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Feminist Cultural Analysis of an Invisibilized Genocide: Gender, Disability, and Memory in texts by Zabel Yesayan

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Feminist Cultural Analysis of an Invisibilized Genocide: Gender, Disability, and Memory in
texts by Zabel Yesayan

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Honors Capstone Project in Women's and Gender Studies

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Abstract

This research is a feminist cultural analysis of the novels, letters, and short stories of Zabel Yesayan. Yesayan was a writer, activist, and teacher during the early twentieth century, during the Armenian Genocide, and up until her death in the mid-1940s when the Soviet Union took control of Eastern European countries, including Armenia. This project insists not only on telling the history of an invisibilized genocide, but also on telling that history through a critical feminist lens based on the documented observations and creative interventions of a woman who lived during the genocide.

In many of her works, Yesayan imagines transgressive relationships between people. She enacts feminist recovery work and refusal in her work of fiction, *My Soul in Exile*, by exploring the intimate relationships women artists develop with one another. She uses similar logics when she imagines the full and meaningful lives people led before the Adana massacres in her novel *In the Ruins*. Her representations of disability and violence often go beyond the pain narrative that stories about war and genocide typically invoke, and her letters reveal that she understood the social construction of race in the Ottoman Empire. Her recovery work includes testimonies people provide during her travels, as well as her writing about sites of massacre, such as the charred remains of a church where hundreds of people were burned. Her writing imagines, rearticulates, and preserves what people's final moments might have been like.

Yesayan is also transparent both about the privilege she carries when she interviews people whose families were killed and about her helplessness to provide significant support. By working with and through the contradictions and impossibilities of her position, she takes her praxis seriously, which is central to feminist methodology and epistemology.

Executive Summary

This project is conscious and critical of categories such as race, class, disability, and gender in writings by Zabel Yesayan, who was an activist, political advocate, and writer who lived from the late-19th century through the mid-20th century. The broad, overarching framework of this research considers Yesayan's writings and political work an entry point into the historical context behind the Armenian Genocide. Poetry, autoethnography, and textual analysis create the structure of this project. This also involves grappling with researcher positionality tensions and paying careful attention to the place from which I do this research. In other words, this is a self-conscious project. The analyses I form are filtered through my identities as a first-generation Armenian woman in the U.S. diaspora who is presenting her research for a university thesis.

To conduct this research, I traveled to Yerevan, Armenia to look through archives for unpublished writings, letters, and other first-hand documents by Zabel Yesayan. To have that kind of international mobility is significant to my research overall, because if I had not been able to travel then my scope of analysis would not be as wide. I speak Armenian but do not read or write Armenian, so the translated texts I have found or procured inform the brunt of my analyses. The text that I have had translated from Armenian to English is *Meliha Nouri Hanem*, which flips the script on who gets to speak for whom. In other words, since Yesayan writes the work of fiction from the first-person perspective of a Turkish woman—who is a nationalist, fervent military supporter, and lives during the beginning of the genocide—she breaks from most narratives around the genocide which focus on the victim's pain and suffering. There is tension in those pain-centered narratives, which Yesayan also negotiates in her other texts: writers want the world to recognize the violence done to Armenians, but they don't want the focus to be more on people's pain and less on the Young Turks' violence. In *Meliha Nouri Hanem*, Yesayan

writes from a subaltern position—a term which Gayatri Spivak coined that refers to oppressed groups—about the group in power, to disrupt both this literary and political way of looking at others.¹

Apart from a set of translated French documents, the other texts I analyze in this project are *In the Ruins* and *My Soul in Exile*. *In the Ruins* is the written account of the relief mission and reporting work that Yesayan and four other people did shortly after the Adana massacres of 1909. They were assigned the task by the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople and Yesayan frequently discusses her frustration with the limitations of the project both in the book and, more directly and vehemently, in several articles she published after the trip. In the book, she is conscious of the fact that their presence stirs up pain among the survivors and she struggles with reporting on the conditions without extracting their pain. She blurs genre by using creative nonfiction techniques alongside testimony and journalistic writing. For instance, she does imagining work when she visits sites of massacre. By “imagining work,” I mean that she wonders and creates stories around what people experienced, thought, and felt before they were killed; she does this because, otherwise, those realities would be erased and gone forever. In some of her personal letters to her husband during this trip, Yesayan reveals that she believes racial distinctions between Turkish and Armenian people are entirely artificial and manufactured, because both groups are similar in many ways.

In her work of fiction, *My Soul in Exile*, Yesayan writes from the first-person perspective of an Armenian woman and artist named Emma, who draws creative, personal, and political energy from the other woman artists in her life several years after the genocide. Emma feels like she is an exile in her own country, but her relationships with the other women in the text make her feel grounded socially and artistically. She stresses that people draw strength from their

social networks, and it is those social networks that oppressive regimes seek to destroy. By maintaining those connections among survivors, people refuse their erasure. Emma also insists on making and sustaining intergenerational memories as another form of survival through counter-memory. She talks about how her aunt makes rose jam, which is a methodical and skilled process that communicates stories—Emma explicitly says “that’s not jam, that’s poetry”—that were passed down through generations. By talking about the rose jam, Emma insists that personal spaces are political, and intimate forms of knowledge can survive despite systematic efforts to eliminate them.

There is urgency to this research because the Armenian Genocide is denied and unacknowledged in many countries today, including Turkey and the United States. Given this political situation, there is not an abundance of literature on the genocide that takes a deliberately feminist stance and unpacks how and why narratives around the genocide form in the ways they do, because most writers simply want to get the documentation out into the world. Yesayan’s writing moves in and out of different genres as she thinks about her role in meditating stories and testimony on the genocide. She breaks apart layered identities and thinks about race, gender, and disability, whereas other writers remain within dominant and overarching themes around genocide. In order to do justice work around the Armenian Genocide today, an analysis of any person’s writing about the genocide must break down the role of race, gender, disability, class, and empire.

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I. Introduction

This multi-pronged project is a feminist cultural analysis that looks at the literary devices Zabel Yesayan uses in her writing and the political praxes she enacted in her advocacy and reporting work. My goal is not only to provide a lens into the history of an invisibilized genocide, but also to tell that history through a critical feminist lens based on the documented observations and creative interventions of a woman who lived during the genocide. Much of the literature and historiography on the Armenian Genocide compiles evidence, testimony, and documentation, in an urgent attempt to show the world that the genocide did, in fact, occur. In the process, critical feminist analyses of those writings and the historiography of the genocide become secondary and may even be considered divisive. This project insists that feminist analyses—which take seriously questions of methodology, race, gender, disability, empire, and genre—are foundationally integral to writing about the genocide.

Yesayan was a writer, activist, and teacher during the early twentieth century, during the Armenian Genocide, and up until her death in the mid-1940s when the Soviet Union took control of Eastern European countries, including Armenia. She published the first testimony on the Armenian Genocide and corresponded with various officials in the Ottoman Empire, France, and other nations. The bulk of her writing and political advocacy took place following the Young Turk revolution of 1908 when the Young Turks, otherwise known as Unionists, orchestrated genocide against Armenians. The Unionists sought to strengthen the Ottoman Empire, which had already been dissolving for decades, and to homogenize the empire by conflating what it meant to be ‘Ottoman’ and ‘Turkish’ (Akçam 85). To preserve the empire, Unionists used Armenians—and to a lesser extent other ethnic minorities—as scapegoats for the deterioration of the Ottoman Empire. Armenians and other minorities had been marginalized, disenfranchised, and massacred

through shifting cultural-legal frameworks throughout the 19th century; any attempt to seek international intervention was construed as traitorous to the nation. The Young Turks used World War I as a cover to exterminate 1.5 million Armenians, especially from central areas of the Ottoman Empire. Leaders told lower-ranking officials that no more than ten percent of the Armenian population in any town could be allowed to survive (Akçam 178). This further supports the idea that the genocide was about maintaining empire because a tiny percentage of Armenians was not a political threat, whereas larger communities of Armenians could rise up with one another's support.

In addition to understanding this historical context, I want to lay bare my relationship with these histories. My relationship with the texts is affected by the ways my family history interlocks with the events and issues Yesayan discusses, interrogates, and exposes in her writing. That makes this project necessarily multidimensional: just as Yesayan's writings themselves are acts of feminist recovery, so is this project an attempt to articulate invisibilized histories from a feminist standpoint. Her recoveries are feminist because they find and piece together stories in ways that take gender, class, and other identities into account. I structure my historiographic recovery work around Yesayan's life and writings through three main modes of analysis: archival research; specific feminist analysis of three books, several letters, and political correspondence by Yesayan; and an autoethnographic discussion and creative exploration of where the project fits into larger social contexts of diaspora and erasure.

Part of my goal is to articulate the parts of Yesayan's life, literary contributions, and political involvements that have either remained unexamined in archives or have not been analyzed through a decolonial, critical feminist lens. To accomplish this, I have adopted different styles and structures of writing—such as weaving poetry I have written in between textual

analyses—because they afford new openings and vantage points to reading subaltern histories from my perspective as a first-generation Armenian woman in the US (this point on methodological interventions will be discussed further in upcoming chapters). There are often memories and ideas that are felt but not fully expressed among families living in diaspora, and poetry can also act as a means of communicating those half-formed but deeply-felt thoughts. Poetry acts as felt theory and method; it is a guiding analytic to understanding method, including refusal. Audre Lorde underlines this tension when she writes, “This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless—about to be birthed, but already felt” (Lorde). Authors such as Aisha Durham incorporate multiple styles of writing and methodology into their work. As Durham says, the “writer/researcher objectivity” denies “the very sensuality that is needed to understand and represent [embodiment]” and denying that false split invites interventions including poetry (Durham).

Tuck and Yang write about a similar kind of sensuality around memory: desire. Their articulation of desire does not erase pain, but it goes beyond the flattening one-dimensionality of pain narratives and “invites the ghosts that history wants exorcised, and compels us to imagine the possible in what was written as impossible.” (Tuck and Yang) Some people’s bodies, their survival, were made impossible during the Ottoman Empire; Yesayan shows how survival creeps up through stories, memories, imagined pasts and futures, and acts of resistance. In other words, Tuck and Yang write that “desire is haunted,” which means people’s bodies are haunted—pleasantly and painfully—with the ghosts that make memory tactile and reflexive with the present. Desire suggests people’s ability to survive and their multiplicities of experience and humanity. According to Tuck and Yang, there are “productive tensions between genres and

epistemologies,” which is what I hope this project accomplishes through a layered writing structure. Besides her first- and second-person testimonials, Yesayan wrote works of fiction, (creative) non-fiction, and journalism about the Armenian Genocide. Her decision to write in each of those genres was strategic, political, and creative and hinged on the time period and location from which she wrote. Placed in conversation with one another, her works dialogue across genres, producing those highly political, productive tensions in intent, style, and epistemology that Tuck and Yang describe.

Durham uses “autoethnography, creative interviewing, semiotics, poetry, participant observation, life story, performance texts, and self-story construction” to piece together her book, *Home with Hip Hop Feminisms*, because she maintains that what researchers say is as important as how they say it. By pulling together an array of genres and styles, she pieces together a book that angles and re-angles its approach and relationship to the issues she interrogates, re-working and layering meaning through each maneuver. Her work takes on a dialogical quality, and this is the same result I hope to accomplish with this project. In order to thoroughly examine the writing and historical contributions of a writer who continuously stretched the boundaries of genre, I believe my project needs to possess similar qualities. For instance, thinking about Yesayan’s writing through poetry lends to different analyses and readings of the text than do creative nonfiction or textual analysis, respectively. By using different analytic techniques, I am able to craft multiple entry points into Yesayan’s writings.

Yesayan’s *My Soul in Exile* and *Meliha Nouri Hanem* are both fiction stories, while *In the Ruins* is a novel that centers testimony and Yesayan’s observations of the Adana massacres that preceded the genocide. I am interested in how Yesayan negotiates the power she holds when she visits massacred towns and villages with her cohort of reporters from Constantinople. She

openly admits that she, in many ways, is unable to help the people from those towns. Even though she feels kinships and solidarity with people, her mere presence causes the survivors' tremendous grief as they retell and relive their trauma.

I also explore how Yesayan emphasizes the resiliency, refusal, and tenderness she witnesses, such as when orphaned children adopt one another as siblings, since most narratives around the Armenian Genocide stop at (voyeuristic) descriptions of pain and destruction. This forms a central part of my argument that, even when she describes the disabling violence of the massacres and genocide, Yesayan still constructs epistemologically desire-centered narratives similar to the ones Tuck and Yang argue researchers should adopt. Additionally, I draw from some of her short stories, letters, and articles on contemporary issues, such as how gender and race work their way into the political imagination during the early 20th century Ottoman Empire. I consider the differences in how she discusses gender and race in her personal letters, telegrams to political leaders, and works of fiction and non-fiction (both of which are tenuous categories for Yesayan, who borrows techniques from different genres in a given piece of writing). With *Meliha Nouri Hanem*, I discuss how Yesayan redirects the literary (and therefore political) gaze onto the oppressor, another important strategy that Tuck and Yang discuss. By questioning who gets to speak about whom, Yesayan reveals the state indoctrination of Turkish people against Armenians. This is a decolonizing move, even if Yesayan never overtly says that is her intent.

Previous analyses of Yesayan's writings have not made connections across her various texts. Such connections would include how her works of fiction imagine characters as a way to decolonize relationships between people against the background of state disintegration of social networks. For instance, two of the women in *My Soul in Exile*, Emma and Mrs. Danielian, become "comrades in struggle" and "companions in exile" amidst a climate in which they are

exiles in their native land (Yesayan 18). Yesayan invokes exile because the genocidal, cultural destruction and dissolution of Armenians rendered survivors fragmented not only in geography but also in their emotional relationships with themselves and others. By insisting they are comrades and companions in both struggle and exile, Emma and Mrs. Danielian refuse the splintering effects of the genocide. Imagining and refusal operate through similar logics when Yesayan goes beyond stagnant representations of pain and imagines the full and meaningful lives people led before the Adana massacres in her novel *In the Ruins*.

To preface the following chapters that present textual analysis and autoethnography, I will discuss what the word *genocide* means in a wider context as well as what it means for the purposes of this project. Martin Shaw writes in *What Is Genocide?*, “Because groups are social constructions, they can be neither constituted nor destroyed simply through the bodies of their individual members...understood as destroying groups’ social power in economic, political, and cultural senses...” (Shaw 2007). Genocide scholarship entertains some ambiguity around when an instance or series of violent events are classified as “genocide.” The distinction is made between specific and general intent—specific intent is the outright, premeditated goal to exterminate a group of people, while general intent does not dictate that the state explicitly sought the annihilation of a group. However, general intent says that the actions carried out by or on behalf of the state should reasonably be enough for dominant groups to know that the consequences of their policies would be the genocidal death and erasure of a group, even if that was not their direct goal. The United Nations wrote a 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide that set up a list of articles which act as guides to determine when genocide has occurred.

This project, however, will not use this internationally codified language to analyze the historical and political context within which Yesayan wrote her books and essays. I am more interested in how Yesayan discusses genocide than in how national or international bodies interpret the significance of her work or of the Armenian Genocide. The United States is among the countries that do not recognize the Armenian Genocide, but this lack of state-level recognition does not make the testimonies and accounts Yesayan provides any less real. This project is partially grounded in the reasons that women of color, such as Kimberle Crenshaw, provide for the importance of naming problems. Crenshaw says that, “where there's no name for a problem, you can't see a problem, and when you can't see a problem, you pretty much can't solve it” (Crenshaw). Yesayan’s writings and political work are implicitly involved in a continuous process of naming the Armenian Genocide a “genocide” and a call to others to recognize the violence as genocidal.

II. Research Process, Methodology, and Narrative Structure: A Dialectic between Multi-Pronged Analytic Styles

Living as an Armenian woman in diaspora is a particular epistemological position that informs my methodology in this project. Since part of this project is an exploration of my research process, my methodology is woven through much of the thesis. I tease apart Yesayan's research process, and it is only fair to do the same to mine, especially because such examinations are key to feminist inquiries. In order to accomplish a project that adds to diasporic, transnational feminist scholarship by addressing issues of disability, race, class, gender, and sexuality within literature around an invisibilized genocide whose narrative has largely been masculinist, I have decided to use a multi-pronged approach to writing.

If this project comes into conversation with itself through different styles of writing, then it becomes a generative and multi-dimensional space of contradiction, messiness, and shifting levels of silence and speech. Poetry, for instance, is an analytic practice that can enact refusal by carving non-literal spaces where writers can construct the architecture of feelings, memories, or ideas without explicitly naming them. In those cases, power comes from the ability to describe location, emotion, and struggle without making it so easy for the reader to map out the architecture at the start.

Autoethnography, on the other hand, interjects vulnerability, reflections on investments into the project, and an engagement with the politics of location which make any piece of writing necessarily subjective. Writings on the Armenian Genocide tend to stress inherent truth, factuality, and objectivity, in part out of defensiveness, since the genocide is widely unacknowledged and denied. However, as feminist theorists and scholars such as Donna Haraway maintain, the subjectivity and partial perspective of any piece of writing in no way

discredit or make any less real the content of the writing (Haraway). Insisting that where people speak or write from is as important as what they say produces a radical politics of location that understands and lays bare the workings of power (Alcoff).

Therefore, this rests on the ability of the interplay between the auto-ethnographic, poetic, and textual analytic sections to create differential but mutually informed sites of access into memory-making and feminist recovery work. Each of these different styles of writing themselves creates additional layers of subjectivity and filtered entry into the epistemologies and analyses I discuss. For the textual analyses, I either rely on texts that have already been translated into English by the Armenian International Women's Association (which is the case with *In the Ruins* and *My Soul in Exile*) or texts I have had translated (*Meliha Nouri Hanem* and the letters, short stories, and telegrams) from Armenian and French into English. In either of these cases, but especially with the already-translated texts, my analyses rely on meanings that have been refracted through a different language and lost the precise vocabulary (and cultural and social context behind the vocabulary) the author used to create specific subtext in the original works. I have communicated with the person who translated *In the Ruins* to ask about their specific word choices, and these conversations inform my methodology and reading of the texts. I have also met with the person who translated the shorter documents from French to English and had phone conversations with the person who translated *Meliha Nouri Hanem* from Armenian to English. In the latter case, there were a few instances in the text where he read the Armenian passages out loud and we decided together that certain words were more accurate translations than the ones he had initially written. I initially tried to familiarize myself with the documents in Armenian through the help of family and friends prior to getting them translated, but my understanding is limited by my inability to read Armenian or French.

Citing Madison, Durham says the auto-ethnographic components of her books demonstrate the “struggle of memory” or the “politicization of memory.” I also hope to demonstrate the tangled nature of recalling and reconstructing memories from lived experience, in part by positioning auto-ethnography in conversation with poetry, since poetry is an indirect approach to unfolding similar stories auto-ethnography unfolds (Madison). Durham insists on the “life-affirming poetics that emerge from a doing, knowing body,” and I too consider poetry a means of centering the knowing body (Durham 2). Yesayan pushed against the boundaries of genre and much of her writing takes elements from creative nonfiction, journalistic writing, fiction, poetry, and testimony to create a politically charged, messy literary space of interrogation and introspection. In order to do justice to an analysis of her work, it makes sense that my project follow the spirit of her writing.

In order to produce a historiography that grapples with my methodological and epistemological concerns, it is necessary to locate myself in this research. My trepidations around this project include but are not limited to these points:

- How does my location in the diaspora, at a US university, enable me with the academic and financial means to produce this research? For instance, the amount of money I spent making copies at the Museum of Literature and Art in Armenia is equivalent to two months’ salary for a working class person in Armenia. The fact that I had the financial access to physically take the evidence of these under-examined histories home with me suggests they are not histories that are as easily accessible to the people actually living in Armenia. Instead, they are easily accessible to people, like me, who want to do research—the academic codification of knowledge supersedes the acquisition of knowledge by people from socially and political liminal sites of access.

- How best can I practice this feminist methodology without reducing Yesayan’s work—such as her personal letters—to yet another kind of representation that gets consumed?
- What strategies can I use to make sure that I situate her writing within her standpoint and access to power, and not generalize her writing or think of her as an authentic bearer of knowledge about women or the genocide?
- What parts of my personal histories should be held in productive conversation with Yesayan’s writings, and which should be off-limits to the academy? In following Tuck and Yang argue that the university, whose knowledges are necessary settler-colonial, does not deserve to know everything about people’s intimate histories, and that this refusal makes transparent the limitations of producing knowledges within academic spaces?

My entry point into this research is unalterably personal, and I choose to do this research because I am adamant that personal and intimate knowledges are valid, important, and necessary in reading and re-articulating invisibilized histories (see [Carol Hanisch](#), [Gloria Anzaldúa](#), and [Barbara Cameron](#)). As Durham, who writes that she began narrating working class black girls’ experiences many years before she wrote her book, says in her introduction, “there can be no meaningful theorization of power that is not felt first” (Durham). That is why I will present and engage with the ways my family history and current location in diaspora inform my relationship with both the hegemonic and subversive histories I wish to analyze through a feminist cultural analysis. If I do not locate myself in this work, and “write [myself and] write [my] body” as Trinh T. Minh Ha says, any theorization or historiographic analysis would not go far beyond abstract. By centralizing the personal through the body, recovery also becomes a political project.

Yesayan and her writings also relate with Durham's point about meaningful theorizations through the body. Yesayan feels the power she condemns and denounces in her books and her theorization through her body. She chooses creative interventions into power because she sees them as springboards into creating meaning through collective and intergenerational stories and memories. She was the only woman who was on the list of Armenian intellectuals and professionals who were the first to be targeted for extermination at the start of the Armenian Genocide on April 24th, 1915.¹ The fact that she published *In the Ruins* in 1911 undoubtedly played a large role in her persecution, which she likely realized was a possibility when she published the book. She escaped to Bulgaria but later returned to lead relief efforts for orphans and refugees in Cilicia and other cities.

Her own experiences with exile likely fueled her drive to help others, and another way she thought to help people was by writing her next book, *My Soul in Exile*, in 1922. While leading relief efforts for orphaned children and refugees has direct, immediate, and material impacts on others' lives, her book about tenderness, art, and the strong bonds of kinship even during exile and alienation had its own kind of material impact. It would be false to set up a dichotomy of materiality between the two, because they both tap into and refuse power and have large-scale embodied effects. Trinh T. Minh Ha discusses this "division between the writer/the intellectual and the activists/the masses," which is made possible through the elevation of "functional" and "clear" language (Trinh T. 16). Within that framework, writing is not an act in itself, but a conduit for action. For Yesayan, however, writing is an act, and it is enough of one to stand on its own have bear its own political value. She does not create a hierarchy between her advocacy work and her work as a writer. Her writing, particularly in *My Soul in Exile*, lacks

¹ 100 Years, 100 Facts. 2015.

clarity, which itself underscores the complicated, at times untraceable and unreachable emotional and intergenerational consequences of genocide and exile. The lack of clarity in her writing—the way she jumps across geographies, time periods, and goes back and forth between her attitudes towards issues—stands against the masculinist and imperialist drive for clear and cohesive language.

With the Armenian Genocide in particular, but genocide in general, literature that reveals the hierarchical nature of the violence meted by the genocidal party is systematically prohibited and destroyed in the same ways people's bodies are prohibited and destroyed.² The body becomes a physical site of communication. In other words, by virtue of existing, members of a near-annihilated and oppressed group—*because* they are members of that group—signify the guilt of the genocidal party. Yesayan's books have the same function, and they are particularly political because her work as a writer pushed against gendered expectations of whose writings and what kind of writings should occupy a substantial amount of space in the public consciousness.

I was extremely hesitant and uncomfortable with selecting this research topic from the start. Part of me did not wish to do pursue this project, but that discomfort is what ultimately pushed me to continue. My hesitation stemmed in part from my wariness around what it means for me to do this research as someone whose ethnicity is mostly either disappeared or associated with genocide. The Armenian Genocide may be systemically unacknowledged and erased, but it still remains a primary association with "Armenian." In following Trinh T. Minh Ha, who writes about being a native informant for the academy, I wondered toward the beginning of this project if writing this analysis would "typecast" and curtail the scope of my personhood within the

² See [here](#) for an example of systematic erasure of genocide documentation.

language and logics of violence and erasure. However, part and parcel of the methodology of this project is that feminist interventions refuse to fall silent even though the stories they tell may be co-opted and may be insufficient to transform and subvert the dominant ideologies and systems they speak against. This may be true for a variety of representations, but feminist stories that go against the grain of dominant story- and history-making are more at a risk of being co-opted.

Gloria Anzaldúa writes that “we are not reconciled to the oppressors who whet their howl on our grief,” meaning that women of color writers are not reconciled into silence simply because their stories of pain will likely be met with voyeuristic consumption, tokenization, and co-optation (Anzaldúa). Anzaldúa practices refusal against that silencing by writing about the personal and painful realities that would otherwise remain felt but unwritten and unmarked. My hope is that this project, which goes into descriptions of mass-scale death, terror, and intergenerational emotional trauma and survival, enacts a similar kind of refusal.

During my travels to Armenia in the summer of 2016, I was struck by the ease with which I was able to travel outside the US. It is strange and disorienting to visit somewhere I had never physically been before, but one that I was intimately familiar with through stories, photographs, and conversations with my family. In comparison to my ease of travel that summer, the fact that my parents have been undocumented for most of my life came into sharper contrast. Due to my mother’s citizenship status, she was barred from returning to her home for over two decades. This made me feel the weight of my passport during my travels all the more as I realized I could visit nearly any place in the world.

Since my mother left Armenia in 1995, only four years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the changing political state of the country—which is not in any way disconnected from increasing globalization, evidenced by the KFCs, Black Angus restaurants, and US clothing

retailers in Yerevan—brought with it huge shifts in the physical and social geographies of Yerevan, Armenia’s capital. Buildings and streets have been renovated dramatically, parks have been expanded, and there are revenue-generating ventures at every corner, such as small amusement park rides in city parks.

I wondered, walking around the streets in Yerevan, what it means that the memories my mother has of the city where she grew up do not match up with the present-day realities. What does that say about the coherence and linearity of how we remember, and how our remembering is tinged and sometimes supplanted by the changed spaces we occupy? Does my mother fit into those spaces any longer, or is her relationship with Yerevan locked in another point in time—is she in a diaspora of time as well? I thought about these questions as I visited archives such as the Museum of Literature and Art and the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute. Since I do not read or write Armenian, I relied on others’ readings of documents, whose suggestions were limited by our mutual understanding of my goals for the project. My limited knowledge during this process of document acquisition is part of my method and struggle with translations.

I was unable to read any of the signs and posters in Yerevan, let alone texts in the archives. I began to teach myself Armenian after a couple days and I was able to read words like “petrol” and “supermarket” by the end of the trip. However, I couldn’t shake the discomfort I felt with my illiteracy in the country where my parents, grandparents, and most (if not all) others in my genealogy have lived. While I don’t know the extent of that genealogy, because of the Armenian Genocide which killed all of my maternal great-grandfather’s family, except for one brother, it is safe to assume that I am the first person in my lineage who has felt somewhat like a stranger in Armenia, apart from my mother’s experience of return.

Toward the end of my trip in Armenia, I visited Garni-Geghard (Geghard is a medieval monastery while Garni is a temple, but most people refer to the two in unison due to their proximity). I wondered what it means that Geghard is recognized and made politically legible as a UNESCO World Heritage Site—how can this part of Armenian heritage be recognized while other parts are obscured? It seems odd that an international, Western organization like UNESCO gets to decide what parts of Armenia are legible within a world heritage narrative. Additionally, for there to be heritage, there must be inheritance, and I am wary of who gets to inherit histories that are global in scale. As I see it, the inheritors of those sites are more likely to be people with the capital and political status necessary to travel to and enjoy those world heritage sites.

It struck me that one of the most notable markers and symbols of inherited Armenian identity—Masis and Ararat Mountains—was visible from a terrace at Khor Virap, a monastery near Garni Temple. About halfway between the monastery and the mountains are poles that indicate the dividing line between Armenia and Turkey. I stood there, gazing at the mountains where, folklore and the Book of Genesis have it, lies Noah's Arc, thinking to myself that physical barriers—such as the one between Turkey and Armenia's southern border, established through the 1921 Treaty of Kars—are laughably artificial, but so politically, socially, and emotionally material.³

While I am not a religious person, I recognize the deeply spiritual and collectively felt relationship many Armenians have with Ararat and Masis. They are symbolic markers of survival and identity and a connection with ancestral lands and family networks that are easily forgotten or erased in many other circumstances that are not as immovable as mountains. The

³ 100 Years, 100 Facts. 2016.

fact that arguably the most quintessential symbol of Armenian identity lies in Turkey suggests at least a dispersal and dissipation of identity, if not an altogether loss and co-optation of it.

Some histories, such as ones related to the genocide, are impossible to remember and rearticulate because they have been obscured by political propaganda and policy, if not literally burned and erased. This latter physical destruction of memory is a deeply political process—collective forgetting is an active, political, colonial, genocidal process, just as remembering is an active process. The memories and emotional interventions that Yesayan makes into remembering and making sense of collective identity after the genocide have systematically been made invisible. That is why I decided to do this research—I want to analyze her work from my position in the diaspora and through my subjectivity as a feminist, first-generation, white-passing woman of color who is still working out her political location and the messiness of her personal and political histories.

III. Poems

It hits me in waves
Like crashing salty pools
of wetness in bygone worlds
it beats against large rocks eroded
over millennia into grotesque and
dreamless shapes
and settled on the ocean floor
with a finality that I will never know
rocks covered in dancing moss and sea
urchins and I can never get too close
for fear of touching the rough
purple pricks and being poisoned
it sounds like the openness
of the sea and the murky water
teeming with aloneness
it is the sand, rough and coarse
and rich with the dead bodies of
half-decayed carp, mackerel, stingray
it is the same sand that moves in eddies
and alternating currents
racing to expose a bottom that has never
been seen by fish or mammal or bug
packed away beneath a lifetime of water
it is finally the taste of salt that reminds me
of home
it is that taste that I fill my nostrils and
lungs with, coughing and sputtering
in pain when the remembering becomes
too much

on remembering trauma

Stolen away from
home
Stolen away
from home
Stolen
away from home

Does the correct pronunciation of your name
Belong to you any longer—

or did you whisper it to no one in particular one day
and tell it goodbye?
But not before you practiced saying it out loud
over and over and over
until it no longer sounded like a name
until the muscles in your jaw and neck and face
Committed the shape and weight of the letters
To memory
Your tongue running over each one separately
Looking for something that tastes like home
To hold on to and dream with at night

names

The contours of my body are all

i

will

allow you to see

You will

not

know

whether my

veins

bunch together like

salamanders

the ends

curling in perfect half-spiral tails

each folding over on

to

the

other

or

if they are

ragged

and gnarled

like a

twisted

vine canopy

You will

not

know

what I really wanted to

put

in

those letters

words that sit heavy

on my chest like a companion

You will

not

know
that my hand
and my stomach
ached as I wrote
shook
You will
not
know
that I
had given up on
living into
old
age
long
ago

Zabel in prison

Compost bin tea

the body sings high-pitched when it slams
against the ground

loudly, like your heartbeat during the night.
it scares me because i think *what if your heart*

stops beating. when i was a kid i rode my blue
scooter in the parking lot behind my

apartment building. i circled around the ribbons
and veins of gasoline-kissed cement

and fell smack on my forehead. the *thump*
disturbed the ants and beetles that made homes

within the cracks in the brick-lined fence between
the adjoining apartment building and mine.

tonight, the steam hisses out of the teapot with a
cracked lid. your dad has an infuser full of

“compost bin tea.” *catnip makes you sleepy*,
you say. it tastes bitter like the dandelion greens

my mother tells me cleanse the body. my tongue
twists around the lavender, full of the taste. i only

drink tea when others suggest it. i only go to sleep when i
can't stay awake any longer. i only listen to my heart

beat when my body makes me. i don't know
what ever happened to my blue scooter

Cyborg woman

freshly-picked strawberries perfume the kitchen as
my grandmother rhythmically washes their tiny bodies

sweet summer juice collects beneath her fingernails

she licks her fingers and dries her hands on a towel
the threads weaken and the fabric falls apart

fingers move like a fine-tooth comb
through her rivulets of silver hair

her blood is lethal
and her bones dynamite

steel knees, titanium wrists, elastic vertebrae

the windows shatter when she sneezes
sending shards of glass into the garden below

no man has ever made her speech falter
those who try taste bitter in the back of their throat like
jasmine tea steeped overnight

her teeth, like fangs, pierce the skin
and redness drips down her chin
my grandmother tosses the green hull into the air,
not caring where it lands

she feels alive with it
she feels alive with the sweetness of the fruit

On meeting your grandmother for the first time

When you meet your grandmother for the first time
 she will be waiting for you in the blue dress she just bought
 wearing the heels that give her roaring blisters and
 clutching roses and daises and baby's breath
 she spent a fifth of her monthly salary on
 Her eyes will dart from person to person in the airport crowd
 and she will worry about not recognizing you right away

When you meet your grandmother for the first time
 she will not have many questions for you
 Instead, she will spend long minutes studying your face
 trying to commit its curves and ridges and furrows to memory
 She will laugh when she hears you squeak as you yawn
 and think it's sweet that you hiccup a lot
 and you'll think that she doesn't really know you
 But this moment is nice, and maybe that's enough

When you meet your grandmother for the first time
 Thoughts and questions will percolate your mind: *What has
 changed the most about Armenia in the past 50 years?
 What has changed the most about you?*
 but you won't be able to complicate the space between
 the two of you, so you will ask to see baby pictures of your mother,
 laugh at how fat she was, and help with the dishes until your
 grandmother shoos you out of the kitchen

When you meet your grandmother for the first time
 She will spend the first few days convincing you
 to eat meat by telling you about a program she watched
 the other day that said red meat is healthy
 This will eventually make you cry, then she will feel bad and
 never mention meat again
 She will fill your every plate – twice – with salads and
 breads and vegetables

You will often retreat to your grandmother's bedroom
 She finds you later and cuddles with you
 You try to memorize the smell of her breath,
 the wrinkles on her face, the smooth lines of her eyebrows

When you meet your grandmother for the first time
 you will see all the childhood photos of you that line
 her cherry brown dresser, nightstand, and piano
 The one of you wearing a Scooby Doo sweater, a pensive

look on your face, and with your hair in braids is her favorite
“*Kyanks!*”⁴ she will cry looking at it, touching the photo with her
index finger, forgetting for a moment that you’re right next to her

⁴ Literal translation from Armenian is “my life.”

IV. Creative Nonfiction: *Moving Across Spaces*

I clutch a quarter in my right fist and an overripe banana in my left. My palms are slick and sweaty from the heat, the salty moisture drawing out the sickly sweet smell of copper from the coin. The smell hits my nose and coats the insides of my nostrils and throat. I stretch out my fingers and look down at the warm metal centered in my palm, feeling its weight, losing myself for a moment in its circular heartbeat. Holding it, I feel like there is potential and possibility—I can do something with it, transform it.

My mother stands at the register inside the liquor store. Several years later, the store will be renamed *Hammered Liquor*—complete with a large image of a hammer next to heavysset font—but today, its tall grey letters indicate it is the community corner store. It is neighbored by a mechanic shop and a parking lot full of oil stains that I think of as lava puddles to hop over. My mother chides me if I step in them, but I am not good at doing what I am told. She does not want me to track the oil into the house but I wonder what patterns and images I could make with the oil-soaked rubbery treads on the bottoms of my shoes.

Across the street are clothing shops and a sign with two stick figures holding each other that reads “Safe Place.” I wonder what makes a space safe—what makes *this* space safe. Is it having someone to hold you?

Inside the store, I stare at the columns of colorful, small rectangles dangling from long, flimsy pieces of string from the top of a metal rack behind the register. Each one has an image of national flags or someone smiling while talking on the phone. They are decorative additions to the grey landscape of the liquor store, which sells everything from cigarettes to laundry detergent to less-than-fresh fruits. The grapes have fruit flies hovering above them, staking their claim to the sugary bounty. My mom will sometimes buy last-minute items from here, such as flour,

sponges, milk, and occasionally fruit, when she does not have the time to walk to the grocery store about a mile away from our apartment.

“I’ll have that calling card,” my mother says as she points to the reddish-green one. Her Armenian pronunciation of the word stresses the *a* in *call* as an *o* and the *d* in *card* as a *t*. The cashier, who owns the shop with his son, is in his sixties and has fine blonde hair that is thinning from his forehead back. He is a short man with sun-darkened skin and two visible silver additions to his teeth. He has an easy, thin smile when he looks at me, which later makes me think he was fond of me because he may not have had any grandchildren of his own. Some weeks later, he offers me a swirly piece of black licorice when my mom and I visit the store. It is the first piece of licorice I have ever tried and I nibble and lick it slowly, contemplating whether I like the taste. I am often not sure if I like the taste or feel of something, and the licorice feels cloyingly sweet, almost like medicine.

He hands my mother the calling card as she fishes in her purse for a purple coin pouch bordered in lime green with an image of Tweety’s bright yellow face on either side. She unzips the pouch slowly—it is bulging and won’t open easily—and dumps dozens of dimes, quarters, and nickels into her palm, counting out five dollars’ worth and placing the coins in neat stacks on the glass counter. The white inside of the coin pouch has greyed from years of holding coins. He waves my mother away when she tries to pay for my banana. I look at the banana nervously, worried that my possession of the freckly fruit has caused problems. I look for images in the brown spots as I slide away from beside my mother and place my sweaty quarter into a vending machine coin slot. I twist the cool metal handle to release a shiny, yellow rubber ball. I turn it over in my hands and trace my finger along the raised line going around the middle of the ball, thinking about how it was made.

Kinetic energy stirs in her breath as she deftly dials the long strings of numbers she reads from the card. The first two combinations access the calling card system, and an automated voice instructs her to enter the number she is trying to contact. That one she has long committed to memory. The 8 is her mother's golden-silver hair, once so long, now shoulder-length and thinning. The 3's are the soft rise and fall of her mother's voice when she is frustrated or excited.

The noises of their conversation feel orange, bright and heavy with an aching desire to hear every dip and catch in each other's voice. Those lilts suggest laughter or sadness and are as close to images of each other as they can get. My mother begins to ask about how my grandmother's students are behaving, which makes me think my grandma has been feeling frustrated with the first-graders' behavior. She has been an elementary school teacher for nearly thirty years and does not have the same energy as before.

"Maybe you can have a card system—green, yellow, and red cards. The red is if they behave really badly. That's how they do it at Haso's school."

I perk up a bit upon hearing my name.

My mother cups her hand around her mouth as she speaks louder into the large grey phone. Dora the Explorer is playing quietly on the 12-inch television resting on a brown chair behind the door, next to my books and Wile E. coyote stuffed animal.

"Haso started first grade the other week. You got the photo I mailed to you? The one with her wearing the blue Scooby Doo shirt and her hair in braids? I love that one too."

I am sitting on my bed and watching the show absently while tossing my yellow ball from one hand to the other. I hold it in one hand for so long that I almost forget it is there and play a guessing game with myself, pretending I don't know which hand has the ball. It becomes

part of me, its presence no longer felt. The heat from my hand seeps into the ball and it no longer feels like there is anything in my hand.

“Mom? Mom. Mom? Mom?”

She says the word as a question, a plea, as if her voice can force the connection to improve. It is ten o'clock in the evening and my mother's back is pressed against the brown-and-black, ornate rug with lotion stains draped on our bedroom wall. Her legs are stretched out in front of her, and she reaches down every few minutes to scratch them, because they itch from shaving. She scratches until her legs turn red and tiny spots of blood appear against her pale skin. My mother's golden-red curls are wild around her face, some strands turning grey at the roots, and her forehead is creased. Her cheeks are flushed with rosacea and anxiety, and she is wearing the tangerine towel robe she brought with her from Armenia. Her tiny silver cross hangs just above her collarbone.

I have moved on to arranging and rearranging the stickers in one of my sticker books. The crescent moon does not belong with the tiger anymore, so I move it to the previous page next to the ballerina slippers that remind me of the ones I hope to have someday.

When I told my best friend from high school, Ania, that I would be traveling to Armenia over the summer, she was surprised and confused. She and I rarely speak any longer since she stayed in Glendale after we graduated high school and I came to school in New York.

“What? Really? Oh my gosh, I never would have imagined you doing that.”

In high school, my friends knew that I had conflicting feelings about my Armenian ethnicity. I resented the misogyny in my household and community and vocalized these grievances freely. I hated my own name. Nowadays, if I want to talk about Armenian culture, I

will probably need at least several minutes to unpack what that words means, how it moves across contexts, how it is inextricably political and not something essential that exists in communities or people's bodies. So I usually just don't bother. But back then, I was angry, and I wanted the people around me to know about it.

Recently, three of my classmates and I were driving back from Ithaca, where we had attended a talk at Cornell University called *The Future of Whiteness*. During the car ride home, we had a conversation that made me more sympathetic to how I spoke and felt about my Armenian identity growing up. I told them that, to this day, I subconsciously read Armenian names with a certain amount of disdain and dismissal, because of the self-hatred and resentment toward my Armenian community I felt growing up.

"You know, people who are critical thinkers are first critical of the community they live in, because that is their immediate surroundings. In fact, I am wary of people who are not critical of their community," said Poonam.

We all laughed and I felt so grateful for her words. I took off my bulky boots and sat cross-legged in the passenger's seat. I massaged my toes through my snow-dampened, mismatched socks and thought about what she said, reveling in the liberating feeling of her words. Maybe it is understandable—even good—that I have conflicting feelings toward the different parts of my identities.

We spoke about names—since all of us have non-American sounding names—how people interact with us based on our names, and how we feel about our own names.

"Do you all ever hold your breath anxiously when someone is about to say your name, because you are worried that they'll mess it up?" I asked.

Poonam laughed and said she did.

“It’s pretty awful that we feel apologetic for our names sometimes. Like we are apologizing just for existing,” I said. I counted the bright yellow reflectors to the side of the road as we spoke, trying to guess how far apart they were. We were moving too fast to tell. I made a mental *clicking* sound as we passed by each one, estimating that we passed by about two per second, which means there must be a few hundred of them per mile.

Hetsie shared that her husband, Herman, often underemphasizes the Dutch lilt of his name when he introduces himself to people in the US.

“I tell him, no, that’s not your name. But he says it’s easier that way.”

I laughed softly and said that I understood that tension. I had been thinking a lot about my name lately. When I was in Armenia over the summer, I went from introducing myself as *Haz-mik* to *Has-meek*, which is the true pronunciation of my name. I told my classmates that I probably first changed the way I pronounce my name about seven years ago, because I’ve found it’s easier for people that way.

“It’s like the correct pronunciation of your name doesn’t belong to you any longer,” I said.

We sat there with the taste of that idea on our lips, thinking about our own names, why we were given them, how we felt about them, and the extent to which a name is just a name and when it’s more. It’s almost always more for us.

I thought back to the conversation I had last year with Ania, when she was shocked to learn that I would be traveling to Armenia. I suppose I am shocked at myself too, because I could never have imagined doing research on the Armenian Genocide growing up, when all I wanted was to lose my Armenian-ness. It is hard to tell when and how my relationship with the different parts of myself changed. It had to do, in part, with the erasure I felt as an Armenian woman on a

campus in Syracuse where I knew only one or two other Armenian people. I remember a conversation between my friends, the person I was dating, and me during the beginning of my freshman year. We were in a bus going to the mall to watch a horror movie I did not want to see. My mother called me and we spoke briefly. The person I was dating was sitting next to me and, after I had hung up, said loudly to our friends, “Hasmik speaks in tongues whenever her mother calls her.” I laughed along at my own exoticization.

Developing a more intimate relationship with my Armenian identity was—and is—a silent and tender-but-insidious process that creeps into the different parts of my body. It changes how I breathe, how assured I feel when I speak, and if I look down at my feet while walking, or if I stare straight ahead, feeling more able to bear the weight of people’s gaze.

My mother wants so badly to hear her mother’s voice, ask how her father is, if her brother has found a job, but she can only discern every other word and the calling card expires after an hour and a half. It is a countdown to silence. Later, I will wonder what it must have been like to keep track of the minutes she spent talking to her family, stopping a conversation short to say goodbye if she heard the *ding* that indicated the call would drop in one minute. Time is a privilege in diaspora.

But today, I think of what my grandmother might look like. I have seen photos of her, of course—my mother has a passport-size photo of her in her purse and larger ones in the photo albums we keep boxed up in the closet. I know my grandmother has silver hair she pulls up into a neat bun on the back of her head. She wears light pink lipstick, soft traces of rouge, and mascara.

But I wonder what my grandmother looks like right at this instant, 10 a.m.—is she sitting at her kitchen corner, hair disheveled from bed, comfortable in her pajamas and ready to begin the day? I wonder if she is excited for the day or if she wants to go back to bed.

There is no coherence in relationships when you live on the other side of your world as your loved ones. The missing between my mother and her family grows large and thickens. It becomes a weight in her voice and makes her shoulders sag. Time warps in strange ways. Days feel endlessly long but years pass without her realizing it, because she becomes accustomed to the heartache like someone might become accustomed to less oxygen in the air. They would take more shallow breaths and move around less in the thinner air. Eventually, they would forget what it felt like to fill their lungs completely.

I study the black numbers on the calling card resting in my mother's lap like they are a script with hidden meanings. She lowers her hand and anxiously bends the card, folding and unfolding it along its center until the numbers become frayed. She has a pile of similar, wrinkled calling cards hiding under the bed. They no longer seem decorative like they did when they were strung up in the liquor store. Now, they are a reminder of hastened and cut-short conversations. Sometimes, when she doesn't have enough money to purchase a new card, she calls those old numbers and asks the operator to activate the card for a few minutes. Sometimes they agree. They must hear the ache in her voice.

Static cuts in and out of her conversation.

“So how are you, mom? Are you doing well?”

Years later, I wonder how honest she was with my mother. Exchanging pleasantries is so much easier when there is so much distance and so much static clouding the conversation. At least that way, my mother was able to remind herself later that her mother did, in fact, say she

was doing well. The words crossed the space between them. It wasn't enough, but maybe she even believed her.

Years later, as an adult in college, I find myself regressing to pleasantries with my mother over the phone when the missing grows too large between us. It is easier to hear her say she is doing well than to think about all the things she is worried about that I'm unable to help with, because I'm not near her. It is not the same as living in diaspora, of course. That kind of disconnection is geopolitical, its physical borders creating layers of impenetrability. The emotional disconnection merely follows suit.

In some ways, it hurts more now, but at least I understand my body and its spatial and emotional dimensions better. In high school, when I did not fully know what diaspora meant, the sense of disattachment made me want to disconnect altogether.

My grandmother pulls out a four-inch long, bulky silver recorder out of her cherry brown wardrobe. She shuts the door to the wardrobe tightly and with a sense of deliberation, like she wants everyone to know she found what she was looking for.

"*Mm-hm,*" she says under her breath. This sound loosely means "there we go" or "I accomplished what I set out to do."

She shuffles over to where I sit on her bed, her open-toed slippers making soft noises as they graze against the carpet on her bedroom floor. There are carpets everywhere in the house, even ones that sit on top of other carpets in some places. I am sure they belonged to great-grandparents of mine, or have at least been in the family for a few decades, maybe from back

when my grandfather had a good job as a food inspector during the Soviet Union.⁵ The cherry brown piano my mother grew up playing matches the other furniture in the room and in most of the house.

The comforter in my grandmother's room is a bit uncomfortable because of all the beads woven into it, so my grandmother gave me a soft blanket to lay on top of it before I took my nap. My mother bought a small black fan for my grandparents, to get the air moving in the house. Until she did, our breathing was strained. My grandmother gave me her hand fan and I would lie spread eagle on her bed waving it in front of my face, beads of sweat rolling down between my breasts. We simply did not want to move because that made it harder to breathe. We just sat or laid down, waiting for night to bring some cool relief. The summer may stick to our skin, but the winter brings frigid temperatures, and my grandmother scrambles to pay the heat bill every year.

I glance at my grandfather in the other room and notice his white hair moving quietly in front of the fan. His skin is a dark olive color, and he has a patchwork of moles scattered across his upper arms, and a large mole to the left of his lips. I wonder if he would think of himself as a person of color, but I also know that term does not mean anything to him.

My grandmother scoots next to me on the bed and shows me the recorder.

“Your mother sent this to me when you were just three years old.”

I look at the recorder and try to remember if I have any memory of the thing. I don't.

“She recorded you reciting a poem about bunnies. Do you remember that one? It's the one in Russian, and you get some of the words wrong in it because you were so little. It's so sweet the way you try to pronounce some of the words.”

⁵ The Soviet Union was a communist union of Soviet states from 1922 to 1991. Armenia was one of 15 republics that comprised the union.

I did remember that poem. My grandmother fiddles with the recorder for a minute but can't get it to play. All we hear is a soft click and moment of static.

“Can I try?”

I hold down the *play* button until we hear the recording of my cheery childhood voice.

We hear my three-year-old self recite a Russian poem about a hunter who thinks he killed a bunny, but later realizes it is still alive. My family has only one home video, so hearing the recording of myself from a young age stored in such a physical, tactile, and weighty object is a strange and nice feeling. It is like that moment in time from so many years ago was captured and stored in the small grey machine. My mother recorded it, put it in a box, and shipped the box across the world, where it reached my grandmother, who played it over and over until the batteries died. She then replaced the batteries and tucked the recorder into her closet.

My voice traveled across spaces that I was unable to cross as a child. My mother sent part of herself—the sound of her child's voice—across spaces that she was barred from crossing, because of her undocumented status. This makes me sad, but also proud of my mother, that she was able to find ways to maintain her sense of hope, resistance, and connection with her family.

Perjuhi glares at anyone who enters the room. Her gray-blue eyes zero in on your face and she does not let go until you approach her desk and tell her what you are looking for. Her desk, cluttered with lopsided piles of papers, sits in the corner of the room. The walls are white and bare aside from two large windows letting in some air. There are eight long tables, each with two chairs and a long filing cabinet in the front of the room.

I approach her desk timidly. “Karine said I should let you know I'm looking for texts by Zabel Yesayan,” I tell her in Armenian.

She lets out a short hiccup of a laugh.

“Karine, that idiot.”

I am taken aback by her bluntness, which will prove to be only the start of the rivalry I bear witness to between the archivist, Perjuhi, and the photo editor, Karine. The two have worked together at the Museum of Literature and Art for over thirty years, and both use any opportunity they get to speak ill of the other.

“You have to find the call numbers and bring them to me.”

The look she gives me when I tell her I can’t read Armenian makes me think she wants me to apologize, leave, and never return. I do leave, but I return with my grandmother, who helps me make sense of the filing cabinet. The descriptions of Zabel Yesayan’s writings sound even more haunting told through my grandmother’s hushed whispers.

We gather all the documents and sit at one of the long tables until closing time. I take notes about what my grandmother reads. I try to understand everything Zabel documented during the 1909 Adana massacres. And I try to forget as soon as we leave. We return the next day, and I try to hold the voices of the testimonials she collected in my head. We leave and I want them to stop ringing in my head.

I am not sure why—now that I am finally here with family I am meeting for the first time—it is so hard for me to have conversations with my grandmother. After I do my research in the archives during the day and come home to my grandmother’s house in the evening, I will sometimes shut myself away in her bedroom to watch Netflix while pretending I am writing my research paper. There are too many silences to unpack.

One Friday, sitting in front of a plate of eggplant caviar, bread, and tomatoes with my legs wound through the legs of an old kitchen chair, I look to my left at where my grandmother is seated. Her forehead is furrowed, light blonde locks running rivulets down her shoulders, and her right hand is holding up the corner of her mouth, bringing the frown up slightly on that side. Her elbow is pushing folds in the embroidered tablecloth. She notices me staring and tells me to finish my food—the refrigerator isn't working properly, and the heat is causing perishable food to go bad in a matter of hours. The air is thin and heavy and the relentless laugh track in the television show is making my mind feel numb. For a minute, it's like I'm not in the room. The letters I rifled through at the Museum of Literature and Art move in front of my eyes briefly. I push them aside and focus on my grandmother's face, wondering what she is thinking about as she stares at nothing in particular. It is remarkable that her dark brown eyes can brim with so much unspoken sadness.

Instead of having those conversations with my grandmother about loss and regret, I play games with my cousins—Becky who is three and fierier and bolder than I ever was or will ever be, and Albert who is eight, shy, and anxious—because I don't have to talk to them about difficult things. And because there is no way I could say no to Becky's pouty lips and big dark eyes when she comes up to me and asks if I want to play. Becky likes to make us laugh with her sharp tongue and quick wit, and I hope she is able to maintain her independence and strength as she gets older, because it has been worn away in so many of the women in her family. When her father visited a few days ago from Moscow—where he works and sends remittances home—he held Becky and told her brother to be careful when they play. *She has softer bones than you do*, he said. I was appalled. But even my mother did not disagree.

Her favorite game is climbing the gray ladder next to the outdoor bathroom to peek inside through the small window. She reminds me of myself when I was her age because I would climb the stair railing in our apartment from all angles, then jump down onto the couch, table, my mother—whatever or whoever stood below me.

“What are you doing in there, auntie?” she will ask my mother with a giggle in her voice, and my mother who will feign shock and be rewarded with Becky’s peppered laughter. My grandmother thinks she looks like a wild child with her hair in disarray, tiny frame shirtless, and dirty feet shoeless. My grandmother scolds her for climbing the ladder but I think she looks like a nimble sprite with her head nearly touching the green grapes hanging low from the lattice patchwork that goes across part of the backyard. Becky loves those grapes. She will lie on the couch, right leg swung over left knee, and eat them slowly, looking like a tiny queen with her jaw bones set squarely.

I hold my leap frog globe in my pudgy five-year-old hands, gripping the attached green pen harder than I need to, with four of my fingers wrapped around it like I might try to stab away at something. I like to spin the globe around as fast as I can, close my eyes, and stop its revolutions with my index finger. Wherever my finger points, I click there with the pen and learn its name, imagining what someone my age might be doing there at that very moment.

I spin the globe around slowly and stop near the giant land mass that is Russia. I tap on Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, and finally spot Armenia. I click on it with my pen, wondering what the country’s name will sound like as pronounced with the disembodied voice of my leap frog globe.

“Please tap only one location,” I hear the voice say. I try again, looking at the round metallic tip of the pen and aiming deliberately—slowly—at the tiny speck on the plastic surface.

“Please tap only one location,” the voice repeats. I try once more, a staccato of a tap, only to hear the same message.

This was my first experience with disappearing, even if I didn’t know what it meant at the time.

Now, I do research on the Armenian Genocide, and I look at that history through writings by Zabel Yesayan, a woman who told her story on her own terms. She saw people, borders, memories being disappeared around her, and she wrote about it. She told her stories so that, a century later, little girls would not have to trust a disembodied, masculine, imperialist voice to tell them whether or not they exist.

This morning, a Saturday, I decide to visit the outdoor flea market where most people who visit Yerevan buy souvenirs for their friends and family back home. On the way, I pass by bakeries, restaurants, toy stores, beauty salons, and all manner of other shops that have the lavender forget-me-not flower in their windows. Some have illustrations of the flower, while others have more lifelike versions. There are usually no other words—the image itself immediately conveys remembrance of the Armenian Genocide.

I soon reach an underground, narrow alleyway that connects one side of the street to the other. I descend the stairs, hopping from one stone step to the next, and am met with booths where people sell fruit, chestnuts, walnuts, dried fruits, cigarettes, magazines, and jewelry. I look at the jewelry and notice necklaces and bracelets with the forget-me-not flower featured prominently. Some are made from shiny crystals and look delicate and expensive. Others are flat and look like they are mass-produced and made from plastic. Part of me wants one, because it is

my favorite flower and practicing memory around the Armenian Genocide is important to me both academically and personally.

But the iconography and memory around the genocide is clearly commodified and geared towards tourists, maybe especially Armenians from the diaspora. It makes me feel strange that my history and intergenerational pain is being sold to me in this way. I think about the silences that are woven into this jewelry. Wearing one of these would feel like I am declaring my remembrance instead of struggling with it, and memory and learning should always be struggles. I do not want to step away from the struggle. Otherwise, too much would become flattened and fall away. I decide to move on.

Growing up, I did not feel any attachment to Armenia. I had no desire to develop the kind of gnawing missing my mother has carried with her for twenty-one years. It will be a continuous, lifelong process to see myself in relation to Armenia on my own terms.

“That’s good. Yes, I’m doing well, too. Yes, yes. Haso is great, she’s right her next to me,” my mother says as she smiles in my direction.

I smile back and go over to curl up next to her. My mother hands me the phone and I shyly say hello to my grandmother, whose voice rises sweetly. She and my mother speak a few times a month, and she is emotional over the changes in my voice. It feels strange to be so loved and so recognized by someone I hardly know and have always thought about in the abstract. I become quiet and stare at the calling card, reading the numbers in my head and murmuring *yes* and *no* in response to my grandmother’s questions about school until she releases me.

I hand the phone back to my mother who assures my grandmother that she will take care of herself. She has always been good at doing what she is told, but I know she is lying. There are some things she cannot control, and her sadness is one of them.

She says goodbye. The moon glow shines through the open window from behind the neighboring apartment complex. I think to myself that, even if we can't see my grandmother, at least the three of us get to look at the same moon every night, and at least it always seems to be in the same place.

V. Race, Disability, and the Blurring of Genre: An Analysis of *In the Ruins*

“The world’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women.”

– Trinh T. Minh Ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*

In 1909, Yesayan and a cohort of four other journalists, activists, and writers were sent on a relief mission by the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople. They were to survey and report on the towns and villages in the Ottoman Empire whose Armenian residents had been massacred after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. The group was instructed to provide aid to people, but they had far less to offer than people needed. Yesayan writes openly about her frustration with their meager supplies of food, clothing, and clean water, and their inability to provide meaningful emotional support much of the time. Yesayan and the other group members were obliged to move from town to town without staying in any one place for long. This contributed to Yesayan’s discomfort with their role as insider-outsiders—they might have been Armenians, but they were from a wealthy city, and they could maintain only surface-level interactions with each town.

In one scene in *In the Ruins*, two women visit Yesayan’s tent and tell her they need blankets (Yesayan 64). She has only one left and gives it to the woman who says her injured son has to sleep on the hard ground with ants crawling all over his wounds. She explicitly says that she attempts to “vindicate [herself] in [her] own eyes” by asking if the woman who did not receive a blanket had children. She tells her that the other woman was surely in more need since she had a son (Yesayan 65). The woman who did not receive a blanket laughs sharply and tells Yesayan sarcastically that she has a “gift for understanding the pain in [their] hearts.” She says

that at least the other woman still has her son—hers was killed. Yesayan feels helpless, knowing that the constraints on her time and finances make it insurmountably difficult for her to help a substantial number of people. She does not spend time explaining that she tried to do her best in an impossible situation because she does not want to center herself in the narrative. She includes this exchange in the text to make her work transparent and show that she inadvertently does harm to the survivors, even when she tries to help them. While she does not go into detail in *In the Ruins* about the systematic and bureaucratic obstacles to attaining funds for resources, she wrote several articles where she says she was “out of her wits,” explaining that orphans in Mersin needed shoes, but the delegation in Adana did not believe shoes were basic necessities.⁶

In the town called Osmaniye, Yesayan visits a church where hundreds of Armenians perished in the flames set by Turkish invaders. She walks around inside the church and tries to patch together and make sense of the deceased people’s final moments. She sees blood higher up on the walls than people could reach without climbing on top of one another. She does not linger for long on describing the agony of those people’s death but she locates and maps out their final moments in the physicality of the church. People’s bodies and deaths irrevocably marked that church, that town, and that moment in history, and Yesayan’s writing prevents that history from becoming obscured. In one area, she reads the following words, written in blood on the stone church wall:

“The events began on April 3

Light! Light! Light!

There is no God now!”

⁶ Yesayan’s four-part article was published in *Arakadz* in 1911.

Yesayan is told that the person who wrote those lines was a poor village teacher from Hadjin (Yesayan 159). She writes that he was the one refugee in the church who had a gun and who fired at the attackers from the church window. He becomes one of several figures in the text whom Yesayan indirectly commends for their efforts at self-defense. She spends several pages breaking down and constructing a narrative around what that man must have seen, felt, and thought in his final moments of life. She reveals the lines to the reader one at a time, moving on to the next only once she has fully imagined what the man thought and experienced as he wrote the line before. This creates more anxiety and suspense for the reader, who is carried along the narrative knowing what will happen to the teacher, but still feeling invested in his story and unconsciously wondering if he might survive.

She says that, after writing the first line, he must still have had hope of surviving and wanted to say more about the violence he witnessed, but then armed Turkish forces arrived at the church door. He had scant moments left to “express his desire for sunlight and life and brightness” and found the word to convey resistance, refusal, and a desperate desire to live: light. Yesayan writes that he looked around at the scene of human suffering around him, saw the “unpitying Virgin and the impotent Christ on the cross” and rejected any holy presence in the third line. This line is a sharp departure from many of the other stories and testimonials Yesayan writes about in her book. Most people—though not all—she speaks with who have survived the massacres still retain their faith in God, some more fervently than before. Others vow to do what they can to help others whose losses are greater than theirs. And still others who have lost all their family are furious with God but do not outright reject their religion. The teacher’s renunciation of his religion is a stark indication of his fury and helplessness at the literal

destruction of the church, which itself is the symbolic destruction of people's access to spirituality and faith.

This scene in the church is one of many instances when Yesayan uses elements of creative nonfiction to piece together the stories, memories, and testimonies she incorporates into the book. Yesayan imagines what the teacher's final moments and thoughts were, so the passage is, of course, not wholly factual, but this is precisely the strength of her book: she troubles what it means for experience and testimony to be Fact. The reality is that no one will know what the teacher's final moments and thoughts were, because he and everyone else in the church perished. She uses the final words he left in his (or someone else's) blood to construct a feminist de-colonial analysis, meaning she decolonizes the memory of his death by imagining its intimate details instead of glossing over it. Due to the collective pain in the space, it likely does not matter to Yesayan whose body the blood came from, because whether it came from his body or someone else's, she argues that in many senses the blood belonged to everyone in that space. However, because of the ways "blood" and "culture" were invoked as reified points of commonality during the Young Turk Revolution, Yesayan runs the risk of essentializing what it means to be Armenian when she writes about blood and collective pain.

Yesayan constructs a feminist de-colonial analysis by piecing together the emotional dimensions of the man who wrote his message on the church wall. This is an act of radical and transgressive remembrance, and it is what women of color writers such as Chela Sandoval refer to as tactical subjectivity, or "the capacity to de- and re-center, given the forms of power to be moved" (Sandoval). Given that the "power to be moved" is the Ottoman Empire which seeks to fragment communities, families, and exterminate an entire group of people in the name of saving the empire, a radical re-centering insists that people will survive and be remembered *because*

they are enmeshed in their social networks. The teacher's words are not his personal thoughts alone, but a consequence of the collective hope and pain in the space.

Yesayan realizes that memory is an active process that must be practiced in order to not slip away. Feminist writers and activists, such as Minnie Bruce Pratt, also think about memory in similar ways. Pratt talks about her experiences practicing memory as a writer by saying "I forgot this moment very quickly, but I remembered it later, when I began to practice memory" (Pratt). Of course, memory-practicing happens and is shaped differently depending on the context, but it is possible to analyze Yesayan's relationship with memory as a dynamic process such as the one Pratt describes. Yesayan's book is a patchwork of memory-practicing and an invitation and invocation to others to practice memory as well. The book uses different literary techniques and has an ambiguous genre because different styles of writing provide different entries into memory—the intent, pace, and politics of remembering vary across genre.

For instance, Yesayan uses simile and metaphor to describe the events on the night of the church fire in Osmaniye and to reflect a nonliteral image of people's emotions, such as by writing that "death began to settle over them like an endless night" (Yesayan 159). The night cloaks the church the way the smoke cloaked and asphyxiated people's bodies as they burned; the night itself becomes a tool of violence. She does not wonder or postulate about what the teacher did, saw, and felt—she states those things as if she had observed the events herself. These stylistic choices do not assume that she has the authority to make these declarations, but her deliberate language instead constructs a scene that uses creative nonfiction techniques to make an incomprehensible event legible and coherent and thus able to be remembered and mourned.

Yesayan leaves the church and walks around the rest of the town. She refers to the rotted corpses and spurts and traces of blood as “bloody inscriptions,” and describes one scene as “the full-stop at the end of these bloody inscriptions running off in all directions: a big stain of coagulated blood” (Yesayan 160). By saying that people’s bodies and blood become inscriptions, she insists that their bodies, their blood, and their death tell stories not unlike the one the teacher wrote on the church wall. Looking around at the bloody remains, she thinks about the teacher’s final words:

It seemed to me as well that that invincible, vital, collective aspiration of our race sprang from the ashen ruin and the carbonized bones, from the mothers’ and widows’ tears and even the orphans’ rags. All of the enemy’s black designs would prove powerless in the face of its immortal, regenerative force: “Light! Light! Light!” (Yesayan 161)

Yesayan emphasizes that survival—which is written into the message on the church wall, despite its dark third line—is collective, and she reclaims a site of death as an indication that Armenian people will survive. Her use of the word “regenerative” is important because women inevitably fall into the position of regenerating a group of people—women’s bodies are as essential to the survival of a group of people as they are to its annihilation.

Yesayan engages differently with testimony than she does with her firsthand experiences, such as when she saw the bloody text in the church. She does not directly mediate the testimonies as much, even though testimonies, through their telling and hearing, are necessarily mediated. In another scene, Yesayan prefaces a man’s testimony with the sentence “Here is what he told us,” which is a near-direct signal to the reader that the text that follows will be an accurate representation of the man’s experiences according to how he remembered them at the time (Yesayan 70). By writing that the man *told* them the story that follows the line above,

Yesayan makes explicitly visible her role in mediating the testimony. There is no secondhand testimony that does not modify experience through the act of telling, hearing, and recounting. The man's eyewitness account is filtered onto the page and into the reader's consciousness and can reveal crucial information, but it also reflects Yesayan's location as a listener and is not a direct representation of his memories. In his book *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony*, Holocaust historiographer and psychologist Henry Greenspan writes that "[a]s listeners, however, we hear what we hear—which includes what we anticipate hearing and what survivors, anticipating our anticipations, have constructed to be hearable" (p. xvi). Greenspan writes that this anticipating-telling-hearing space results in a disjuncture between experience and recollection. Coming to terms with these tensions in testimony collection is central to feminist research and analysis, because those feminist interventions seek to flesh out methodology more than they desire clear answers. Yesayan makes visible her role in the research and survey process because omitting her location would obscure the fact that the testimonies are filtered through her subjectivity, her value judgments, and her investments in the research.

Throughout the book, Yesayan contemplates whether her reporting and aid work is extractive and causes people pain as they relive their traumas in order to accommodate her reporting work. She even feels ashamed and resentful toward herself and her group, saying "how pitifully impoverished our sterile petty bourgeois souls were when measured against that stubborn, indomitable desire to live and endure, a desire that we almost always, in all circumstances, find among survivors" (Yesayan 42). Her use of the word "bourgeois" especially suggests she realizes the class privilege she and the others hold. She tries to mitigate the emotional harm the group has by making small adjustments to the way she and the others talk to survivors. For instance, in all likelihood, Yesayan and her group were instructed to distribute

only the bare minimum supplies people needed, since they had only a fraction of the resources necessary to supply everyone's needs. Despite this material constraint, Yesayan and her group switch from asking people how many members are in their family, to handing them a pile of clothing and asking if it would be enough. They realized that when they asked how many people they needed clothes for, or even how many articles of clothing they needed, they did violence to people who had to verbally admit how many loved ones they had lost. They may or may not have been repressing their losses, but in regardless, they often did not want to communicate their grief with people who were in a position of power. Yesayan and her group held power because they had the supplies, they were from Constantinople, they were wealthier, and they were literally taking notes on people's losses to report back to the Armenian Patriarchate.

By slightly changing their question, Yesayan and her group engaged in a politics of refusal. Tuck and Yang write that a refusal is not necessarily a subtractive stance, but a generative one, which is the case with the group's altered question. By refusing to directly solicit an admission of loss and grief, Yesayan creates a space where she acknowledges the power disparities at play and enacts her solidarity and collective empathy by helping people—in as small a way as she could, with supplies—without collecting their grief as part of the standard operating procedure of their transaction. In fact, she shifted what was a transaction into a moment of understanding by limiting her encroachment on people's emotions. The significance of her decision does not depend on whether people knew she altered her words for their benefit; it is that she interrogates herself and tries to cause people as little harm as possible. It is enough that she alone knows, and she writes about it to show that even the “mundane” moments in her work are rife with the potential to hurt others.

Yesayan continually stresses that people's grief and survival are collectively experienced. While the mournful cries and stories she hears from women are unlikely songlike, Yesayan refers to them as "singsong lament" and writes about them as if they were a rhythmic lamentation:

My child was as lovely as the light
Ay! Ay! Ay!
They leveled their rifles and shot him down
Ay! Ay! Ay! (156-157)

This continues for two pages, and each stanza similar to the one above is followed by a few sentences of Yesayan describing the scene around her. She makes the cries seem like a call-and-answer that produces a collective musical constellation where the cries both build off one another, like pieces of a disjointed conversation, and comfort the women who feel the palpable presence of one another's pain. It is likely that the mothers did not speak with such measured melodies, but Yesayan writes this way to emphasize the communal nature of the women's pain. Joy Harjo writes about the songs a woman sang during a massacre in El Salvador—they were songs about beauty and love, and she sang them despite the violence done to her. In a somewhat similar way, the mothers in this passage sing and cry about their cherished memories of their children, because they do not know how else to handle their grief. The translator chose to maintain the word "ay" because there is no exact English translation and maintaining the original word retains the emotional character of the passage. In fact, those exclamations of pain do not lend themselves to translation and attempting to make them legible to an English-speaking audience would distill and cheapen the tenor of the women's pain.

In several other places in the text, the translator maintains the original words for other exclamations of pain—*vakh*, *vay vay*, *aman*, and *akh*. One woman says to her "*Vakh*, my Nshan,

vakh...” and Yesayan writes that the other voices in the house rose “mingling with these sighs and completing them” (Yesayan 162). By saying that the women’s voices and sighs completed one another, Yesayan insists that their cries are pieces of a conversation. Since they can complete these pieces of conversation for one another and mingle with them until it is indiscernible which sighs and tears belong to whom, the women carry collective, not individual stories. Their pain and desire are echoes and layers; their memories are stronger and less breakable when they are held in relation to one another. This way, the women’s memories reaffirm, add to, and create links of solidarity with one another.

Yesayan includes a testimony by a woman who petitioned the court-martial three times to punish the people who had killed her family. When that failed, she went to the government building near her town cried out her story to the courtroom of court-martials, demanding justice (Yesayan 82-83). She was met with denial and dismissal and told to forget the past because “calamity passed like an evil wind” and she must look to the future because her “religion itself enjoins [her] to love [enemies].” She responded furiously, saying “the past is written in flaming letters on my heart!” Yesayan includes this passage to show how oppressive groups can employ and co-opt language around “love” to further marginalize and gaslight people into quelling and depoliticizing their grief. The state systematically gaslights people immediately after and for generations after genocide, meaning that the state tells survivors their experiences of pain, violence, and loss are not real.

Through this passage, Yesayan also emphasizes how crucial it is that people practice memory, because state institutions will do all they can to erase memory and make people’s deaths seem natural and inevitable. The testimonials Yesayan collects are both firsthand and secondhand accounts, and they are valid simply because people spoke them to Yesayan. People’s

experiences and pain are good enough for her, and she openly and continuously admits that, even though she feels an intimate kinship with them when they look at one another and speak in Armenian, she does not understand their grief and loss.

Yesayan's accounts emphasize that suffering is not monolithic—the effects of massacre vary from person to person, town to town, and community to community. Some people may put others first despite their losses, while others might be too buried in their grief to think about anyone else; others might fight back rather than surrender, while others mistakenly believed their attackers would be merciful; some people might cling to their faith more tightly than ever while others might lose their spirituality in the face of the complete unraveling of their lives. Yesayan holds some people in high esteem—such as the prisoners who insist the money Yesayan and her group had brought for them be taken to another group of prisoners whose conditions were even worse—but she does not make value judgments about anyone's reaction to the death of their loved ones and the destruction of everything they cared for (Yesayan 110). Her decision to show people's varied reactions instead of highlighting only the altruistic ones goes against common themes in genocide historiography and insists on the complexity of people's emotional lives, apart from just their observed lived experiences. She wrestles with the impossibility of making easy sense of the effects of violence on an individual level, let alone a collective one.

Yesayan hoped the eyewitness accounts, confessions, and testimonials she collected might help stop the escalation of violence against Armenians (and Greeks and Assyrians). Her fears proved to come true, and it is likely that her account of the massacres of 1909 played a role in why she was the only woman placed on the Ottoman Empire's list of initial targets in 1915, which comprised Armenian intellectuals, clergy, educators, and other prominent and influential

people whose work was believed to carry cultural and political weight.⁷ To destroy them first was to weaken people's spirit overall and to enact a social death and cultural genocide against Armenians.

The translator of *In the Ruins*, G.M. Goshgarian, writes that, even though Yesayan wrote that her book was for “all the members of our nation,” she especially “wished to reach out to the Turkish citizenry with her moving account of the Adana massacres” (Yesayan 253). She likely said the book was for everyone as a strategic and political decision to not signal out Turkish people. This may have been to encourage apathetic or antagonistic Turkish citizens to feel more inclined to read about the stories they were politically and systemically compelled to obfuscate or legitimize in the name of nationalism. Goshgarian says Yesayan wanted to communicate that Armenians were targeted because of their support for political reform across social issues (this supports the next section which discusses Yesayan's realization that race and ethnicity were constructed and co-opted during the massacres). Additionally, Yesayan refers to Constantinople by its Turkish name—Stamboul or Istanbul. This is another way Yesayan strove to invite Turkish citizens into the narrative and into political consciousness, by making a linguistic connection between the Ottoman Empire and the city her delegation came from, implicitly suggesting they have more similarities than differences.

One of the passages Yesayan writes that most poignantly communicates the solidarity and community love that survivors of the massacres show one another is a scene with two young children. They approach and tell each other that their respective families have been killed. Realistically, Yesayan could not have known the details of their conversation, but she writes about what they said as if she had been there as a third party. By using similar techniques as in

⁷ 100 Years, 100 Facts. 2016.

the church scene, Yesayan allows the reader to feel the full weight of the conversation, even if it is filtered through her perspective. She provides a short transcript of the conversation:

“Do you have a father?”
 “No.”
 “A mother?”
 “No.”
 “I don’t have a mother or father, either.”
 “Did they kill them?”
 “Yes.”
 “They killed mine, too.”
 A long, anguished silence, and then:
 “Do you want us to be brothers?”
 And they adopted each other (Yesayan 25-26).

These succinct line communicates that even in their loss—because of their loss, in fact—people formed familial bonds with others in similar situations, to refuse aloneness, because it is isolation that creates a kind of social death among those who survive violence. And because, especially after violence, and as the text indicates repeatedly, people often see themselves as part of a collective. In those moments, someone else’s pain is their pain, and someone’s support becomes a tether to the world. They do not say much to each other because Yesayan wants the reader to realize they don’t *need* to say much in order to understand each other; she communicates that by writing about their “long, anguished silence” and including one-word responses for the second boy.

In another passage, the delegation encounters people who are “fragments of scattered, massacred families [who] formed groups based on their native village or town; these groups of compatriots adopted a collective mode of existence, made collective plans, took to the road on a collective decision” (Yesayan 86). In this case as well, Yesayan shows that people draw what little strength they can muster from one another’s presence. By banding together with people

from their place of birth, they are able to maintain hope that they will return there someday and salvage what they can of their lives.

False Binaries of Race Stemming from Empire-Building

In many of the towns the group visits, Turkish and Armenian people had lived side by side as neighbors for generations. Those Turkish acquaintances and friends became sucked into the counter-revolutionary fervor of the early 20th century Ottoman Empire. In rare instances, Turkish people hid, smuggled, fed, and otherwise aided their Armenian friends, but overall, the dehumanization and scapegoating project against Armenians proved effective. In all, Yesayan shows that Armenians and Turks who lived near one another were not so different culturally or physically, but that Turkish violence against Armenians was spurred by a political co-option and re-articulation of identity. For instance, many if not all the Armenians in Yesayan's book speak and understand Turkish. To this day, Turkish, Armenian (and to an extent, Greek) words become enfolded into one another's lexicon.⁸

This racial ambiguity is further evidenced by the letters Yesayan wrote to her husband during her travels between the different towns. In one letter sent from Mersin and dated June 1909, she says "there's no distinguishing Armenians from Turks. They have the same physiognomy, the same accent, and essentially the same customs."⁹ If two groups of people living in the same region are so similar to one another, an oppressive regime must actively

⁸ *In the Ruins* provides an index that defines the words the translator chose to maintain in the original language. Most of the words are in Armenian or Turkish, and some of the ones that are technically Turkish have become woven into contemporary Armenian, just like Russian words have. For someone like me, who speaks but does not read Armenian, the lines between what words are technically Armenian and which are technically Turkish are even more blurry.

⁹ Yesayan, Zabel. 1909. Museum of Literature and Art. Yerevan, Armenia.

construct artificial distinctions between them so that Armenians not only become different from Turks but also subhuman. These artificial racial distinctions overlap with national and class identities until the separations between those categories become blurred. If their lives are not worth living, then their deaths are not really human deaths, their killings are not murder, and their lives are not worth remembering or mourning. Achille Mbembe writes about necropolitics, the politics of death, arguing that “appeals to [and production of] exception, emergency, and fictionalized notion of the enemy” are necessary to build a discourse of enmity and justify killing and biopower (Mbembe). Foucault and Mbembe write that biopower is the set of disciplinary mechanisms that decide who gets to live and biopolitics is the control apparatus that sustains life and delivers death.

As this delivery of death hinges in part on the state-sanctioned construction and consolidation of race, scholar Patrick Wolfe refers to the “organizing grammar of race” as a necessary tool of settler-colonialism and genocide (Armenia is an instance of genocide without settler-colonialism) (Wolfe 387). Similar to Wolfe, Cherrie Moraga writes “But it is not really difference the oppressor fears so much as similarity. He fears he will discover in himself the same aches, the same longings as those of the people he has shitted on” (Moraga). This is the fear that is built into the justification of genocide. Turkish forces maintain the false split between Turks and Armenians, and Armenians are rendered the threatening minority group.

Even when Yesayan describes the invading Turkish forces as markedly different and villainous—such as by calling them “veritable devils” (Yesayan 34)—she does so as a proxy for the political parties that arrange for the mass killing of Armenians, not as a way to suggest individual Turkish people differ in any significant way from Armenians. She realizes that distorting and polarizing identities is how genocide percolates in the first place. However, it

would not have been strategic to include those two lines from the letter to her husband in the text of her book because it would have departed from the narrative she constructed—that Armenians were near-annihilated but often still maintained community support and solidarity for one another—and she wanted to rouse public consciousness about the violence that was taking place. Further, she may have wanted Turkish citizens reading the book to view themselves as markedly different from the Turkish people who perpetrated the massacres, in order to spur them to stand against the attacks.

At the same time, her descriptions of the invading Turkish forces do render those individuals subhuman, and this reenacts the same logics that led to the massacres and genocide of Armenians. She and the surviving Armenians she visits have far different levels of access to power than the Turkish forces and the Turkish government, but it can be limiting and counter-productive to use similar logics of dehumanization against the oppressor, even if those logics are coming from a place of defensiveness.

Disablement as Dehumanization, Disability as Sub-Humanity

Throughout the book, representations of disability make the absence of a non-disabled body the striking feature and “tragic” undercurrent of the group’s observations. The disabled bodies in the book are simultaneously hypervisibilized and invisibilized, because through the hypervisibilization of their physical and mental disabilities, the absence of normative embodiment stands out and becomes the generator of pity, empathy, and hopeful political recognition of the attacks. At times, the narrative focuses less on the politics that led to the massacres and more on the resulting death, disablement, and displacement of the massacres. The intent behind *In the Ruins* was to bring to light the massacres that the Ottoman government wanted to erase and push

outside people's collective memory, including even the memories of the people affected by the massacres.

Yesayan relies on testimony, eyewitness accounts, second-person accounts, and her own observations of the physical and emotional devastation of the massacres to communicate the graveness and scope of the violence. She does not spend much time breaking down the political counter-revolution—the translator provides this context in the endnotes—because that is not what she believes will sway the reader, and she feels the urgent need to publish the book to help prevent further violence. Yesayan published the book almost two years after her three-month trip, after she published a series of articles about her observations, which means she did not have a significant amount of time to compile all her notes. Helen Meekosha writes about the relationship between disability and gender in war and dislocation, arguing the following:

“...war results in the dislocation of hundreds of thousands of peoples who become refugees, the majority of whom are women and children (estimated as 85 per cent) and many of whom are injured and disabled. Similar passive imagery is used to portray both refugees and/or women with disabilities... Disabling women and children renders families economically disadvantaged” (Meekosha).

Yesayan often—but not always—uses passive imagery to convey the pain of genocidal disablement, and in some instances her descriptions are not so different from how she discusses refugees or orphaned children. Meekosha also says “A national community may encompass ideas of shared race, history, culture and language, as well as mythologies of blood lines, gene pools and kin” (Meekosha 59). Yesayan continuously invokes shared blood lines and the idea that people belong to a “single family,” which does risk the mythologies of essentialism that Meekosha writes about (Yesayan 37). Yesayan's descriptions of disability as suffering

sometimes place disabled people outside the imagined futures of resistance and survival, and therefore their bodies are located outside the bounds of kinship. Tuck and Yang write that pain-centered narratives operate within the refrain that “*You are in pain, therefore you are,*” and Yesayan risks locating people’s humanity in their capacity to experience pain, which is rooted in ableist and colonial logics (Yesayan 228).

However, in other cases, she locates power and agency among disabled people. For instance, she quotes the consul’s wife in Adana who says that, despite a belly wound and losing his arm and both his legs, one woman in the village “remained conscious of her dreadful situation” until her death, and describes her presence of mind as “amazing” (Yesayan 37). Yesayan does not paint a passive image of her because she resisted her oppressors by remaining aware of her situation; her disablement did not prohibit her from surviving in that way. Her elevation of that kind of awareness is in itself, however, a kind of ableism, because not every person disabled by war and genocide can maintain that level of cognizance.

The word choices around disability Yesayan made when she first wrote the book in Armenian may differ slightly in meaning from the ones in the translated book. The Armenian International Women’s Association translation includes descriptions such as “deformed creatures” and “tortured animals,” which are strikingly ableist and dehumanizing. The account is a desperate proclamation to readers to pay attention to the horrific violences that have taken place and not allow the Turkish government to get away with them, but much of the language rests on the equation of disability with deficiency in order to garner sympathy.

Nirmala Erevelles discusses the creation of the metanarrative around disability within a Third World context, referring to her analytic lens as a transnational feminist disability studies perspective (Erevelles). This metanarrative creates both a hypervisible and invisible monolithic

construction of disability that statically stands in for the lived realities of disability among people from Third World countries. Erevelles asks in what spaces disabled Third World Women may claim sisterhood with feminists from imperial states that inflict disabling violence onto those Third World Women. She also says “third world feminists should have common causes around at least one issue—that of disability, an inevitable repercussion of the violence of such oppressive practices/structures.” Yesayan accomplishes avoiding a monolithic depiction of disablement and disability because she locates disability as one factor in people’s lived experiences and providing varied accounts of disablement.

Third World women writers who criticize imperialist, settler-colonial, and genocidal states, which in many ways is what Yesayan does in *In the Ruins*, face a tension between highlighting the state disablement of oppressed minorities and re-inscribing the ableist logics that codify the body as capable vs. incapable, normal vs. abnormal and functional vs. broken. Erevelles writes that Third World women must push against narratives that invoke ableist ideology while still representing wide-scale, state-inflicted disability. An important question to consider while reading this text is whether and the extent to which allowance and space should be made for Yesayan to count on ableist pity to stir outcry over the massacres, since she and others feared a genocide would soon take place. Drawing on those reactions could be considered a strategic and calculated decision that was right for that particular moment in time.

In other words, it may seem politically imperative and expedient that Yesayan present overarching depictions and narratives around disability—such as vivid descriptions of mutilated bodies—that demonstrate the material, bodily harm the Ottoman Empire has done to Armenians. However, using some of the most marginalized bodies post-massacre as political tools could be considered short-sighted and exploitative. Her descriptions also do not seriously consider the

political marginalization of disabled people, such as the women who were blinded in the massacres. She limits her discussion to her observations—such as that blinded women’s children were taken from them—without discussing the institutional and structural barriers that disenfranchised and did violence to blinded women. By excluding these systemic analyses, disability becomes deficiency and the tragedy (mothers losing their children) becomes attributed to the disability, instead of the political regard for and meaning around disability. Erevelles asks “More urgently, how do they challenge their invisibility among their third world sisters who, while critiquing the imperialist state, refuse to foreground its ableist assumptions that ultimately work against all third world women?” Yesayan does not take seriously this last point about ableist assumptions working against all Third World Women.

At the same time, statistics of disability in war and genocide are often ignored or actively erased in order to cover up the full consequences of violence. Given this, cataloging the effects of genocide on the physical and emotional (dis)ability of survivors is an act of memory-making and a struggle against the normalization of disappeared (killed or state-disabled) bodies. By providing observations and testimony about the people who were disabled during the Adana massacres, Yesayan makes sure disabled people’s bodies do not become swept up within narratives that deny the massacres, and consequently deny those people’s bodies. By representing (however irresponsibly) their disabilities, Yesayan insists that they exist and that their embodied experiences are a consequence of state terror. Since the state makes little room for disabled people to have access to resources, state disablement *is* a negative and reprehensible tactic of genocide, even if disabled people themselves are not deficient or lacking. Despite this, often absent from Yesayan’s text is the reminder that while what happened to people’s bodies was reprehensible and horrific, their bodies are not wrong.

Importantly, Yesayan's book highlights that there is little infrastructure to support disabled populations, and that her cohort's efforts can only scratch the surface of the problem. Erevelles writes, "In contexts where subsistence is itself a struggle, third world disabled people, in general, and third world women, in particular, who are themselves disabled and/or who care for disabled family member/clients, face the social, political, and economic implications of being invisible" (Erevelles 133). This invisibility is compounded further because the disabling effects of war and genocide are gendered processes. Several of the people Yesayan speaks with proclaim defiantly that the Turkish government failed in its extermination of Armenians because Armenian women will go on to have many children and the race will continue. Even in peacetime, women are made to represent the "biology reproducers (mothers of the nation)," as Erevelles describes, but this category becomes even more sharpened when so many people from a group are killed. This gendered impact of genocide may have intergenerational effects on dominant discourses around gender, heightening the urgency that women act as biological reproducers for the "sake of the race."

Trauma may force some people to repress the violence they experience, but memories are carried in the body. The physical and emotional trauma people carry in their bodies will not allow them to dispel the memories of what they experienced. By writing about the disability, trauma, and collective grief she sees in the camps and villages, Yesayan provides a space for those embodied memories to have a legible space in the public consciousness. Her ableist language makes her representations fall short of transgressive, but she does step outside the monolithic pain narrative Tuck and Yang discuss, and often describe the desire, subjectivity, and rage disabled people experience.

The Motif of the Eyes

The emotion that eyes carry, whether they stare vacantly or intensely at their surroundings and other people, figure as a prominent motif in *In the Ruins*. The idea that people can communicate deeply through their eyes borders on ableism, but it is worth unpacking the political significance of staring and looking in Yesayan's writing.

In her book *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson says "the stare is distinct from the gaze, which has been extensively defined as an oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim" (Garland-Thomson). Yesayan continuously says she feels uncomfortable that she and her group must impose themselves on the survivors during their intense grief, the depths of which she realizes she is incapable of understanding. At the same time, Yesayan also feels a collective sense of kinship and pain with the people she and the others visit. The eyes—and the stare in particular—are a primary mode of communication between Yesayan and the survivors, especially during moments when speech feels emotionally or physically inaccessible and words could not convey the scope of the survivors' heartache. Her critical attitude toward her own location and methodologies, and the fact that she feels an intimate and intergenerational connection with the people she visits, suggests Yesayan stares at and with the survivors, and does not gaze at them from a removed and voyeuristic standpoint.

This does not, however, mean there is no voyeurism involved in staring. As Garland-Thomson argues, staring is an enactment, a tangible process, and has material consequences. Yesayan is unable to stare at survivors without inviting them into a conversation—whether verbal or not—about their grief and losses. On the other hand, she is also able to use staring and tone to convey hidden messages of support and solidarity to the prisoners she visits while the prison guards stand watch.

VI. Fiction as Resistance: Exile, Alienation, and Radical Tenderness in *My Soul in Exile*

My Soul in Exile, published in Vienna in 1922, is Yesayan's first major piece of writing following the Armenian Genocide. The book is set between the 1909 Adana massacres and the start of World War I in 1914. The protagonist's name is Emma, who narrates the story in the first person, which lends interiority and intimacy to the text. She is a well-known painter who grapples with silence, memory, and the power of creative expression as an intervention into the loss of collective identity people experienced during that time period in Constantinople. The book has been described by Krikor Beledian as a "psychological novel," but I argue against the psychologization of exile and political dislocation. Instead, an exploration of the role of relationships and the emotions that crop up in the midst of deportation and massacres is an intensely political endeavor; referring to her work as solely a psychological exploration not only depoliticizes and pathologizes but also feminizes her work. These descriptions run the risk of feminizing her writing because they suggest that interior, personal examinations reflect more about a person's psychology than their political location.

In his essay about *My Soul in Exile*, Krikor Beledian refers to an excerpt from a letter Yesayan wrote in 1917, which includes the following:

"I am full of my novel's subject, and whenever I am alone—which rarely happens—I isolate myself in that corner of my soul which shelters my novel's universe: in that refuge there is neither massacre, nor deportations, nor Bolsheviks, nor anything else, but only sunshine, roses, and the eternal song of love, beauty, and grace. If I could manage to give expression, even if only partially, to that secret world, I would be satisfied, very satisfied."

In this excerpt, Yesayan does not enter her novel—her refuge—as a way to escape the violent realities of exile and deportation, but to carve spaces of transgressive and subversive identity-making. Yesayan surrounds herself in imagined worlds of beauty and then weaponizes that beauty. In a time of loss, displacement, and gruesome death, beauty becomes a site of rebellion and resistance. Her satisfaction with giving expression to that “secret world” is because she knows those forms of expression are in direct defiance against the political violence that materially and symbolically deny people the right to access sunshine, flowers, and songs of love. In this context, strategic love is a political tool, which is another reason why the tender and loving relationships in *My Soul in Exile* are politically charged. The secret worlds Yesayan feels are transferred and translated as creative representations on the page, because their fullness and depth are felt more easily than communicated.

In Yesayan’s novel, things that are beautiful are powerful. For instance, Emma describes how her aunt makes jam and wine out of roses. One of the reasons the jam-making is so demanding is that Emma says prolonged exposure to the rose fumes causes rose-poisoning. In effect, what might be seen as innocuous and beautiful can be harmful if not handled deftly. Emma, her aunt, the maid, and the other women in the room need to take breaks when they become lightheaded. Her aunt knows exactly what she is doing and does not hesitate to tell the others what she needs and how they should assist her. Her cooking is a “delicate, beautiful operation” and she approaches the “sacred task” with “the gravity of a bishop getting ready to celebrate Mass” (Yesayan 30-31).

Emma, as a narrator, elevates the ancestral knowledge it takes to make the jam. By referring to cooking as an “operation,” the process seems methodical, calculated, and an act of significant labor that demands energy and concentration from her aunt. Emma’s observations

make jam-making into a spiritual, meditative practice. Her descriptions assign power both to her aunt and the demanding jam-making process, indirectly arguing that domestic knowledge and skills—which are feminized and obscured from the public imagination—are valid, worthwhile, and essential to maintaining social networks.

By showing that her characters have control over these realms of beauty, Yesayan suggests they have control over their collective identities, which are also beautiful and resilient. Collective knowledge, such as jam-making, becomes even more precious and tenuous during periods of violence, when pain threatens to supersede ancestral, intergenerational ways of making, enacting, and consuming beauty. Her aunt is not only making food when she prepares the jam—she is also communicating and telling stories through the jam that she would be unable to tell through words., and she is inviting the people around her to help her tell those stories. This is what Emma means when she says “That’s not jam, that’s poetry” (Yesayan 34). Her aunt beams when Emma says this, and Emma observes that “Her eyes are still beautiful, full of light and wisdom.” Just like with poetry, the jam is a nonliteral intervention into the emotional dimensions that cannot be spoken about explicitly, because leaving them felt and mapped out but not directly named makes it more possible to have spaces to enter, taste, and imagine the memories, desires, and futures the jam contains. Entering these spaces can become overwhelming, which is when rose-poisoning takes effect.

Food, especially the process of making food, is about nourishing the body and nourishing and sustaining other people’s bodies through care work. Food and poetry are both elements of desire in the way that Tuck and Yang discuss the idea—they are time-warping in their relationship to the past and the future. The authors argue that “the logics of desire is asynchronous just as it is distemporal, living in the gaps between the ticking machinery of the

disciplinary institutions” (Tuck and Yang 231). With *My Soul in Exile*, those disciplinary institutions are the policies and social injustices that rendered Armenian people physical or social exiles. Desire-centered research—although this text is not research in the ways Tuck and Yang discuss research because it does not interface with an institution in the same ways, it is still political writing and a valid site of analysis—does not deny tragedy, but it expands the ways people understand the space there is to resist and find joy even within a minefield of pain and violence. In the above scenes in *My Soul in Exile*, the routine of jam-making in the private space of the home carves an intimate, non-linear, and non-normative gap within disciplinary institutions.

Emma’s relationship with the other women in the novel, Mrs. Danielian and Sophie, is often tender and affectionate. For instance, she says that Mrs. Danielian’s “tranquil smile has a strangely calming effect” on her (Yesayan 21). Considering how melancholic Emma typically feels, the fact that Mrs. Danielian’s mere presence makes her feel calm can only mean Emma has deep, platonic if not romantic love for her. She goes on to say that the scent of roses follows Mrs. Danielian when she walks—a deliberate location of Mrs. Danielian within the intergenerational power and memory-making she communicates in the passage about rose jam. Later, Sophie, another woman Emma befriends during her visits to people’s homes, says to Emma,

‘Have you ever thought about the fact, Emma, that someday, on some unknown date, at some unknown hour, they’re going to put us in a coffin, pale and unfeeling, our hands crossed on our breasts and our shrouds covered with flowers? With flowers, Emma! So that the more or less indifferent people crowding round us can’t smell the odors coming from our putrefying bodies’ (Yesayan 20).

Sophie is amazed and gripped by the spectacle and ritual of death and honoring and remembering the dead. She says, twice, and the second time with an exclamation mark, that their graves will be laid with flowers, like she wants Emma to share in her fascination with that eventuality. Even in death, the women will be connected with the potent, fragrant, beautiful, and political marker of roses that will connect them with generations of other women who have lived, made rose jam, smelled of roses, and died with roses lining their graves. They are women whose bodies were never meant to survive. Their survival happens collectively, and they will carry the intergenerational scent and power of roses with them into their death, a declaration that they lived and that their lives continue to carry meaning.

Lorde writes about the power of the erotic, and not only sexual eroticism. She writes, “that self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling” (Lorde). Yesayan and Mrs. Danielian share the joy, hope, and self-connection they feel from the creative power of their art, and they see in each other the reminder that their art has the power to act as a catalyst for collective identity-making and refusing the dislocation of exile and marginalization in their own country.

Mrs. Danielian says, “It’s as if we were exiles in a remote foreign country. We are exiles in the land of our birth because we’re deprived of the kind of environment that our people’s collective existence would create around us. Only fragile, loose threads bind us to our native land” (Yesayan 18). Those threads strengthen when Emma and Mrs. Danielian locate their art within the context of each other’s work. Even though they struggle with negotiating what place art has in a violent political landscape, each woman’s art grounds her in her political trajectory and they feel a greater sense of purpose and direction when they think of themselves as co-conspirators in creative rebellion. Emma thinks to herself that the “powerful breath of creativity”

can come only from “collective existence,” because art may be transmitted from an individual body but it percolates and takes shape in the spaces between people, where the origins of experience blur and it becomes impossible—and unnecessary—to tease out ownership over ideas (Yesayan 19). This artistic blurring is yet another source of the eroticism and intimacy between Emma and Mrs. Danielian. Her dreams become yet another productive space for Emma to imagine and hone her creativity, in part because she draws inspiration from Mrs. Danielian and her work (Yesayan 27).

Since their intimacy makes Emma and Mrs. Danielian “comrades in exile” and “comrades in struggle,” the tenderness between them is an act of resistance against a masculinist and genocidal state that would never imagine—or make space for—two women as comrades. By its very name, exile demands isolation. Claiming another as a comrade and companion in exile strips the concept of some of its power to curtail people’s relationship with their ethnicity, race, and home to their individual bodies, bodies which are themselves cut off from a country of origin. The two insist that their interconnectedness and embodied, intimate, creative power can carve futures that have enough sutures—in the form of paint brushes and typewriters—for half-legible, contradictory, and ambiguous memories to cling to. Adrienne Rich writes about the lesbian continuum, “If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support... It is also direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women” (Rich). In this context, that “male right of access” is the masculinist state that enacts genocide through women’s bodies in particular ways. Emma’s and Mrs. Danielian’s “sharing of rich inner life,” their art, is just that—an interior place where they meet and find sanctuary and solace.

The novel maps Emma's progress from ascribing to binary thinking around her place in the world, her relationships with others, and the state of politics, to arriving at a sense of peace with their ambiguity and contradiction. In the beginning, she says "It seems there is no transition between one state of affairs and the next: things are either very good or very bad" (Yesayan 4). She says later,

I may become a leading personality in the renascent, resurgent Armenian community from one day to the next...It seems that it is my task to utter one of the cries of liberation of a people that has for centuries been groaning under a crushing burden of violence and servitude, relying on the force of my personal talent and my inner, individual strength.

Emma quickly realizes that those feelings of individual strength are illusions, and her power and capacity as an artist stems from her collaboration and connection with others. Through her painting, she grows to recognize silences as generative and art as a way connect individuals to collective ideas and desires. The "intentional incompleteness of her art" suggests that her art will never fully communicate everything she wants to say, so she intentionally avoids trying to communicate anything definitive; she refuses the drive to make her political and personal beliefs and concerns fully coherent, linear, and conclusive (Yesayan 25). This partiality is a politically-charged remark on the incompleteness—and queerness—of her political location in non-physical exile.

Emma says existing collectively is the only way to resist being "torn from the past and fenced off from the future" (Yesayan 19). Emma refuses to individualize violence, pain, and survival, even as she experiences and writes about them from and through her body. Many of her paintings depict scenes in nature, and the essay by Krikor Beledian, who was her student later in her life, reveals insight into why nature figures so prominently in many of her writings. Beledian

writes that Yesayan told him, on her last day of class, “I would just like you to be more attentive to your inner voices, closer to nature” (Yesayan 112). Descriptions of nature go beyond her literary style—she also things nature brings people closer to their inner voices and reminds them what justice looks like and how people’s bodies should be treated. In the wake of genocide, these reminders should not be construed as romantic or ephemeral, but closely linked to survival.

I. (Re)directing the gaze: The Politics of Victimhood and Race in *Meliha Nouri*

Hanem

By writing from the perspective of an elite, nationalist, Turkish woman, Yesayan enters the intimate spaces of the oppressive group to redirect the literary and political gaze toward the site of power. The text would not have been as powerful if Yesayan wrote *Meliha Nouri Hanem*, the protagonist, as someone who is immediately sympathetic to Armenians. However, as the narrative progresses, Yesayan does offer glimpses of hope that Meliha can unlearn state propaganda, nationalism, and unquestioning support for militarism. This is not Yesayan's way of humanizing "the enemy" per se, although she does succeed in demonstrating the nuances of Meliha's character and writes her as someone who is intellectually minded and somewhat of a feminist, despite the xenophobia and imperialism rooted in her feminism. Yesayan imagines and enters the life of someone who was brought up in the Ottoman Empire to show how deeply the state-level propaganda and politics inculcate unquestioning support for violent policies and practices.

It is important to consider the audience for this book and time period when it was published. Yesayan first published the book in an Armenian communist newspaper in Paris, France in 1928, and it was later published as a stand-alone book. Yesayan did not write this book immediately before or after the genocide, and its style of narration does not possess the same urgency and sense of call-to-action as *In the Ruins* does. Instead, *Meliha Nouri Hanem* pushes readers to question issues of power and subjectivity post-genocide. The text is set, however, around the beginning of the genocide, judging by the mention of deportations. Yesayan not only looks from a different location—a hospital in Gallipoli—but she also looks backward. Both these epistemological maneuvers unsettle what Donna Haraway refers to as the "God trick," which

claims to speak and see objective truth from nowhere in particular (Haraway). This “God trick” extends observations and stories beyond and outside the body until they appear as static, self-evident, naturally-occurring, reified ideas. By positioning the narrative from a Turkish perspective, Yesayan troubles the taken-for-granted assumption of who gets to speak for whom.

In the book, Meliha says she doesn’t believe in war and yet absently and offhandedly recites that the *Other* is their enemy, and that the members of the Turkish military are the true heroes. In the beginning of the narrative, she says “Let this war finish! Who cares how it finishes? To whom is this victory going to serve? Feasts and celebration for a few *beys* and *effendis*... What else?”¹⁰ She has class-centered criticisms of the war and recognizes the pointlessness of victory and the commodification of violence.

However, like most of the characters in Yesayan’s works of fiction, Meliha demonstrates contradictory views. When Meliha is in the surgery room, an Armenian doctor asks her for pincers as he operates on a dying soldier. She is lost in her thoughts and slow to react, so he pushes her aside and takes the pincers himself. Meliha later tells Remzi what happened but leaves out the detail about her slow reaction. She says to him, “Let that traitor not run his mouth too much! Who is guilty that the rooms are filled with wounded? Aren’t his kindred guiding the enemy in our country? I hate those enemies of the state.” By referring to Armenian people explicitly as “enemies of the state,” Meliha reveals how directly she has internalized and normalized state-level propaganda.

When Meliha later calls the Armenian doctor careless, Remzi reveals that he works from five in the morning until midnight to save soldiers’ lives. He also informs her that the doctor’s

¹⁰ Any quotations I use from *Melia Nouri Hanem* are taken from the translated text I procured from Dr. Vartan Matiossian.

elderly parents and young wife have been deported, which all but means they are guaranteed to die. The reader hears and sees very little of the Armenian doctor, but he becomes the unspoken hero of the story, as someone who works to save the lives of Ottoman soldiers who are part of the military structure responsible for his family's deportation. He sees others as people before he sees them in relation to the state; his character serves as an invocation for others to do the same. Yesayan does not give the doctor a name or reveal what village he is from or how he became a doctor—she keeps him abstract to further suggest that he represents more than just an individual person.

Yesayan subtly conveys the institutionalization of hatred toward Armenians and other minorities in the Ottoman Empire. Meliha thinks about Remzi—who believes the empire is their true enemy, not scapegoated minorities—and his “kind heart,” while wondering about him, “Why do you hate and disdain things that we consider progressive, illuminated, and liberal ideas?” The “we” in this sentence represents majority groups in the Ottoman Empire who hold social and legal power, and the “progressive” ideas are the policies that purportedly unify the empire, in part through orchestrated, collective animosity and violence toward minorities. There is almost a sense of sarcastic bitterness in this sentence—Yesayan writes Meliha as someone who does not realize the hegemony and violence of the ideas she considers “progressive,” because Meliha has only heard and been told that they are progressive.

One of the most pivotal turning points in the story occurs between Meliha and the Armenian doctor. The two are working in the hospital alongside each other as “unending rows” of wounded soldiers appear, and “[their] eyes met each other in the same sincere feeling of sadness.” This is another instance when Yesayan uses eyes as motif for acknowledgement and intimate understanding. In this scene, Meliha finally feels an unspoken sense of respect for the

doctor over their shared sadness. She does not look at him with contempt like before, such as when she said he has an “ugly and big nose,” but she also does not verbalize this new feeling to him or anyone else. She feels safe seeing him as more of an equal in the intimate space of their act of looking while still thinking about Armenians as “the enemy” and having militaristic and nationalist thoughts.

Even though Meliha realizes the pointlessness of the war and wants it to come to an end, she can't help but feel pride in her nation and its military—this naturalization and institutionalization of war shows that the state demands, and needs, the kind of fervor Meliha demonstrates. Remzi feels disdain and distrust toward the nation, and his political stance sheds light on the entanglement between class and nationalism. Remzi grew up poor and was the son of a gardener to Meliha's family. He supported himself in his efforts to become a doctor, and Yesayan shows that his class background enables him to see the state from a more critical site.

Toward the end of the book, Meliha, Remzi, the Armenian doctor, and a Syrian doctor are seated around a table having lunch. The Armenian doctor leaves and the Syrian one begins to talk about the droves of deported Armenians that had passed Damascus recently. He tells them a story about a gendarme who had exhibited only cruelty as he accompanied a caravan of deported Armenians until, one day, he found a three-month-old infant in the street and asked some women in the caravan to care for the baby. His demeanor toward the women caring for the child softened; he put up with the other gendarmes who mocked him and even gave the nursing women and children watermelon and bread on occasion. According to the Syrian doctor, “his face was infinitely blissful when an innocent smile came across the baby's face” and he was heartbroken when his request to be released from his command and to live in a small house with

the baby was denied. The doctor finishes the story with “Ah! Try to solve the secrets of the human heart if you can.”

If the Syrian man had told a story about cruelty and pain, Meliha would not have paid much attention to his words. She would have written the story off as slander against the Turkish military forces she believed were virtuous. A story of compassion and tenderness, however, about someone whose position dictates that he inflict violence and death in the name of state victory, creates a moment of tension for Meliha. The story may romanticize the connection between the gendarme and the baby, but the key point is that the military-political structure that put the gendarme in his position of violence and refused to allow him to leave is the real culprit.

Meliha is indirectly called upon to realize this systemic injustice and find that proclivity for tenderness within herself and realize that violence, deportation, and genocide are never justifiable and that people can always act instead with compassion. That is why her response is so defensive—she does not want to reckon with the vulnerability and culpability behind her staunch support for the state. Remzi says about the man’s story, “This means that that monster had kept a spark of human feelings in his depths...you must not become desperate, despite what happens. Those sparks must be stirred to dissipate the darkness asphyxiating us.” Meliha responds by saying, “Yes, to nurture vipers in our midst,” and immediately wonders why her instinctual response was to write off the story, even though she was moved by it. She equates Armenians with poisonous, deadly, cold-blooded creatures, which was common dehumanizing language during the genocide, and naturalizes violence by later thinking, “I’m not responsible if nature commands us to devour in order to live.”

Yesayan implicitly underscores that Meliha’s response is learned and automatic, but not inherent to who she is. She wants the reader to realize that there is the possibility and potential to

unlearn—to resist and show radical solidarity with subaltern groups of people. It is possible Yesayan may have drawn inspiration from Meliha’s character from Halide Edib Hanem—an Ottoman Turkish woman who championed women’s rights, wrote novels, and was also a staunch nationalist—who was around the same age as Yesayan. She was involved with the orphanages after the genocide which assimilated Armenian children into Ottoman Turkish society, including by stripping them of their names.

Yesayan redirects the hegemonic, colonial gaze from the people whose bodies are the sites of violent attacks to those whose bodies either deliver or condone violence. By looking at the people doing the looking and violating, instead of the people being killed, Yesayan calls upon Turkish people to disentangle themselves from the indoctrination that spurs them to hate ethnic minorities, namely Armenians.

II. Telegrams, First Drafts, and Short Stories: The Unpublished Writings

Yesayan, who lived in Constantinople, devoted part of her life to exposing and attempting to ameliorate the disablement and oppression of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. In one of her telegrams to Boghos Nubar Pacha, President of the National Delegation in Paris, France, Yesayan says the condition of orphans and refugees is revolting and Nubar Pacha must transfer to Cyprus from Cilicia to prevent intervention from the Turkish government, whatever that might look like. She writes that, if he does not, then she will step down from the position he has appointed her to. Her word choice is particularly important—she does not say she will not continue with the mission, but that it would be *impossible* for her to do so, and that he should replace her with someone “who will have the necessary qualities to bear through such a situation.”¹¹ In this sentence, those “necessary qualities” do not represent positive attributes. They stand in for acquiescence and an absence not just of moral and empathetic insight, but also a critical set of politics and a refusal to align and become complicit with violence. In a telegram to Dr. Kennedy, representative of the “Lord Mayor’s Fund” in Adana, Yesayan urges that Dr. Kennedy to send 3,400 orphans from Aleppo to Cyprus. Her language is not as personable with Dr. Kennedy, but she still makes the urgency of the situation clear.

Depending on the urgency of the telegrams and the person Yesayan wrote to, she sometimes used short and brief sentences to communicate information and other times wrote eloquently to convince someone in a position of power to help orphans and refugees. In some of the first drafts of telegrams and other communications Yesayan wrote early in the 20th century, there are several areas where she has crossed out certain words, phrases, and sentences and replaced them with others. I do not suggest that it makes sense to analyze and assign direct and

¹¹ Yesayan, Zabel. Museum of Literature and Art. Yerevan, Armenia. 1910.

explicit meaning to the edits she makes in rough copies of her writings, but I do believe there is some space to consider the social and political implications of certain key changes she makes in these documents.

In one part of her notes, Yesayan has crossed out “make you remember” and written “fill in some gaps in what we know,” followed by “to make you remember.” This part of her notes refers to the condition of orphans in Cilicia (it is only possible to deduce that she wrote this sometime after 1920, because the text references events that took place in 1920). Yesayan urges “His Excellency”—who must be Boghos Nubar Pacha, President of the National Delegation in Paris, France, Yesayan judging by the other telegrams she wrote—to realize, through the accounts she provides, how necessary it is to aid the orphans. She likely wants him to remember the massacres and genocide earlier in the century and do right by the orphaned children.

By foregrounding that she hopes the testimonies she has collected will provide knowledge about (his)stories people do not fully know, Yesayan suggests those gaps have been intentionally contrived—that people have been *made* not to know them. The reason people have gaps in knowledge is because the Ottoman Empire deliberately carved out those spaces of not-knowing by fragmenting communities and sending people into exile. To fill in those absences and insist that a man who holds significant power do everything he can to support orphaned children is decolonial feminist recovery work because Yesayan does so in defiance of the state which says her recovery work is obsolete because there are no (his)stories for her to recover.

Since she chose to emphasize that filling in the gaps of what people do not know is *how* they are made to remember—collectively and broadly—she must have realized that memory is a patchwork construction and reconstruction. Filling in memory-knowledge gaps is a constant process and a declaration that a group of people exists and has not been wiped from the earth.

The state makes memory disappear by killing bodies, destroying churches, homes, and schools, and then denying that those killings and acts of destruction ever happened. By denying genocide and scattering survivors into exile, the state all but ensures that the monolithic specter of violence supplants people's cultural heritage. Reeling from their losses, people are likely to collectively forget their lives before genocide, and struggle to make connections between their trauma and others' trauma.

One of the documents I selected from the archive is an extract from a report on the events in Marache (present-day Kahramanmaras, Turkey) dated 1920 in which Yesayan provides testimonies by two eye-witnesses who survived and made the 200 km journey to Aleppo, Syria. At one point in that document, Yesayan includes a quote by a French commander who says "I am not giving out any soldiers, I don't care" in response to requests for one hundred French soldiers to protect several hundred Armenians. Yesayan censors the final word, which is a profanity, likely because the report was part of formal correspondence and she felt she did not need to include the full word to accurately represent the testimony. In this case, formality superseded accuracy.

In a short story called "The Song," Yesayan writes about a protagonist named Zabelle Grandchamp, whose first name is a Gallicized version of Yesayan's and whose last name is a common French name. It is unclear whether this character has any direct connection to Yesayan's life, but it is no coincidence that they bear the same first name. The narrative centers around the protagonist's real or imagined experience hearing voices in the wind at night that represent her lover coming back to haunt her. The wind itself is personified—it moves, takes up space, and speaks like a person. The wind represents the resurgence of memories, and the fact

that there is sometimes no escaping the memories that swell up around people. The song moves like a person, and Yesayan writes that at one point it swooshes by her and says

“...Mother, the bird is singing, and yet...

“...It’s the season for flowers, nature is alive, why should I die?...”

The ellipses indicate memories that fade in and out, and the child who is wondering why he has to die may be sick of natural causes, but it is possible they are dying because they were hurt in massacre or genocide. She writes, “The song coughed, and the wind blew through the elderberry trees,” and the image of those trees could be either a bad omen or suggest sorrow and remorse. The text cuts off before the conclusion, so it is unclear what happens to the wind or to Zabelle.

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