar” culture that translates it.<sup>6</sup> By drawing on Faulkner’s language of negation and indeterminacy in her translation of the memory of the Armenian genocide, Marcom activates the memory of American slavery and unsettles the comfortably sanitized sense of familiarity with a national trauma in the United States.

### The Mission Orphanage

The American orphanages that housed Armenian survivors were part of a larger missionary structure that had been put in place, improved, and perfected since the beginning of the nineteenth century. While the modern-day crisis of World War I demanded a new approach to the treatment of children who had witnessed extremely traumatic events, the methods and discourse that were employed to respond to the crisis were drawn from a structure that preceded it. I examine here the role of American missions in the translation of the Armenian genocide, which missionaries helped

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<sup>6</sup> In “Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff” (1970), Bakhtin contends that new semantic depth can be achieved only through an “outsideness.” A meaning, he argues, is revealed or acquires a new level of understanding only through an encounter with another, foreign meaning.

publicize and bring to international attention through specific forms of domestication and discipline.

The first Protestant missionaries had traveled to the Near East as early as the sixteenth century, but permanent efforts to institute a mission structure in the region began in 1810, when a chaplain of the British East India Company, Henry Martyn, journeyed from Tabriz to Erivan and from there to Kars and Erzerum in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>7</sup> That year also marked the founding of an organization called the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions by several seminarians from the Andover Theological Seminary in New England, who saw their task as the evangelization of the non-Christian people of the world. Shortly after Martyn's death during his mission to Tokat in 1812, two young American Board recruits, Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, arrived at Smyrna. The ideological motivation for this journey, according to missionary historian Joseph Grabill, was "moral renovation of the world—wars ceasing, every location having its school and church, every family its Bible readings and prayer" (5). After decades of work with Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire, the American Board gained an autonomous millet (confessional community) status for the Protestant Armenians in 1850 and formed the Protestant Armenian Church, thus becoming enmeshed in the millet structure of the Ottoman Empire (Grabill 15). The securing of the Protestant millet opened many doors, including the long desired evangelism among Syrian Arabs, and the American missions spread through Armenian and Syrian churches in Aintab, Sivas, Adana, Diyarbekir, Marash, Harput, Tarsus, and other cities. Attesting to the success of this missionary work, Thomas H. Norton, United States Consul at Harput and Smyrna wrote, "At present [in

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<sup>7</sup> The term "Near East" was used in the nineteenth century to encompass the Balkan and Caucasian areas, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire and its successor states.

1908] we see the map of Asiatic Turkey dotted with the stations and substations, the schools, hospitals and orphanages of the American Mission” (*Missionary and His Critics* 26). But as Grabill points out, this period also openly marked the ambitions of the missionaries to ideologically colonize and civilize, as they resisted cultural differences, for example, changing Armenian and Syrian songs to mandated Puritan hymnals and Presbyterian psalms. According to Grabill, “Armenians and Syrians were being indoctrinated perhaps more in Americanism than in a Christianity related to their own cultures” (18).

The domesticating discourse of the missions in the Ottoman Empire began with the “exploration and translation” of maps and languages (Barton, *Human Progress* 20), which foregrounded a problem-solving, task-oriented, progressive frame through which the massacres and genocide would be filtered. The tours of the first missionaries were “related in detail and with scientific accuracy” as they passed months “in the heart of that untamed and unknown section of Turkey called Kurdistan” (Barton, *Human Progress* 21). Later, in the early 1900s, the American missionaries in Turkey, like the modern doctors in the United States who, according to historian Robert H. Wiebe, “descended upon [American] cities and towns with a scientific gospel,” would lead “the world in translating modern medicine into public policy” (115). According to historian Suzanne Moranian, “[The missionaries’] progressive, philanthropic efforts incorporated state-of-the-art organizational skills with the ancient zealousness of the Gospel” (202). This missionary discourse, she argues, employed “a radical approach overseas to promote a traditional, if not conservative, domestic goal” (201).

The success of spreading Christianity as well as American policy globally enhanced the role of the missionaries in an increasingly secular and politically changing United States. They understood that power in the new urban, ethnically mixed, and industrial United States was being organized differently than it had been before, as the seemingly homogenous climate of the nineteenth century gave way to the cultural diversity of the twentieth. The foreign missionary movement was useful to the Protestants, according to Moranian, “as they sought rank and leverage in an industrial, urban America” (201) and the search for power at home came to depend, in part, on evangelical and humanitarian programs abroad.<sup>8</sup> Protestant missionaries propagated knowledge and developed their own reputation as specialists who “interpreted the world for many Americans” (Moranian 203). Due to their long-term missionary work in Turkey, fluency in languages, and connections to local governing bodies, the missionaries were unique as “couriers of knowledge” and the American public regarded them as the “most trustworthy experts on the Armenian Question” (Moranian 203). As professor of Near Eastern history at the University of Illinois Albert Howe Lybyer remarked in 1924, the missionaries “made a large proportion of our people familiar with events and conditions in the Near East” (qtd. in Moranian 205). Not only were they able to act as interpreters of foreign cultures and shape public opinion, but they also served as close advisors to those in the United States government. Quoting various renowned American figures in *The Missionary and His Critics*, James Barton emphasized the mutually beneficial relationships between missionary work and the American government, trade, tourism, journalism, and literature. The missionary discourse impacted the minds of both Americans and Armenians, all of whom participated, albeit differently, in the production

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<sup>8</sup> See Wiebe 233-36.



of a domesticated translation of the Armenian massacres and genocide for American audiences. The representation of the foreign experience of trauma was carried out in accordance with values and beliefs that were both disciplinary and civilizing in their nature. For indeed, missionary rhetoric and work, with their regulatory orientations, aimed to produce the kind of trained and docile bodies described by Foucault.<sup>9</sup>

As part of its “training” mechanism, the Near East Relief operated by the transformation of what Foucault calls “the confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities” (148). According to Barton, “The whole organization [of the orphanage system] functioned for the ultimate development of untutored, undisciplined child life into potential manhood and womanhood. . . . This was the task,” he wrote, “to which the relief workers devoted themselves: feeding the body back to normal, training the mind into ways of usefulness and building character for the purposes of life. The tragic past had to be effaced by new activities” (*Story* 220-21). He insisted that although discipline “was never military in rigidity nor oppressive to individual initiative,” it “was essential to organizational efficiency and as a corrective for years of homeless existence” (*Story* 222-23).<sup>10</sup>

The “tragic past” to which Barton euphemistically refers encompassed a range of personal encounters with extreme violence and death. Many of these children had undergone or witnessed multiple rapes, genital mutilation, and forced pregnancies—

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<sup>9</sup> See *Discipline and Punish* 135-94.

<sup>10</sup> Other sources, however, record quite brutal discipline. Zaroukian, for example, recounts an incident where a warden physically abused one of the orphans for complaining of a stomachache who died soon after from the abuse and neglect (55-59). The children were also abused verbally and emotionally, as according to Zaroukian, wardens often equated children with animals, calling them “pig,” “ox,” “dog,” “bear,” or some other dehumanizing epithet (35). Mariam Tumanyan, who was in charge of an orphanage in Dilijan in Armenia, describes how wardens searched the bodies of the children for gold coins and confiscated everything in their possession. The children were not allowed to own anything and were severely punished for holding onto or hiding family possessions (298-310).



traumas that were unacknowledged and untreated by relief workers who yet had no “language” for these cases. For, as Barton admitted, “Never did a child welfare organization face more baffling problems, and there were no precedents for their solution” (*Story* 220). Due to the unexpected events of war that placed new demands on American missionaries, which they assumed bravely, sometimes even risking their lives, the new order that was launched to deal with the unprecedented numbers of orphans was directly drawn from the modernization and urban-industrial movement in the United States between 1877-1920, which, according to Wiebe, was “America’s initial experiment in bureaucratic order” (xiv). The new bureaucratic orientation, that by World War I defined “a basic part of the American nation’s discourse,” set the form of problems and outlined their solutions (Wiebe 295). Accordingly, the missionaries adopted the rhetoric of “regularity, functionality and rationality, administration and management” (Wiebe 295). As a result, “the children were handled in blocks of thousands,” wrote Elliott in *Beginning Again*, “they became symbols in card-index systems[,] so many thousands of receptacles into which so many hundreds of pounds of corn-grits and fats must be put in so many hours. There was no time to think of them as immature human beings” (183). However, the new progressive system still maintained “America’s traditional separation of the world into two spheres, civilized and barbaric” (Wiebe 278) and this ideology unquestionably played a role in the treatment of genocide survivors who were citizens of the Ottoman Empire.

As orphanage records make clear, the children’s trauma was manifested in erratic or dissociative behavior. However, Elliot and Barton also characterized the children’s traumatized conduct as uncivilized and unnatural:

It will be entirely incomprehensible to people living in civilized countries to imagine a group of hundreds of children upon whose faces a smile never appears and who have no incentive to play. This was the most unnatural, appealing characteristic of the newly discovered children. Their diseased and filthy bodies and scant clothing were heart-breaking enough, but to see them huddled together in groups, without the least sign of a smile or the least effort to entertain themselves, was vastly more pathetic. . . . The children did not weep or moan or beg for anything—they simply sat about for days with a look of despair upon their faces, with no interest in their companions, no curiosity—an entire absence of normal childhood.<sup>11</sup> (Barton, *Story* 253)

Writing about children who undergo extreme conditions of early, severe, and prolonged abuse, Judith Herman explains how most survivors develop an array of mental maneuvers such as trance states, at once conscious and unconscious, through which they dissociate from an unbearable reality. Abused children, as she further contends, learn “to ignore severe pain, to hide their memories in complex amnesias, to alter their sense of time, place, or person, and to induce hallucinations or possession states” (102). As Barton and his fellow missionaries saw it, the antidote to these dissociative states was “character building,” a system of corrective mechanisms that involved hygiene, training, physical exercise, surveillance, strictly regulated time schedules, and clearly organized spaces of

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<sup>11</sup> Writing in the same period and of another group of survivors housed in the military barracks in Dilijan, Tumanyan records: “It is impossible to describe the early stages of orphanage life. Almost all of the children had diarrhea and there were watery stools everywhere on the floor. The children paced like ghosts in the rooms, leaving liquid marks after them. Most of them were in such bad shape that we had to care for them in bed. . . . A morbid silence dwelled in all the orphanages, even though we had around one hundred and fifty children in each orphanage. There was no laughter, not even a smile on their sad faces, which was very depressing. There was not a trace of childhood on these faces and only after five or six months did they show signs of vitality and interest in their surroundings” (my translation, *Im hamarot kensagrutyune* 300-304).

work and leisure. Existing methods that were meant for disciplining “untutored” (i.e., non-Christian or “heathen”) children were also employed for normalizing traumatized children into docile bodies and useful minds, into individuals capable of functioning in a Christian society without being stigmatized by deviance.<sup>12</sup>

Implementing disciplinary mechanisms as a response to trauma was, in this period, by no means uncommon. During World War I, soldiers who experienced psychological breakdown or exhibited traumatic symptoms were frequently considered to be afflicted with moral weakness or effeminacy, and psychotherapists such as Paul-Charles Dubois thus urged physicians “to increase the soldier’s virile self-discipline and autonomy by strengthening his rational and critical powers” (qtd. in Leys 88). While developed in the context of “shell shocked” soldiers, this model was generalized to many victims of traumatic experience, although it was often conceived as most efficacious for men or boys who “by nature” were more inclined to reason and disciplined behavior. Then, as now, disciplinary society largely deemed trauma victims unstable and erratic—worthless, and indeed threatening, to a regime that depends on docile, legible, useful individuals performing regulated tasks in an organized space. For the normalizing gaze, traumatic symptoms are behavioral deviations under “a perpetual penalty” (Foucault 183).

Accordingly, the orphanages operated by the Near East Relief instituted routine admittance examinations for each child that made it possible to classify, document, and regulate the incoming orphans. Simultaneously clinical and disciplinary, such examinations were initiated by a nurse “with rolled-up sleeves and handy basins of

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<sup>12</sup> On the disciplined, “docile” body, produced by the regulation of both space and time, see Foucault 138-54.

antiseptics,” who removed children’s clothing, which was then “put with tongs into a fire” (Elliott 177). Unfortunately, this conflagration was an unwitting destruction of the only information that many children had about their own history and identity since parents, foreseeing their own deaths, had, on many occasions, sewn documents and family valuables into the linings of their children’s garments or between the soles of their shoes.<sup>13</sup> Once children were bathed, their heads were shaved, and their sores were dressed, they were then summoned for an interview to determine their original names, parents’ names, and places of origin, but many, like Marcom’s character Vahé in *The Daydreaming Boy*, were too young or traumatized to remember anything about themselves. Marcom documents one such scene, drawn almost verbatim from an orphanage director’s report:

“After she had been cleaned up and fed I called her and one of the teachers to me and tried to find out who she was. When we asked her what her name was she said ‘Salema.’ We asked her her mother’s name. She did not know, but recognized the name ‘mother.’ Although we named over all the native names of women it brought no response from her. Then we asked who her father was. She just looked at us in a dull, irresponsible way until finally, after a long time, a gleam came into her eyes and she said: ‘My father—why, my Heavenly Father.’ And this was all we ever learned about that child. It was evident that she had come from a Christian home but where that home was or who her parents were we never found out.”<sup>14</sup> (Qtd. in Barton, *Story* 224-25)

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<sup>13</sup> See Bryce, 1st ed. 20-21; Shahan Derderian 15; Miller 80; Tumanyan 306.

<sup>14</sup> For the adaptation, see Marcom, *The Daydreaming Boy* 182.

In the interest of integrating such children into the ordered regime of the orphanage and ultimately into Christian society, of generating identifiable and classifiable individuals out of the confused and indistinguishable mobs of “wandering vagabonds” and “ragged waifs” (Barton, *Story* 210), the children were assigned names and identities.<sup>15</sup> Children who could not remember their Armenian name were given a new one, and this reinvented identity was intended to help efface the traumatic past, an erasure of identity that had for many children commenced first with their forced conversion to Ottoman subjects, and was followed by the admittance “cleansing” in the orphanages.

Subsequently, the orphanages implemented technologies of behavior aimed at integrating orphans into society and organized on the structure of seven mutually reinforcing models:

- first, that of the family: wardens, who were often Armenian widows or older orphan girls were called *mayrigs* or “mothers”; while each orphanage employed a number of mayrigs, the operations director and disciplinary overseer was called *hayrig* or “father” and acted as sole patriarch of the orphanage;<sup>16</sup>
- second, that of the hospital: as Elliott recorded, “The medical work at first was such as may be done on a battlefield under fire. . . . Every orphanage was also a hospital, every child was a patient, and medical treatment was as much a part of the orphanage routine as mealtime” (177); in addition to providing the urgent medical care needed by most of the orphans, the medical department supervised menus, regulated sanitation, and inspected hygiene;

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<sup>15</sup> On the disciplines as “techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities,” see Foucault 218-19.

<sup>16</sup> See the chapter on “Hayrig and the Mayrigs” in Zaroukian; Miller 125-28.

- third, that of the school: “unschooled children formed the raw material that had to be remolded and remade” (Barton, *Story* 220), and orphans were instructed in the Armenian language, Bible studies, moral character, physical exercise, and various other subjects as funding allowed;
- fourth, that of the workshop: orphans were trained in gender-specific forms of vocational work and “gradually, by teacher guidance, directed to one of the trades” (Barton, *Story* 240);<sup>17</sup>
- fifth, that of the army: orphans were assigned uniforms with numbers “to facilitate the keeping of records” and often housed in abandoned military barracks, spatially regimented with “beds neatly spread upon the floor in geometrical order” with a boy in each bed, and each hall guarded by a sentinel (Barton, *Story* 223);<sup>18</sup>
- sixth, that of the judiciary: some orphanages instituted a juvenile disciplinary court with orphan judges presiding over other inmates competent to sentence inmates to shaming, solitary confinement, or other forms of punishment;<sup>19</sup>
- and, seventh, that of the prison: orphans were strictly confined to orphanage grounds; disobedience and delinquency were severely penalized, including by confinement in an internal orphanage prison; one of the orphanages in Greece was organized around a “panoptic” rotunda.<sup>20</sup>

This panoptic network, with its systems of surveillance and observation, intimately intertwined with the functionary language of instruction and training exerted a

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<sup>17</sup> On gender-specific forms of vocational training in orphanages, see Barton, *Story* 239-40.

<sup>18</sup> See also Barton, *Story* 213-15; Tumanyan 298-99.

<sup>19</sup> See Barton, *Story* 256.

<sup>20</sup> See Barton, *Story* 223.

normalizing power, which assimilated the language of trauma into a technology of coercion.

Exemplary of multiple aspects of this disciplinary regime is the moment in Marcom's novel when the boys from the Nest are bathed, combed, dressed in shoes and new shirts (which will immediately be taken away), arranged hierarchically by size, and set in orderly rows to pose for a photograph. Literally "set straight" by the mayrig [mother] who walks up and down the rows with "her rod like a black bat" descending on disorderly boys, the orphans are exhorted by the hayrig [father] to assume the appearance of a flourishing family: "Hayrig arrives and he stands in the front row; he is wearing a nice suit and tie. This is a photograph boys, he says to us, for our friends in America. Our friends in America would like to see you happy. We are grateful for the help of America" (148). It is a photo the boys will never see, in which they are observed, constituted as objects of knowledge and charity and, not unlike the inmates of Bentham's Panopticon, scrutinized by a regulatory gaze that they can neither detect nor return, but that holds power over them in a state of perpetual observation.

### The Dialectic of Trauma in Micheline Aharonian Marcom's

#### *The Daydreaming Boy*

While the American missionary discourse translated the Armenian crisis through a progressive narrative in which postwar redemption of orphans depended on putting "the tragic past" behind, moving on and building a new life, Marcom's *The Daydreaming Boy* (2004) suggests that no amount of discipline or character building could prevent the

return of the traumatic past. She makes it abundantly clear in the novel that the practice of perpetual discipline only creates the possibility of trauma's eternal return.

The novel opens with the image of thousands of boys running to the wide blue Mediterranean, the warm water swallowing their frail bodies, as the orphanage looms in the background, and the mayrighs wait on the shore for these newly arrived "Adams" who will be given new identities and retaught their dead mother tongue by surrogate mothers. This opening seems to echo Elliott's title *Beginning Again*, with its emphasis on a new beginning, a rebirth necessary to initiate the progressive mission of redemption and normalization. It is the beginning promised to the "starved" and "diseased" children found in the streets and outskirts of Turkish towns who had been rescued and sheltered in orphanages at the end of the war.

Marcom's protagonist, Vahé Tcheubjian, through his broken stream of consciousness, articulates the inability to discipline the traumatized self, to expurgate loss, and replace traumatic memory with a progressively ordered narrative: "Like a teacher lays out the mathematical problem for the hungry cold caned boys: 'Ratiocination, boys!' Mr Hovannes says, writing his numbers for them. 'Add it up quickly!': there is a plan and (accepting all of the contradictory nonsense of his keepers) it would be true and good" (143). But no amount of training or reasoning seem to keep Vahé's memories at bay: "When the sea rises before me I am arrested by some thing I cannot think or name and on the nights I cannot sleep I find myself wandering along the shores and although it brings comfort it also surprises me with its terrible sameness, its constant in, this sadness" (8).<sup>21</sup> Memories of violent death surge relentlessly like the

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<sup>21</sup> Zaroukian records a similarly haunting intimacy with the sea: "It was the same place, the same shore, the same sea we had entered only a few hours ago, hundreds of us; the same waves, the same hiss of the sand;



waves of the sea, threatening to consume the boys who “at first thought these white apparitions were thousands of the dead come to meet us” (63). Throughout the novel Vahé repeatedly and literally “sees” his own death: “My eyes are open and I see sea as if seeing for the first time my rushing blood, heavy organs, millstone lungs” (145). Figuratively, the sea binds the orphans with an all-embracing “oceanic feeling” through which the self dissolves in a collective identity.<sup>22</sup> And literally, it is among the bodies of water where Turkish soldiers carried out systematic campaigns of drowning during the genocide.<sup>23</sup>

The sea with its womb-like properties repossesses the children, who are thus reintroduced to the loss of the mother, “with each gust of salt water swallowed” (3). It is a moment of double consumption: they consume the object of loss and it consumes them. In this moment of interiorization of the other as the self, which Freud has associated with the formation of the melancholic ego, identification with another—the (M)other—occurs through total absorption.<sup>24</sup> This rite of cleansing by water and admittance into the orphanage also symbolizes the trauma of entry into the Symbolic order; from this moment on the dead mother will be replaced with systems of language, signs, translation, culture, and norms. However, Vahé develops two divergent selves—“the notlistening one,” a self pathologically bound to the traumatic past, and “the speaking one,” a rational, communicating self. He replicates the speech of the abject, which, in Kristeva’s characterization, emerges in a repetitive rhythm, like a monotonous melody that

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but now it seemed completely different, and I was transformed, one out of the hundreds who splashed here by day, into a completely different person. . . . My soul absorbed the turmoil of the waves, with their determined surge and chaotic retreat” (142-43).

<sup>22</sup> See Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 11-15.

<sup>23</sup> See Dadrian 424-28; Miller 139-40.

<sup>24</sup> See Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*.

“dominates the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies” (33). In one instance, during what seems to be Vahé’s intimate encounter with a lover later in his life, Marcom constructs a suffocating reading experience, in which Vahé regresses into an infantile state, where language stops performing in its *normal* functional way, and mechanically duplicating sentences, depleted of meaning, rush through him in uninterrupted lines with no punctuation or spaces between words:

I am good and she loves me here I am sitting on my bed and she never leaves our bedroom we are always in the bedroom and my mama loves me here and every night she comes and although I don’t like to kill her I do because she has the blood and I am thirsty and also hungry in the Lebanon blood never changes to water but here I can have it because I am good here I am good and she loves me here I am sitting on my bed and she never leaves our bedroom we are always in the bedroom and my mama loves me here and every night she comes and although I don’t like to kill her I do because she has the blood and I am thirsty and also hungry in the Lebanon blood never changes to water (46)

In another instance, the glaring voids in the text where there should be words signal the incommunicability of experience and Vahé’s interrogation of the medium of language, its insufficiency to translate the embodied experiences of trauma or ecstasy:

. . . because perhaps the reason the words were not right for the saying and I couldn’t find the words is because the words themselves cannot do it: cannot say it right. The merest beast knows it. . . . And man? What does he do? Bend his passion and joy and anger rage and sadness into abstract sullen word-sounds that take us away from the *vrai* sound, the thing itself. Just as when the man and

woman fuck it, it is not the words that express in the fleshiest part of ourselves our fleshy desire, not the words, but the belly pitched moan . . . and there is no space between the moan and the desire: it is the thing itself. And I think this is why I have always yearned for the moment of high-pitched desire, that falling away of words into the beast's pure expression—that: —its truth in this world of prevarication of obfuscation of language distanced lies. I want the body only and the sounds it makes—the truth of flesh; the boy suckling his mother, his before he latches onto her teat . . . (189-90)

The narrative unfolds like a testimony of survival, Vahé apparently receiving as much pleasure as he does pain from the revelation of his agony and countless betrayals. His testimony, though, is neither an act of repentance, nor a journey toward redemption, but an act of revelation and a repudiation of survival. Each revelation is followed by a counter-revelation or alternative version of the past (“Because, it was like this:” (172); “Or it was like this:” 96), which, I would like to suggest, unfolds as a testimony that turns against itself, a counter-testimony—a confession that cannot function as evidence, that produces a deep uncertainty as to its very truth, and that attests via negation:

Because I never existed. Because it was never me in the Nest with the hordes, the thousands of lost boys and girls. I wasn't the Armenian unnamed boy thrown onto a train in Eregli and unloaded by the Levantine coastline. I never lived in that place until I was sixteen years old and then told to leave . . . And I didn't because I never existed, I didn't remember or forget any of it. And if you don't remember and if you don't recognize this flesh it is because it has all been in vain, the greatest fabrication: a lost dead boy retrieved from the dead time and dead places

and in a dead tongue reviving and reiterating a life that was never lived, not seeded, out of place; impossible; irretrievable. (194-95)

Vahé's rhetorical negations, aimed not only at himself and at the missionary discourse of "character building" that strove to efface his trauma, but also at Turkish historiography and national memory, suggests that the problem of recognizing trauma lays precisely in the ability to translate it through a radical domestication, a lens that renders the extreme foreignness of trauma anything else but what it actually is—a literal void. Here Vahé constructs a traumatic self through clauses which are formally negative but whose function is to assert an emphatic positive. The reenactment of trauma points to *how* one can re-cognize through the Symbolic order. The language of trauma, marked by what Caruth calls a "literality" that resists symbolization and remains "absolutely *true* to the event" (5), is translatable only through an adaptation that fills in and smoothes out the literality—the void—of trauma, thus enacting a betrayal of traumatic experience. Indeed, as Marcom performatively suggests, one can inscribe any linguistic expression in the place of "pure expression—that: —its truth" (190).

Verbal translation, the spoken or written communication of traumatic experience, I suggest, with its tendency to domesticate, becomes a vehicle for an indefinite discipline, "an interrogation without end," in the Foucauldian sense, used as "the permanent measure of a gap in relation to an inaccessible norm" (227). In other words, one is never sufficiently disciplined, one constitutes a file that will never be closed. In his attempt to integrate himself into the Symbolic order, Vahé is repeatedly traumatized, having to dissociate from a mother(tongue), then from the mother's death: "I don't remember: the Armenian (before it was dead); the Turkish (it beaten from the meat like one beats the

horrific lamb); the Armenian taught back to me at the Nest, beaten back word by word (the rod blows)” (133). Yet, at the same time, Vahé resists the normalizing power of the Symbolic order by speaking through privative neologisms (“notlistens,” “notfish,” “notmemory,” “unhistoried,” “notmoves”) that negate the familiar and refute logic. Along with common negative constructions, Marcom introduces invented negatives where a less foreign form would fail to convey the full extent of negation: “I can never get you back, Mother, not in all of the flesh of this world (newly created or no), nor in the spectered notflesh” (133). Marcom uses this foreignizing method to mediate trauma in a manner that remains faithful to the catastrophic event and that disrupts normalized language. Narrating *via negativa* allows for what Lawrence Venuti calls “a symptomatic reading” that *exposes* the verbal translation of trauma as being a violent rewriting of an ineffable event, which eludes conceptualization. These negative constructions also perform the indeterminate deferral of the illusion that one might fully understand the traumatic event and its impact, which, as Caruth contends, lies precisely in its delay, “its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9).

In a search for an answer to his inner conflict, Vahé stumbles upon a pronouncement from a “foreign” text that appears to be more than familiar: “You cant know yet. You cannot know yet whether what you see is what you are looking at or what you are believing. Wait. Wait” (140). While Marcom doesn’t explicitly indicate here that these words are drawn from William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), she signals the connection earlier on, in her first epigraph, placing Vahé’s experience simultaneously in the tradition of lamentation, referring to the biblical passage of David’s lament for his

son Absalom, and Faulkner's confrontation with the institution of slavery in the American South.

"Lamentation," as Rebecca Saunders writes, "is both a kind of language and a kind of time" that are ultimately indistinguishable ("On Lamentation" 730). The moment of lamentation, conditioned by the moment of catastrophe, thwarts language that cannot simply record the catastrophe but must also speculatively and tentatively construct it. Lamentation, according to Saunders, is characterized not only by cognitive upheaval, but also by dispossession—a redistribution of value, knowledge, and identity (732). Analyzing lamentation as a literary mode, Saunders contends that this language is not only distinguished "by the tentative and fragmented but also by a proliferation of privatives which rhetorically (re)enact dispossession" (732). Saunders traces the language of lamentation in *Absalom*, which, she argues, stylistically imitates the rhetoric of the progressive New South spokesmen, which was at once "constructing, decimating, and eulogizing the Old South" (740). Through its rhetoric of progress and diversification, the New South program, according to Saunders, "both urged and rhetorically enacted the destruction of old ideas, ideals, identities, in the interest of producing a New South" (738). And while Southern laws decreed a new beginning without slavery, they simultaneously excluded former slaves and poor whites from the progressive changes, which ultimately helped "reestablish antebellum social relations in a new industrial atmosphere" (754). Analogously and in a quite ironic way, Vahé's language of indeterminate waiting and negation in *The Daydreaming Boy* reenacts dispossession, brought on by the establishment of a modern Turkish state, the abandonment of the Constantinople trials and the release of the perpetrators of the genocide, the redistribution

of the mandated Armenian lands, and the new foreign policy of the United States in the Eastern Mediterranean region.<sup>25</sup> Dispossessed of their homes and families, land and culture, justice and reparation, the survivors of the genocide were urged to forget their violent past in the interest of the new Turkish Republic, the spokesmen of which at once refuted the atrocities of the genocide and lamented the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire by the Allied forces. Marcom sets up the connection with *Absalom* from the very beginning, in the first epigraph of *The Daydreaming Boy*, where Quentin Compson constructs the moment of Thomas Sutpen's encounter with the institution of slavery as his "loss of innocence" through the redemptive language of the New South:

All of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not, because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life, never live with what all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on, with all the dead ones waiting and watching to see if he was going to do it right, fix things right so that he would be able to look in the face not only the old dead ones but all the living ones that would come after him when he would be one of the dead.<sup>26</sup>

According to Quentin, this is the moment when Thomas Sutpen, as a boy, is rejected from white Southern patriarchy, and where he is compelled to adopt the ideology of

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<sup>25</sup> By 1921, after much debate over the pursuit of justice in Turkey, the British War Office decided to abandon the trials to prosecute political, military, and economic leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress responsible for the Armenian genocide. Under the pressure of most Republicans, who saw Armenia as a "poorhouse" with nothing to offer American interests, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson abandoned his mandate for restoring several Western Armenian provinces to Armenians. Instead, the U.S. signed the Turco-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce that promised free passage for U.S. ships in the Dardanelles, and an open-door policy for American businesses such as the Standard Oil Company (Peter Balakian 344-45, 360-68).

<sup>26</sup> See *Absalom, Absalom!* 220.



white supremacy in order to address the affront. And even when he achieves admittance into that society, Sutpen remains the subject of his affront, compulsively reenacting rejection through his repudiation of his partially black son, Charles Bon, to maintain the discriminatory system that kept African Americans in servitude before the Civil War, and to deny freedmen the right to equal citizenship in the post-war South.<sup>27</sup> The language of lamentation employed by the different narrators (Quentin Compson, Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, and Shreve McCannon) translate Sutpen's story in a new era, the first decade of twentieth century, in turn, eulogizing the Old South and erasing the trauma of African American slavery. Marcom, however, employs the discourse of lamentation both to narrate Vahé's internalization of it—in a language that erases a traumatic past and simultaneously reinstates an equally traumatizing system—and to deconstruct it.

In *The Daydreaming Boy*, Vahé, as a child, comes to the realization through his encounter with the other orphans, mayrigs, and Sunday samaritans—families who adopt orphans for a day—that he has been dispossessed of a mother (tongue) and a home(land). Abused and dehumanized in the orphanage for speaking Turkish and for reminding the other survivors of their victimhood, Vahé quickly learns and reenacts the “rule of bone” (33), turning to victimization of another boy in the orphanage, Vostanig:

We beat him over and over, we punished him mercilessly, he lost his vision in the left eye, his arm was broken on one occasion, the Mayrig took special pleasure in using him to demonstrate a broken rule. All of us tried, I think, to unmake his look of sorrow: the Mayrig herself could not bear it. He was weak and he cried and I would have killed him then, he was fucked for this weakness . . . (66)

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<sup>27</sup> See Foner 412-44, 553-601.



Perceiving the symptoms of trauma as “weakness,” Vahé learns to speak the language of normalcy at the Nest, which at once erases his traumatic past (“the notlistening one”) and disciplines him into a rational, communicating being (“the speaking one”). Vahé’s language reenacts the dissociation from self not only through privatives but also through pronoun shifts, as the first-person plural pronoun in the opening of Book I (“We are naked like Adam” 3) is repeated in third-person in the opening of Book II (“They are naked like Adam and they run to the sea’s edge” 87). Here the language records and creates the moment of dispossession, as the future tense in the first scene (“we will some of us regive ourselves of this now dead tongue and revived and here, we will say in the dead language: we are as Adams in the garden” 4) becomes the past tense in the repeated scene: “They prayed for a miracle, a name, to remember their tongue, the tongue they’d left them, the tongue they didn’t remove; the hands, a heart, a boy’s untold things. And they are no longer dreamers, Adams in the wasteland” (87). The repetition of this scene also marks the stoppage of time, it thwarts the progress that each child was expected to make at the orphanage, and it literally thwarts the traditional chronological development of the novel, as everything in it “re- and re- returns” (33). Thus, Vahé’s narrative not only performs trauma, which, in Herman’s words, “arrests the course of normal development by its repetitive intrusion into the survivor’s life” (37), but it also exposes the progressive discourse as a new form of dispossession that leaves the survivors in a “wasteland.”

Marcom further develops the notions of time stoppage and indeterminate waiting by linking Vahé with Charles Bon—the eternal, unconditional waiter in *Absalom*, *Absalom!* who, according to Quentin and Shreve’s construction of events and in the passage upon which Vahé stumbles, is longing for recognition by his father: “You cant

know yet. . . . Wait. Wait” (140).<sup>28</sup> “The very conception of the father and his signs (as anticipated possession),” writes Saunders, “conditions both Bon’s desire and his sense of perpetual ‘loss’ of a father he has never possessed” (“On Lamentation” 745). This moment in *The Daydreaming Boy* is significant, as Vahé discovers his own state of waiting through an experience and text that are foreign to him. Like Charles Bon, Vahé, as a boy, awaits his mother’s return, writes letters to her, constructs scenarios of why she must have abandoned him and how she will arrive at the front gates of the orphanage to claim him as her son. As an adult, Vahé awaits “when he can see it differently—the way it must needs be seen” (141), in other words, he anticipates some type of closure: “As a boy I believed that when I died all would be revealed: the killers, my parents and theirs also, and everything understood as if in a history book” (177). Yet he simultaneously knows that there can be no closure in the disciplinary system in which he functions:

Because: where is the man that took her from me? . . . Because just as the knowing is impossible, the man also is impossible, so it is not him I seek, but the system that makes him (such as me) into system-followers, men who follow the injunctions, believers, the rules and customs, say: Yes they are vile; Yes they must be intolerated; Yes here is the boundary of our village shove them out of it; Polluted; Unbeliever; Dogs; . . . Or perhaps it is not the he or the system man makes and man follows, but the why of it: are we so easily led, killed, defiled and humiliated and dominated and haunted then by our specters who cannot return either, who say to us notspeaking: you are no better than dogs unless you do it? (176-77)

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<sup>28</sup> See *Absalom, Absalom!* 314.

Locating himself within this pervasive system as both a constructed and constructing subjectivity, Vahé draws attention to the discourse that operates through an exclusionary and redemptive ideology that keep him, as well as Bon, in the paralyzing grip of a traumatic cycle. While Vahé acknowledges the cyclical and destructive nature of trauma, he nonetheless restages an imagined moment of his mother's rape by raping the thirteen-year-old Palestinian servant girl who works for his neighbor. Thus Vahé transforms her in his mind from a refugee girl who "had that other and vulgar Arabic name, Jamilah or Nabihah)" (206) into "Béatrice"—sublime ideal of beatific love and guide to paradise for the pilgrim who has come through hell. Vahé's destructive desire for her is not only a reenactment of his mother's possible rape by a Turkish soldier, but also of the disciplinary discourse of his "keepers" at the orphanage, who had "successfully civilized" the subjects in their charge. When Vahé rapes Béatrice, it is her scream for mercy, "Please, sir" in Armenian, "her tiny words against the beast (in his tongue, the victor's tongue)" (206) that constitute his reversal of the primal affront that he suffered as a boy: "The sooth flesh I requited to get a little bit of it back, a small immeasurable ineffable return: inside that girl's flesh I was (say it!—Says): home" (206). This, then, is the brutal truth, as Vahé acknowledges that "home" for him is the site of absolute violence and that he cannot distinguish home or love from utter destruction and desecration.

As an American Armenian, Marcom problematizes the notions of home, trauma, and foreignness by translating them through domestic experiences of trauma at "home," in the United States, that have been often mistranslated through "official history." In a 2004 interview with Erinn Hartman she explains: "I suppose I am quite suspicious of official history, and I know that what it leaves out, denies, and elides is often the history

of the powerless, the disenfranchised, the unclanned: the minority voices; the unpopular and the vulgar.” Through her fiction Marcom foreignizes historical traumas such as African American slavery and more modern-day CIA-led atrocities in Central America by connecting those traumas to the Armenian experience. Marcom perceives her own “American” history through what Bakhtin calls an “outsideness”:

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths.

(Bakhtin 7)

The phenomenal and historical foreignness of these traumas in relation to one another help in subverting domesticating translations of trauma that prevail in different discourses, such as missionary texts or Hollywood movies, and reformulating them in nonhabitual constructions, which in turn enable a revision of seemingly concretized perceptions of traumatic experiences and our responses to them. In particular, Marcom exhibits the crisis of survival in a system that substitutes the painful work of remembrance and mourning with a disciplined amnesia that imposes a false sense of order, sequence, causality, coherence, and completion, and thereby perpetuates the cycle of trauma. Speaking of a similar tendency toward amnesia, Toni Morrison remarks in an interview with Paul Gilroy: “We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the

slate is clean. The past is absent or it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past. That memory is much more in danger now [circa 1988] than it was thirty years ago" (*Small Acts* 179). The language of erasure that Morrison refers to is not dissimilar to the missionary discourse on the Armenian genocide, typified by Barton's notion that "the tragic past had to be effaced" (*Story* 220-21) and the language of the U.S. government that still does not officially recognize the Armenian genocide. African Americans, like Armenians, are urged if not to forget the experience of slavery, which appears to thwart the American narrative of progress, then to replace the traumatic memory with a new set of signs that will discipline the results of traumatic memory. Resisting this kind of domestication, Marcom translates the foreign, Armenian experience through the ostensibly familiar terms of the American experience, transgressing discourses of amnesia.

### Trauma, Language, Translation

Critically analyzing the task of what he calls "writing trauma," LaCapra writes: "It involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and "giving voice" to the past—processes of coming to terms with traumatic "experiences," limit events, and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different and hybridized forms" (186). LaCapra asks which narrative modes are most suited for rendering traumatic events, especially in ways that will not harmonize them and thus border on repression or denial. As a new and necessarily problematic genre-in-the-making, LaCapra argues, "traumatic realism" is indispensable in its ability to voice the radical disorientation and unreason of trauma, threatening to agitate or infiltrate the

audience in unsettling ways, and posing a barrier to closure in discourse (186). LaCapra argues that literature “in its very excess can somehow get at trauma in a manner unavailable to theory—that it writes (speaks or even cries) trauma in excess of theory” (183). These explorative modalities of certain works of art allow for a departure from ordinary reality “to produce surrealistic situations or radically playful openings” that seem to be immaterial to ordinary reality but, as LaCapra contends, “may uncannily provide indirect commentary or insight into that reality” (186). Finally, LaCapra suggests that “traumatic realism” differs from “stereotypical conceptions of mimesis,” because it expresses a disconcerting examination of traumatic disorientation, its symptomatic caesuras, and possible ways of responding to them (186).

Marcom’s foreignizing translation of survival and the post-traumatic self resists harmonization and conveys trauma through experimentation, acting out, and “giving voice” to the past in a manner that demonstratively problematizes the domestication characteristic of missionary “character building.” Marcom’s fiction effectively raises the question of (un)translatability and the deeply ethical problem of how not to betray a traumatic past. If, as Marcom signals through her fiction, language cannot literally convey the irreparable ruptures caused by trauma, it can faithfully and palpably reenact the caesura, moods, and temporalities of trauma, thus bringing the reader closer to the foreign experience of a traumatic event. Remaining faithful to the past, in this sense, means, rather than assimilating the voids created by trauma, making them visible or audible on the page. This often means that the translators of trauma who resist domestication have to go beyond the normalized verbal system and draw on other—nonverbal—sign systems to translate the experience of trauma. In her works on African

American experience during slavery and the race riots of the 1920s, *Beloved* and *Jazz*, Toni Morrison, for instance, incorporates elements of blues and jazz music as a way of both reenacting African American modes of expression as well as creating new, hybrid forms of expression. She explains in an interview, “Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art above all in the music” (qtd. in Gilroy 181). Houston A. Baker, Jr. makes a similar connection between the blues as a matrix in cultural understanding and translation:

Like translators of written texts, blues and its sundry performers offer interpretations of the experiencing of experience. To experience the juncture’s ever-changing scenes, like successive readings of ever-varying texts by conventional translators, is to produce vibrantly polyvalent interpretations encoded as blues. The singer’s product, like the railway juncture itself (or a successful translator’s original), constitutes a lively scene, a robust matrix, where endless antinomies are mediated and understanding and explanation find conditions of possibility. (7)

In this remarkably suggestive theorization of the blues as translation and as a railway juncture marked by transience, Baker proposes a mode of mediation that employs rhythms and sounds as onomatopoeic references. “Even as [the blues] speak of paralyzing absence and ineradicable desire,” Baker writes, “their instrumental rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance, unlimited and unending possibility” (8).

In a similar vein, Marcom references an Armenian song in all of her three books on the genocide, *Three Apples Fell From Heaven* (2001), *The Daydreaming Boy* (2004), and *Draining the Sea* (2008), leaving only a trace of the original, an untranslated phrase:

“Նորից գարուն եկաւ, գարուն անըման.” The first line from this popular song called

“Ձէյրանի պէս” [“Like a Doe”] appears as a dedication to her maternal grandparents in

*Three Apples Fell from Heaven* and the book ends with the following open-ended

reference to the song: “When she arrives at the edges of Beirut she smells the sea air

which she has always dreamed of so that her shod feet take her down to the boardwalk

and she walks along the waterfront . . . and she gathers her brothers and blue-eyed Nevart

close to her and she says, My darlings, new spring has arrived, and she began to sing this

song” (264). The song reappears in *The Daydreaming Boy* in a more disillusioned and

tragic tone: “Because I am not from this place. Because there is distance and it is a wide

gap made by land and unwilling journey and also by the tongue itself because of: what it

cannot say, what it no longer knows how to say, what it does not know—the language

makes me dead, I speak dead words and then I’m seeking a body via these (now dead)

words: Նորից գարուն եկաւ, գարուն անըման” (133). And finally, it reemerges in *Draining*

*the Sea*, where an unnamed man living in Los Angeles contemplates the atrocities taking

place in Guatemala and in his own Ottoman-Armenian past: “. . . and then the song came

to him out of the blue, from ether, and he sings the phrases ‘Նորից գարուն եկաւ, գարուն

անըման’ makes barbarian sounds” (225). The song is a trace of “the dead language”—

Western Armenian—that ironically, amid erasure and loss, signals hope and regeneration:

“Spring is here again, beautiful spring” (my translation). On the one hand, Marcom

signals a linguistic untranslatability in the “translating” language of the novel, which is



English, but on the other hand, and more profoundly, the phrase refracts meaning through a nonverbal sign system—the form of music.

Marcom thus introduces a new sign system into her work, which goes beyond the limits of verbal language. She bears witness to the complex relationships between trauma, language, and translation by foreignizing simultaneously her native (English) language through the use of neologisms, infelicitous syntax, and untranslated phrases, and language in general by incorporating song. Speaking of diasporic Armenians who, in some measure, “suffer the attribute of melancholy,” Marcom states in an interview in *Context*:

The aftermath of genocide and exile has been a heavy one, one that can still be felt, has rippled across the generations to reach even someone like me: a half-Armenian girl who was raised mostly in Los Angeles. There seems, concomitant with this melancholy, always some inestimable loss at play, which lies behind most things: something and some things not spoken of, some place unknown or vaguely known, some people long-lost, some before when life was different, some terrible wound which obscurely and continuously presents itself as an evening shadow might on the dark ground. And this melancholy which surges and falls, I remember it vividly from the songs we sang as children—those sad Armenian songs from the old place.

Belonging to two worlds, simultaneously American and Armenian, Marcom is an outsider in each culture, which enables her to reflect on each culture’s traumatic pasts and engage in a dialog that, in the Bakhtinian sense, transgresses “the closedness and one-sidedness” (7) of dominant representations of traumatic experience. Always critical of

methodologically conservative and domesticating discourses that employ language to discipline and censor, Marcom writes in generative, interrogative and critical ways that offer in-depth explorations of trauma and its integration into collective memory.

## Conclusion

Situating Marcom's fiction in a "translation zone," where translation becomes "a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself" (Apter 6), I have shown in this chapter how *The Daydreaming Boy* mediates the foreignness of traumatic memory of the Armenian genocide. By juxtaposing the progressive optimism of missionary discourse that aimed to efface the memory of the genocide through disciplinary mechanisms such as "character building" against the progressive narrative of the New South that largely expunged the traumatic memory of slavery, Marcom offers a critical translation of a defamiliarized past in the United States. While the novel centers on Vahé Tcheubjian's cultural and symbolic foreignness in the progressive missionary narrative of redemption, it also can be read in a comparative manner that removes the subject of slavery and its trauma from any familiar discourse in the United States and transports that experience into a transnational realm. For it is in this diasporic "zone" that, as Marcom suggests, one is able to denaturalize citizens, take them out of the comfort zone of national space and mediate new knowledge that will, in turn, help re-signify dominant narratives in the translating language.

## CHAPTER IV

### TEACHING THE LITERATURE OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

#### Introduction

As the framework of my previous chapters suggest, teaching the literature of the Armenian genocide entails raising the question of translatability on several levels. First, it is important to identify a text as a site of verbal translation, where the foreign, inassimilable discourse of the catastrophic experience is replaced with an intelligible language. Second, the text should be analyzed as a site of intralingual translation or the replacement of expressions with other, often euphemistic, expressions within the same linguistic system. And finally, where relevant, it is critical to analyze the text as a site of translation proper or the interpretative rendition from one language into another. As I have argued in the preceding chapters, the cultural and political costs are tremendous when we read texts that refer to or recount the experiences of the Armenian genocide without treating them as translated texts and without problematizing the conditions and methods of translation that render the fragmented script of trauma legible. I have analyzed the diasporic literature of the Armenian genocide as a body of multidisciplinary texts that go beyond the property of a single nation, involving various translational projects carried out by Armenian survivors, their descendents, and missionaries, diplomats, relief workers, human rights activists, and writers from the United States and elsewhere. Viewing translation as more than a mode of communication, I have

demonstrated that the very choice to translate a certain experience, as well as the strategies of translation, publication, review, and presentation critically affect both the source-language and the target-language cultures. The present chapter focuses on a translation-centered pedagogy and offers modes for rethinking the design of global and comparative literature courses in a way that encompasses a double orientation, centering not only on the foreign experience and culture, but also on the invisible power relations and hierarchies within the translating culture.

If, however, translation is to function in such a way, education and pedagogy as well as cataloging practices that classify critical translation theory, for example, under the label “intercultural communication,” will have to be rethought. “World literature and translation,” Haun Saussy writes in the 2004 Report of the American Comparative Literature Association, “are modes of understanding, and they are also filtering techniques: they unavoidably impart their selective bias to the literary field in the act of representing it” (14). Aside from the obvious task of “putting traditions into contact,” the study of world literature, Saussy argues, requires that language—both the language of the original and of the translation—be recognized as something more than a delivery system for content and be perceived as having a weight and resistance of its own (14).

Americanist scholar Kirsten Silva Gruesz points out the absence of translation studies in the current critical discourse of American studies, an absence, I would add, that also extends to English studies. Both fields depend upon and incorporate translated texts, yet “while other reflexes of thought are interrogated and revealed as situated knowledge, the assumption that linguistic differences are bridged easily and transparently remains undisturbed” (Gruesz 85). Everything is subject to critique, Gruesz argues, except the

language in which those critiques are voiced: by default, the register of academic U.S. English, and the persistent acceptance of translation as transparent renders disciplines such as American and English studies complicit in the use of translation as a tool for dominating and subsuming foreign languages and cultures (85-86).

Translation is anything but transparent, and translation theorists André Lefevere, Lawrence Venuti, and others have emphasized the need to regard translation as culturally significant in its own right and critical to the (trans)formation of power relations in both the translated and translating cultures. In Emily Apter's analysis, the "translation zone" is also "a war zone"—"an area of border trouble," governed by the laws of hostility and hospitality, by semantic transfers and treaties, in which monolingual nations "police their internal linguistic borders" and "linguistic separatism" is sabotaged by the "translational transnationalism" of diasporic cultures (129).

Given the unavoidable use of translated texts in teaching diasporic literatures, such as the texts of various genres produced in response to the Armenian genocide, I argue that any engagement with this body of literature calls for a critical analysis of the various forms of domestication and instances of resistance that are at play in translation. Arguing for a visibility of translational practices in the classroom, Venuti writes:

Recognizing a text as translated and figuring this recognition into classroom interpretations can teach students that their critical operations are limited and provisional, situated in a changing history of reception, in a specific cultural situation, in a curriculum, in a particular language. (*Scandals* 93)

With the knowledge of conditionality, I would add, comes the awareness of possibilities and of different ways of understanding the foreign experience, which, in turn, can help

initiate alternate ways of understanding one's own cultural situatedness. Venuti's conception of teaching through a problematization of translation and resistance to a fluent integration of the foreign experience in the target-language culture resonates with Viktor Shklovsky's theory of *ostranenie* [defamiliarization], which is useful in unsettling domestic cultural values and revising their hierarchical arrangements. *Ostranenie*, according to Shklovsky, is a process or practice that imparts an event with "strangeness" by removing it from the network of conventional perceptions and symbolic representations, which allows for the possibility of experiencing the event in new and unprecedented ways. In other words, after encountering phenomena several times, the process of recognition switches to an automated mode in our minds, and language, used creatively, can renew perception by shifting the familiar into an unfamiliar semantic grid.

Inherently Shklovskian, Venuti's praxis of critical translation and pedagogy examines differences not only between the foreign experience and its translations, but within the translation itself by focusing on what French theorist Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls "the remainder"—the textual effects and idiolects that function in any given language.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Venuti proposes to lay bare the various domestic linguistic forms that are added to the foreign experience or text in the process of transfer and that "run athwart the translator's effort to communicate that text" (*Scandals* 95). Teaching the issue of translation for Venuti means teaching the remainder by calling attention to the multiple, polysemic forms that exceed communication of a univocal meaning and instead point to the conditions of the communicative act that are not only linguistic and cultural but also involve social and political factors. My discussion in this chapter will extend Venuti's proposition with specific examples of classroom practices, which illustrate how

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Violence of Language*.

translation studies can help in developing effective ways of teaching the histories of collective trauma in a comparative literature framework.

### “Nations and Narrations”

In the Fall of 2008, I had the opportunity to design and teach a cross-disciplinary course that was offered at Illinois State University to undergraduate students as a part of the general education program. “IDS 203: Nations and Narrations” was an interdisciplinary course taught by graduate students or professors from various departments in the Humanities, the aim of which was to examine constructions of “national identities from cultural, philosophical, religious, and political empires, using narrative discourse as a lens” (*ISU 2008-09 Undergraduate Catalog* 91). My course was framed as a comparative literary study of historical traumas and narratives about them and centered on diasporic experiences, particularly the experiences of the African and Armenian diasporas in the United States. My approach to designing the course was strongly motivated by a translational paradigm, as discussed earlier, where a comparative framework would allow for a reinterpretation of a familiar, albeit contentious, domestic narrative of trauma (i.e., slavery in the United States) through a foreign experience (i.e., the Armenian genocide), and simultaneously impart to students a new and critical knowledge of the history of the genocide of World War I.

As was the case, the majority of the students in the course had very little or no familiarity with the history of the Armenian genocide. The goal of the course was to engage students with historic events through literature and other cultural productions, and it employed critical translational methods to the study of themes such as the intersections

of individual and collective trauma, dispossession and loss, guilt and mourning, and denial and remembrance. In addition, the course aimed at challenging students' assumptions about history, national memory, and their own encounters with foreign cultures, pushing them to unhinge fixed notions about human relations and develop a multiperspectival worldview through literary narrative. In order to gain as comprehensive a view as possible and to understand the interplay between the individual, cultural, and political factors imbedded in the literary responses to human crises, we drew on numerous kinds of "texts," including formal speeches, witness reports, survivor testimonies, slave narratives, fiction, documentary films, and painting. In a quest to understand the similarities and differences between these historical traumas, we also engaged theoretical concepts drawn from psychoanalysis, rhetoric, and narratology.

We began the semester by studying Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and watching Ed Bell and Thomas Lennon's *Unchained Memories*, a 2003 documentary film based on the stories of former slaves interviewed during the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project. We subsequently read and discussed Frances Harper's poem "The Slave Mother" (1857), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and watched Marlon Riggs's film *Ethnic Notions* (1988), which explores the distorted interpretations of slavery in the post-Reconstruction era and interrogates the lasting stereotypes of black Americans from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Lastly, I dedicated one class period to a discussion of a caricature mural in the basement of my rented apartment in Bloomington, Illinois, which we related to Riggs's film and students' own situated realities and experiences in the mid-2000s in a small Midwestern city in the United States. In the second half of the semester, we explored texts of the



Armenian genocide beginning with the testimony of Arshaluys Mardiganian, *Ravished Armenia* (1918), followed by witness accounts by Mabel Elliott and James Barton. I showed Italian film artists Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's *Oh! Uomo (Oh! Man*, 2004), which is a powerful survey of the irreparable damage to human lives caused by World War I. Finally, we read Micheline Aharonian Marcom's *The Daydreaming Boy* (2004), and concluded the semester with Charlotte Zwerin's short profile documentary *Arshile Gorky* (1982), which explores the Armenian American abstract painter's works as narratives of exile and loss.

By juxtaposing these two historical traumas, of U.S. slavery and the Armenian genocide, I focused not only on the domestication of the Armenian genocide in the translating language of Mardiganian's *Ravished Armenia* or Elliott's *Beginning Again at Ararat*, but also drew students' attention to the constructions of American history and identity in the mediation of the Armenian genocide. This helped students see that translation is not simple intercultural communication, but an appropriation of a foreign experience that often serves domestic purposes and invited them to question the appropriative movements in their own encounters with foreign cultures. I situated our study around the following questions: What is the relationship between trauma and memory? How is a literary translation of trauma different from historical translations of traumatic events? What literary techniques do authors employ in their narratives to represent or problematize individual or collective traumas? And most importantly, what might get lost, assimilated, or inscribed in verbal or interlingual translations of traumatic experience?

In posing such questions, I attempted to disrupt the “us versus them” dichotomy that can be reinforced by a superficial engagement with a foreign experience which, according to comparative literature scholar Charles Bernheimer, is typical of a “tourist” who “regurgitates information about ‘native’ cultures while ignoring his or her own nativeness” (13). So, for example, in the discussion of the mural—which depicted the heads and shoulders of a couple, presumably African American musical performers, whose cartoonish features were both dehumanizing and racist—I situated myself as an outsider: a native Armenian, teaching, among other things, African American texts in a class of predominantly white American students, who nonetheless was living *in* a house that preserved a hideous caricature in the basement (see Fig. 3) and was thus inhabiting a space of racism.

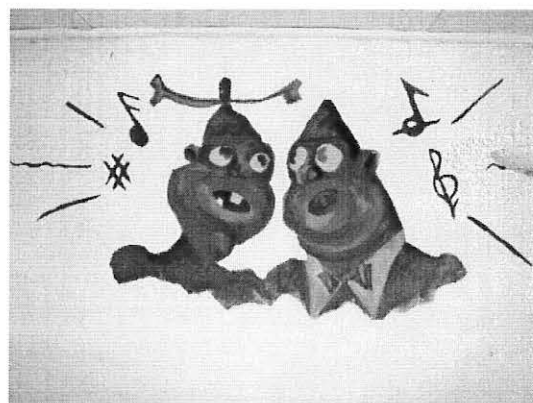


Figure 3. Mural in the basement of a house in the Franklin Square Historic District in Bloomington, Illinois. Copyright Shushan Avagyan, 2008.

One way of responding to and dealing with the situation at the time was by using this grotesque artifact as an educational tool and by critically engaging with it through a discussion with my students (as well as my academic peers and colleagues). My aim with the discussion of the mural was twofold: I wanted to push students to see a current domestic discourse from a foreign perspective, and I wanted to problematize the notion of “us” (i.e., “Americans”) as a homogenous group united by similar experiences and motivated by the same ambitions. After the initial spurts of nervous laughter and uncomfortable silences, some students responded that the mural needed to be painted over, while others urged me to find out the history of the mural from the landlord. One student was able to perceptively relate the obscenity of the mural and the history of racial violence of which it was part to the course material, as she compared it to the small statue of a black boy—a cruel caricature in Morrison’s *Beloved* that Denver, the daughter of a former slave, discovers in the house of an abolitionist family:

His head was thrown back farther than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pockets. Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth. His hair was a cluster of raised, widely spaced dots made of nail heads. And he was on his knees. His mouth wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery or some other small service, but could just as well have held buttons, pins, crab-apple jelly. Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words “At Yo Service.” (300)

This disconcerting image, according to Rafael Pérez-Torres, is at once suggestive of “commercial exchange (the coins held for delivery or small service), servitude (the kneeling figure), and the grotesquely twisted neck of a lynching victim” (185). The

reference to this passage led the class into a discussion of the commercial, racist, and potentially violent nature of the dominant social order that Morrison is comprehensively critiquing in her novel and that was displayed in the mural. At the end of the discussion, I asked students to write a one-page response to the mural and also to research and find current artifacts existing today in their milieus that were conceivably as harmful as the images on the mural and in Morrison's *Beloved*.

Our initial task, then, as a class, was to establish a pervasive familiarity with historical trauma(s) within the United States. As one student wrote in the initial questionnaire about familiarity with the African American experience: "While I obviously know a great deal of the historical information on slavery in America, I haven't read many texts discussing the topic [of trauma]." This was precisely why I started the course with texts referring to the mass deaths in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Middle Passage, the institution of slavery and its euphemization through minstrelsy and caricatures, the era of Jim Crow laws and lynchings, and what sociologist Ron Eyerman calls the "distinct gap" of memory thereafter formed between "the collective memory of a minority group and the dominant group in the society, [which] controlled the resources and had the power to fashion public memory" (77). These references allowed us to bring the discourse of trauma "home"—we engaged in discussions about the unspeakable violence that millions of African diasporans had faced for over three hundred years and the cycle of generational trauma that is permeated in the present day. We read texts that interrogated the U.S. national amnesia—the ideology to forget rather than to commemorate the human sacrifice that indelibly formed the nation and, according to Eyerman, was established at the end of the Civil War and thrived well into the Civil

Rights era (82-111). These discussions were extremely important for establishing existing “countermemories” of national identity and for problematizing the “melting-pot theories” and widespread notions about “the ‘normal’ process of assimilation, wherein ‘each succeeding generation becomes more ‘American’” (Eyerman 110). As Eyerman reminds us, the notion “African American” is a historically formed category resulting from a violent displacement of Africans into America, thus placing the experience and the memory of this trauma at the center of “being American” (76-77).

The next step to the “foreign” terrain of the Armenian genocide theoretically would have seemed less strange, as many experiences such as mass deaths, slavery, and forced assimilation into another culture reappeared if only in a different context. What I often encountered was a readiness and eagerness to engage with the Armenian material that went beyond the limits of the classroom, as I received emails asking for titles of texts or films for further research, whereas the response to the African American experience tended to be less curious. This was perhaps reinforced by the fact that many students were learning about the genocide for the first time, while they felt they were more or less familiar with the history of slavery in the United States. “As I read through the rest of the narrative,” one student wrote in response to *Ravished Armenia*, “I feel as if I have been deprived of my education on this horrible instance in history.” Another student posed several questions, which are important enough to be quoted at length here:

Before this class I had never heard of the Armenian genocide, also referred to as the “forgotten genocide” (for obvious reasons) . . . When we began discussing it in class I was really confused . . . All I could think was, Why didn’t we learn about this in history? After participating in class discussions and doing some

research outside of class I learned that I hadn't heard about these events because they are rarely discussed. I couldn't help but wonder, Why aren't these horrible things that took place in history books? Do we not learn about war? Are we not familiar with the Jewish Holocaust? Why is it that what happened to the Armenian people isn't presented to us? I have spent a lot of time this weekend pondering these questions and I must say that I am still frustrated with the only answer I can come up and that seems to be viable: it is easier to deny. . . . It is not a new concept to regard human life as invaluable [*sic*]. When will it stop? When will people open their eyes and more importantly their minds? When will people truly show pride and take responsibility for their actions? I, for one, hope I live to see it not only for myself but for all those "denied" and forgotten.

Such critical questions were posed by other students as well in their responses to readings, films, and class discussions, which clearly pointed to the literal foreignness of the topic as well as a readiness and willingness to critically engage with a foreign experience. On the other hand, the trauma of slavery in the United States was often represented in class discussions as something that had been dealt with in the past and that was irrelevant to the present day realities. Students frequently referred back to the Civil Rights movement and the election of Barack Obama as U.S. president as indicators that a past imbued in racism and segregation had been overcome. And often times, as I observed, there was an unwillingness to recognize any kind of similarity between the traumatic memory of slavery and that of the genocide—as one had supposedly been resolved, while the other still persisted in the memory of the Armenian diaspora.

The comparative framework undoubtedly created a resistance; when asked to identify parallel themes or styles of writing in Morrison's *Beloved* and Marcom's *The Daydreaming Boy*, one student wrote: "After having read both novels, I didn't really make any sort of connection." Another student noted: "They both deal with horrific traumas, however I feel that in *Beloved* there was more of a family trauma, whereas in *The Daydreaming Boy* there was more of an unloved and not wanted society trauma [sic]." Curiously, while the first student dismissed the persistence of violent memories that haunt the characters in Morrison's and Marcom's novels, the second student failed to recognize the African American experience of trauma on a collective level in *Beloved*, which Morrison dedicated explicitly to "sixty million and more." These reactions are comparable to Mabel Elliott's perception of Asia and the violence that took place in that "strange, bestial, incomprehensible" land. Like Elliott, some students expurgated the violence that took place in the United States, while they simultaneously recognized the violence in a foreign culture. Elliott's familiarity with racial prejudice, as I have shown in the second chapter, had been so naturalized that she was unable to perceive the atrocities and racism present in the history of the United States. Elliott wrote in her account of the genocide survivors in 1924: "Perhaps no American will ever fully understand the Armenian people. Three hundred years of pioneer life and almost unbroken peace have produced us. Three thousand years of war and hate and mixing of bloods in the maelstrom where East and West meet have produced the Armenian" (16). It is an analogous nonrecognition of violence and incredibly benign view of America's past that resonated in some students' responses who saw no connection whatsoever between the haunting presences of the Armenian trauma and the trauma of black Americans in the

United States. Some students, however, did find thematic and stylistic parallels between the two novels, as one student wrote: “[W]e get a sense of fragmented memories. I think re-memory is an important issue in both books. Both main characters seem to lose touch with reality, because of the trauma they have gone through.” Another student commented: “Instead of looking [at] traumatic experiences in the face and dealing with them, [characters] try to ‘store’ them away and lock them up, for example, in the ‘tin tobacco box’ in *Beloved* and the orphan’s box in *The Daydreaming Boy*.” Making these connections helped students reposition their readings of a domestic experience in a transnational context and develop intellectual capacities to revise the cultural codes that were naturalized “at home.”

The final assignment for the course was motivated by Morrison’s critique of the absence of an interrogative place where one could remember and mourn the totality of traumatic experiences of “sixty million and more.” Morrison remarked in a 1989 interview on the *raison d’être* of *Beloved*:

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not to think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There’s no 300 foot tower. There’s no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place does not exist (that I know of), the book had to. (“A Bench by the Road” 4)



These words resonate powerfully even today, when there *are* plaques about the experience of slavery in historical sites, such as the reconstructed plantations in the Southern states that are used as major tourist attractions, “offering windows into a bygone past” and a space “perfect for weddings and special events,” according to websites such as the “Official Tourism Site of the City of New Orleans,” but certainly not for mourning and remembrance. These spaces of “antebellum grandeur” that effortlessly integrate the slave quarters leave very little room for serious contemplation of the traumas left by the brutality of the slave system. I wanted to transform our classroom into a space, where the students could be more cognizant of the politics of memory—the political means by which events are remembered or discarded—and address the role of politics and ideology in shaping national memory.

### The Commemorative Act Project

For their final assignment in the “Nations and Narrations” class, I asked students to collaborate with one another in small groups on preparing a creative presentation of an original commemorative gesture that memorialized an event or historic moment in (or involving) the United States that affected a collective of people, whose trauma and suffering had been forgotten, erased from national memory, censored or distorted by historiography. I asked students to think of this project as an act of subversive translation aimed at unsettling national memory or problematizing representations of specific historic moments involving the United States. The students were asked to develop their own creative ways to translate the “foreignness” of trauma using a perceptible language or genre that at the same time would critique and revise influential cultural values,

ideologies, beliefs, and representations that domesticated that trauma. This assignment was especially effective, because translation gestures towards a process that endlessly negotiates with the production of meaning, which is never final. As a collaborative “translation” project, the commemorative act allowed students to participate in and experiment with the processes of conceptualizing trauma from the translator’s subjective position, as one who possesses knowledge, is vested with agency and bears a responsibility to make choices concerning the degree and direction of fidelity at work in the translation. Simultaneously, the assignment engaged the students with what Jeffrey Alexander calls a “trauma process,” in which they had to act as agents responsible for “a claim to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution” (11). The act, in most cases, invested students with a desire to change existing paradigms, even if only in a classroom setting, and transformed their learning experience from passive consumption to creative action. Finally, it invited students to reflect on the challenges by which writers are constrained including a system of language or genre, or socio-political factors such as censorship or ideology, which then allowed them to better understand other writers’ choices, styles, and techniques when they attempt to problematize, in their own poignant ways, the limitations of language in representing complex phenomena such as trauma and traumatic memory. This active engagement with what Venuti calls an “ethics of difference” motivated students to question the “American” experience by recognizing the heterogeneous experiences of different groups in the United States, to share an understanding with them, and develop new domestic values that would in turn question

naturalized ideologies and redemptive narratives that shape a falsely unified or reconciled national memory.

In choosing a case study and designing the commemorative act project, the groups of four or five students were expected to carry out the following tasks:

- Inform themselves: Do a thorough study of the cultural context in which they were working in order to develop a culturally-sensitive and effective narrative; learn as much as possible about individual and collective experiences within the particular group they were working with; research the actual historic event(s) and its consequences, existing or absent memories and its place in U.S. history, in order to develop an empathetic and ethical narrative within the parameters of the research.
- Analyze the political and ideological methods that had been deployed by various official or nonofficial bodies to censor or silence the event(s) or historic moment(s) that had brought about the collective trauma. What was the purpose of this kind of censorship? How would the students' commemorative act challenge and revise those realities?
- Study strategies deployed by other members of a collectivity who had been subjected to collective trauma: how could students adapt models of commemorating trauma to their own project?
- Examine commemorative speeches and alternative narratives that had been written in the past, yet be original when creating their own narrative.
- Identify the specific methods that they would employ to collect, arrange and present individual and collective narratives within their own narrative. How

would they collect information? How would they credit their sources? What media or technologies would they use to present that information? What were the most effective ways to translate for an audience who was uninformed or misinformed about the trauma they strove to acknowledge?

At the end of this assignment, the students were expected to produce:

- A 20-minute class presentation of their collective commemorative act. The presentation included: (a) an introduction of the historical and cultural context necessary to understand their commemorative act; (b) an original commemorative narrative; and (c) presentation of the visual aids and alternative materials that they had developed;
- A written formal report handed in on the last day of class.

Examples of case studies that students chose to present on included the Tuskegee syphilis experiment conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service between 1932-72; the deportation of the Cherokee people across Southern Illinois to Oklahoma between 1838-39; the Japanese American internments during World War II; and the U.S. government led coup of 1973 in Chile. After receiving my initial feedback on their chosen topics in the tenth week of class, the students conducted their own research independently and met with me regularly before their actual day of presentation. I urged them to incorporate first-hand narratives, but to also to focus on their own message to the audience (their fellow students and myself), through which they would mediate a new conception and remembrance of the specific historical trauma in which they were invested. I wrote in my comments on their initial proposals: “How you will effectively achieve this goal is completely up to you. Always have in mind that your audience might not know the things

that you know—so you will have to educate us about your topic and then show us why you care and why we should also care.” These histories were often new discoveries for the students who, as comparatists, were encouraged to read themselves “as a site of contradiction and contamination, [distrusting] all guides that offer to decode the exotic other, and [refusing] to become detached observer[s] exercising a free-floating, disengaged intelligence” (Bernheimer 15).

The narratives ranged from formal statements that recapitulated the past event, asking the audience to remember and to never let such atrocity happen again, to more creative performances that critically used imagery and poetic language to describe the suffering of a group. For example, the students presenting on the Tuskegee syphilis experiment showed a short silent video on which they collaborated, while a group representative read his own narrative poem, which he wrote specifically for the project. The video included images of men, mostly poor black sharecroppers, who were being subjected to a series of medical experiments for the treatment of “bad blood,” juxtaposed against images of prisoners from World War II, who were victims of Nazi medical experiments. The narrative poem, by contrast, focused on descriptions of the strength and potency of the physical body and its capacity to regenerate. At the end of their presentation, students from the audience, who admitted that they had never heard of this case, asked the presenters how they had found out about this history. The presenters responded that while there was a good amount of documentation on the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, it was not widely publicized and that they were directed to the case by a professor from the Criminal Justice department, who also provided them with helpful references. I welcomed such interdisciplinary cross-fertilization particularly

because “Nations and Narrations” was a general education course and it was important to build and sustain a connection between English studies and the other disciplines from which the students were coming.

In the end, the course turned out to be a hospitable space for learning and active remembrance, which I conceived of as a critical tool for active citizenship. The evaluations for the course varied, but were mostly positive and constructive. To the question of what they took away from the group project and the course in general, students wrote:

- I loved this class and the depth and insight that was reached. I learned so much about narrative styles and purposes. I will take everything I learned in this class and consider the concepts in everyday life. It has already aided in my own art projects when considering content and meaning. . . . I could take a class like this for a whole college career every semester.
- I really enjoyed the history aspect of this course. I liked actually learning something new. The history and the literature that went along with it made this class unforgettable. I truly have learned a great deal. I also enjoyed how you opened the class up for discussion.
- I’ll take from this course how to really analyze what I read and what the author is really trying to get across to the reader. I’ll also take a lot of knowledge and understanding about the Armenian Genocide because before this class I really didn’t know much about it.

Some of the critical responses to the question about material we did not cover and suggestions for changes to the course were the following:

– I felt the readings were more graphic than they needed to be at times. Maybe you could find other novels that get the point across but do not contain unnecessary details.

– I do not feel like the chosen texts fully educate students on the events. The Armenian genocide has two sides and only one was shown as legitimate even though it is currently debated. We did not evaluate or read any primary sources to prove [*The Daydreaming Boy's*] stories so I was left wondering why I read an author's exaggerated story without any historical facts.

As I encouraged and welcomed the students' distrust of all guides, to paraphrase Bernheimer, the comment on the two sides of the Armenian genocide was an especially important one, which I wished the student had brought up in class. The comment, of course, troubled me not only because the student had missed the course's overarching focus on the inventive problematization of traumatic memory and its place in official history, but also because it raised the question of proof, which has haunted the survivors of the Armenian genocide for nearly a century, impeding the processes of healing and forgiveness. After I reflected on the comment, I thought again of Turkey's denial of the genocide and Herman's analysis of the power to promote forgetting. The student's reference to the "current debate" was, in my view, a reiteration of the politics of forgetting. In this regard, Herman writes, "In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting." To accomplish this, Herman continues, "he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization" (8). I had, of course, raised Turkey's official stance on the genocide in class, and we had discussed the

Turkish statesmen's repeated obstructions of U.S. Congressional legislation and cultural productions that referred to the atrocities of World War I.<sup>2</sup> And yet, the student's comment urged me to reflect on my selection of materials and since my original 2008 course, I have included in similarly structured courses the works of Turkish authors and artists who have challenged Turkish national memory. For example, I included Ahmet Altan's essay "Oh Brother" (2008) for which he was charged under Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code for "publicly denigrating Turkishness," a law that criminalizes anyone for "insulting" Turkey, the Turkish ethnicity, or Turkish government institutions. I have also incorporated Fethiye Çetin's fascinating memoir *My Grandmother* (2008), which recounts Çetin's grandmother's assimilation into Turkish society during the genocide, and the controversial revelation of her Armenian ancestry. Finally, I have incorporated in my lectures stills from Kutluğ Ataman's and Atom Egoyan's collaborative video installation *Auroras/Testimony* (2007), discussed in the second chapter, which explores the translatability of traumatic experience and the memory of the genocide in Turkey. In conclusion, I was glad to be able to interrogate my own point of view through teaching this course where I engaged students with an "ethics of difference" (Venuti) and an inquiry into naturalized ideologies that shape a falsely unified or reconciled national memory. In the following section of this chapter, I discuss a bilingual translation workshop, which was similarly framed as a comparative study of the experiences of the African and the Armenian diasporas in the United States, which I led during the summers of 2009 and 2010 at the Utopiana Cultural Center in Yerevan, Armenia.

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<sup>2</sup> See Peter Balakian 373-91; Guroian; Welky.



## The Literary Translation Workshop

During the summer months of 2009 and 2010, I organized and led two sessions of a literary translation workshop in Yerevan, which was partially funded by the Swiss-Armenian nonprofit organization Utopiana. The workshop was part of the newly initiated series of creative writing workshops at the Women's Resource Center, the purpose of which was to motivate young women writers in a culturally isolated post-Soviet Armenia, encourage women's participation in literary discourses, and foster the transnational study of women's literature. While the workshop was not a formal class or degree requirement, it was able to serve young women in the contemporary Armenian literary field, which is dominated by men. This forum provided the participants with an exposure to cross-cultural literary discourses through a focus on translation, as well as promoted professional exchange and the development of a critical translation practice.

The make-up of participants was the same in both workshop sessions, insofar as the majority were professionals or university students who had (primarily passive) contact with English in their jobs or programs of study. The sessions were designed around two seminal texts: in the summer of 2009 we focused on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the following summer we read Micheline Aharonian Marcom's *The Daydreaming Boy*. We started the first session by reading and discussing theoretical texts on translation from the 1900s to the present, including Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" (1923), Roman Jakobson's "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" (1959), Alfred Arteaga's conversation with Gayatri Spivak "Bonding in Difference" (1994), Edward Said's "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals" (2001), and Emily Apter's "Twenty Theses on Translation" (2006). During these discussions the participants were invited to

think about translation in critical ways and to form their own subjectivities as translators. For example, we discussed the impact of Benjamin's argument on "the basic error of the translator" in preserving the state of a native language "instead of allowing [the] language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue" (22) in the context of Armenian, a minority language that had been condemned to extinction during the Armenian genocide and obsolescence during the Soviet era of Russification. We challenged the role of the translator as a mere communicator or imitator and related it to Said's notion of the intellectual, whose task "is to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity and mission" (27). We also questioned the invisibility of the translator in the literary field both during the Soviet period and in post-independence Armenia, engaging with Apter's thesis that "translation is a *petit métier*, translators the literary proletariat" (xi). Viewing translation as intellectual labor, we debated the translator's authorship and the economics of translation that tend to undervalue and exploit the work of the translator.<sup>3</sup> These preliminary discussions set the ground for a cultural, rather than merely linguistic, approach to translation and helped participants to articulate their own investments and entry points in past and contemporary debates on translation.

We approached the discussion of translation by critically engaging with two interrelated questions: 1) what is the role of the translator? and 2) what are the effects of translation in the translated (foreign) and translating (domestic) cultures? The participants were invited to keep vocabulary journals, which they consulted and updated on a daily

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Translator's Invisibility*, Venuti shows how factors such as the ambiguities in copyright law, the changing book markets, the translator's level of expertise, and the difficulty of a particular translation project affect translation contracts. He contends that the recognition of the translator's crucial role in the production of the translation lessens the levels of exploitation and improves the financial terms in contracts (9-12).

basis. To encourage constructive criticism and application of theoretical concepts, I provided the participants with copies of one of Shushanik Kurghinian's poems, "Dim the Chandeliers" (1906), in my own translation and an earlier translation by Diana Der-Hovanessian, asking them to compare the English versions with the original and discuss the effects in each translation.<sup>4</sup> This exercise helped them locate differences at the level of language and style as well as dialect and discourse, and equipped them with analytical tools to understand translational choices not only as subjective, but also embedded in cultural, political, and ideological milieus. Following the theoretical discussions of the purpose and effects of translation, we closely read and analyzed first Morrison's (2009) and then Marcom's (2010) novels. In addition, the participants selected passages from each text, translated them into Armenian, and discussed their own translations, which helped strengthen their translating skills and ability to express their interpretive insights and choices through critical language. At the end of the workshop, each participant compiled a portfolio-in-progress of select translated passages, which they had been revising throughout the workshop based on my feedback and the comments of other participants.

English was a second language for all participants, but they were able to engage with both the theoretical and primary texts in English or English translation. The discussions, however, were bilingual, and we switched back and forth from English to Armenian, according to the needs of the participants, who used English to improve their knowledge of the language and Armenian to make sense of words or concepts that were otherwise incomprehensible in English. Discussions on the translator's role and

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<sup>4</sup> "Dim the Candelabrum, Let the Chandeliers Rest" in Der-Hovanessian's translation in *The Other Voice: Armenian Women's Poetry Through the Ages* (2005).

subjectivity, as well as on the purpose of translation, often turned into lively debates, as some participants exhibited attachment to more traditional methods, while others were inclined to be more experimental in their methodology. Participants committed to a discourse of “preservation” of the Armenian language and culture—which is pervasive in the post-independence era, and characterized by a reductive shift from Soviet transnationalism to more conservative constructions of national identity—were reluctant to see the translator’s role as an innovator or translation as an opportunity to introduce transgressive paradigms or challenge dominant cultural values. But other participants were more critical of the existing state of Armenian culture, propagated by the Armenian Ministry of Culture through programs such as the biennial festival “One Nation, One Culture” that canonized monoethnicity and cultural conservatism.<sup>5</sup> The primary texts that I had chosen for this workshop were aimed at decentering such reductive discourses by introducing two American authors who diverged from dominant conceptions of “American” as Anglo-European and male. It was indeed a scandalous realization that after researching existing translations of works from the United States, the participants of the workshop came across not a single African American author in translation. Marcom’s case was slightly different, for if the participants were more or less familiar with the works of Armenian American writers, Marcom’s literature diverged from the conventional realism, narrative progression, and redemptive trajectory of genocide literature. In short, both texts challenged existing literary discourses in Armenian culture and set the ground for remarkable intellectual and cultural discoveries.

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<sup>5</sup> Started on August 15, 2004, “One Nation, One Culture” was sponsored by the President of Armenia Robert Kocharyan and the Armenian Ministry of Culture, aiming to “strengthen Armenia-Diaspora spiritual and cultural links, to attract the creative youth from Diaspora communities to the preservation of national culture, as well as reveal a Pan-Armenian professional potential in the cultural field” (“One Nation, One Culture,” *The Official Web Site of the Armenian Ministry of Culture*, retrieved 11 May, 2012).

My methodology in this workshop was, in part, inspired by Joseph Jacotot's "emancipatory" pedagogy examined in Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. In this experiment, conducted in 1818, Jacotot, a lecturer in French Literature, who knew no Flemish, taught French to a group of Flemish students, who knew no French, using a bilingual edition of François Fénelon's *Télémaque*. Instead of pursuing the traditional and progressive method of "explicative" teaching, Jacotot asked his students to learn through translation. The students, in turn, were able to learn "by observing and retaining, repeating and verifying, by relating what they were trying to know to what they already knew" (Rancière 10). Ultimately, as Rancière argues, "There is nothing beyond texts except the will to express, that is, to translate" (10). Guided by this method that hinged upon inventiveness rather than instruction, the participants of my workshop were not presented with rules, which they were required to apply to their translation practice, but rather were left on their own to understand and manipulate the morphology and syntax of the foreign texts. The goal of the workshop was thus not to produce "correct" translations, but to help participants explore the processes of translation and learn from their own choices concerning the degree and direction of fidelities between texts or cultural codes prevalent in Armenia. The participants were encouraged to discuss their translations during the workshop hours and these deliberations were also beneficial to a deeper analysis of the primary texts. For example, one of the participants selected a passage in *Beloved*, where Sethe, a former slave from a Kentucky plantation, explains to her daughter Denver what "rememory" is—a striking neologism that, like trauma itself, poses a challenge to translation. In her version, the translator provided an interlinear translation and also included commentary explaining her decisions:

Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away.

[Որտեղից էս գալիս եմ, այդ տեղը իրական է: Այն երբեք չի անհետանա:]

Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies.

[Եթե նույնիսկ ամբողջ ֆերման ու նրա ամեն մի ծառ ու խոտ չորանա:]

The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again . . .

[Պատկերը կմնա այնտեղ/ կլինի այնտեղ/ դեռ այնտեղ է ու ավելին՝ եթե գնաս այնտեղ, դու

ով երբեք չի եղել այնտեղ, եթե գնաս ու կանգնես հենց այդ տեղում, որտեղ դա պատահել

է/կար, դա կպատահի նորից . . .] (*Beloved* 43-44)

Here the translator comments: “I was debating between the words “նորից” [again, anew] and “կրկին” [once more]. I perceive the former as something that has taken place in the past, countless times, with countless people, but that reappears with a new tension. An event the spectacular repetition of which is unavoidable. The word “նորից” [again, anew] holds one as if in a chain . . . The other word, “կրկին” [once more], doesn't carry that sense of inescapability. I am going with the former, as Sethe reappears in or relives the event anew” (my translation). I am bringing here only a very short excerpt from the five-page long reflection on the image of “rememory,” which Mae G. Henderson calls “the residual images of [Sethe's] past,” which Sethe gives form, drama, and meaning through a process of narrativization (84). The translators spent hours discussing the concept of

“rememory” and ultimately trying to make sense of the traumatic experience of the institution of slavery, which, while as Morrison warns at the end of *Beloved*, “is not a story to pass on” (324), but, as the novel also insists, has to be re-membered through verbal translation. Like Morrison, the translators also had to find devices for manipulating what Lefevere calls “textual and conceptual grids” (77) in a way that communication would not only be possible, but would determine how traumatic reality is constructed for the reader.

The violence posed by the linguistic appropriation of the foreignness of trauma was something that Morrison too had to counter. Commenting on her choice to reconstruct the foreignness of the traumatic turmoil in the house on Bluestone Road and those who dwell in or haunt it, Morrison writes:

There would be no lobby into this house, and there would be no “introductions” into it or into the novel. I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense. (*Beloved* xviii)

The “alien environment”—the traumatic memory of slavery— threatens, in Morrison’s translation, the fluency of language and the reader’s environment that require “proper” introductions and warnings of graphic material. The narrative in *Beloved* “snatches” the reader from a comfort zone and spins in circles, reenacting the ways in which Sethe’s disquieting “rememories” engulf her. Morrison’s experimentation with language and narrative exemplified for the translators in the workshop the complicated relationship between trauma and language and the author’s attempt to construct a textual and



conceptual framework that would bring the reader closer to the foreignness of traumatic experience by re-membering slavery and dis-membering language. In a conversation with Patricia Saunders, African Caribbean Canadian writer NourbeSe Philip states that, “So much of what we’re living with today is linked to that first experience in globalization where the currency of globalization was the black body. Black bodies could be taken anywhere in the world, at any point in time, *sans passport, sans visa*” (76). At a time, she continues, “when we are often told we need to forget and move on,” the very (f)act of remembering the traumas of slavery “can be an act of subversion and resistance” (77). In this sense, “globalizing” the memory of slavery becomes another act of subversion, as it leads to uncharted connections with other less studied (and thus less remembered) historical traumas such as the Armenian genocide.

My choice in focusing on Morrison’s text was clearly strategic, as it aimed to introduce a group of young Armenian writers to what Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark*, calls an “unsettled and unsettling population” in American literature (6) and to resist “the literary ‘whiteness’ . . . in the construction of what is loosely described as ‘American’”(9). I was invested in filling in a vacuum in the Armenian literary discourse on “American” writers, who were and still are perceived as predominantly Anglo-European and male. This representation, of course, has its roots in the fact that national literatures, as Morrison writes, “seem to end up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind. For the most part, the literature of the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a *new white man*” (*Playing* 14). In this sense, I wanted the workshop participants to contemplate how “Africanist personae, narrative, and idiom” moved and enriched the body of “American” literature and engage with this diasporic



utterance that decentered the “‘normal,’ unracialized, illusory white world” (*Playing* 16) that also existed in the Armenian imaginary.

I included Marcom’s *The Daydreaming Boy* to further complicate the understanding of the Armenian experience of trauma in a global context and to make the issue of translation visible in the representation of the Armenian genocide. The translation of Marcom’s novel helped the workshop participants to not only analyze the author’s choices to foreignize English in the representation of the memory of the genocide, but also to scrutinize the representation of this historical trauma in any language, including their native Armenian. Marcom’s fiction, unlike any other work written in response to the Armenian genocide, problematizes the domesticating effects that traditional realism, narrative progression, and redemptive closures have produced in the representation of the aftermath of the Armenian genocide and survival. If the role of translation, be it verbal, intralingual, or interlingual, seemed intangible before in the perception of this historical trauma familiar to participants, the experience of translating it from English and in comparative juxtaposition with Morrison’s *Beloved* revealed the various forces at play in the representation of this event. As one of the participants wrote in her final reflection, “My approach to translation changed after this workshop. If before I thought of translating as finding an equivalent of a foreign phrase in my native tongue, I now perceive of the translator as a writer, who has to operate within a set of codes and conventions that she either maintains or transgresses” (my translation). In the end, I hoped that the participants of the workshop would continue regarding translation activities not only as being embedded in linguistics, but also as having cultural significance. And I endeavored to encourage anyone studying the literature of the

Armenian genocide, or other diasporic literatures shaped by a catastrophic event, to raise the question of translatability in more specific terms, beyond rhetorical statements of untranslatability and by developing critical lenses for reading against domesticating effects and locating discontinuities that expose the translation as being a replacement of inassimilable experience with language(s).

## Conclusion

When I began designing the “Nations and Narrations” course at Illinois State University and the Yerevan translation workshop I had only a vague idea of how much I would learn about teaching literature in a comparative framework and about the need to bring attention to the issues of translatability not only in the study of the Armenian genocide, but in other bodies of diasporic literature. The success of these pedagogical experiments also stemmed from the support I received from my mentors at Illinois State University, and directors at Utopiana and the Women’s Resource Center who provided me with space and invaluable teaching resources. In my quest to introduce and integrate the literature of the Armenian genocide into the general education curriculum at Illinois State University, I employed the overarching method of defamiliarization to denaturalize established perceptions of phenomena such as the traumas of the African diaspora and to address the absence of conversations about the Armenian diasporic experience in the United States. The comparison of these historical traumas pushed students to reconceptualize their familiarity with trauma and perceive it in nonhabitual contexts, which created the possibility of discarding old and seemingly concretized ideas and constructing new critical conceptions of trauma and representation. Similarly, the literary

translation workshop in Yerevan enabled me to challenge narrow conceptions of the “American” experience in the newly forming post-Soviet Armenian literary milieu and to explore the representation of the Armenian genocide in a transnational context.

Translation, in this framework, was useful for disengaging from the assimilation of someone else’s “otherness,” to paraphrase Lyn Hejinian, and for catalyzing one’s own “otherness” and the foreignness of one’s own language (303).

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