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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Dislocations of Identity
in Late Twentieth Century Armenian Diaspora Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Comparative Literature

by

Lilit Keshishyan

2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dislocations of Identity In Late Twentieth Century Armenian Diaspora Literature

by

Lilit Keshishyan

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Peter S. Cowe, Co-Chair

Professor Ali Behdad, Co-Chair

The relationship between geographic space and identity has long been established. Increasingly, scholars working in the area of diaspora studies have been debating the extent to which the idea of a physical homeland is significant when defining and categorizing expatriate communities as diasporic. This dissertation enters the conversation concerning the geographic homeland, conceptual spaces, and identity within the context of diaspora studies through a study of the literary works of three Armenian writers from the diaspora. Focusing on the works of Vahé Oshagan, Hakob Karapents and Vahe Berberian, this dissertation examines the representation and reconceptualization of identity in Armenian literature from the diaspora written in the latter part of the 20th century. Examining the literary characters' relationships to

the multitude of spaces they call home, my readings assert that these works offer a complex view of the diasporic subject because they acknowledge the duality of living outside one's "home" country and go beyond this binary understanding by rejecting and questioning the simplified and romanticized narratives of origin, place and subject-hood. I argue that rather than finding solace within a particular space, searching and wandering within those spaces, whether literally or metaphorically, become the only stable fixtures in the lives of the characters, and therefore, define their identity. Although the significance of geographic and imagined spaces as clear markers of diasporic identity is sometimes contested in diaspora studies, I argue that, these spaces, nonetheless, serve as integral components within the process of negotiating identity and belonging.

The dissertation of Lilit Keshishyan is approved.

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For Aram

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

All translations in the dissertation are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

Armenian words have been transliterated according to the Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies (JSAS) system of transliteration included in the Appendix of the dissertation.

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Introduction

Traditionally, the term “diaspora” was reserved for what is now called the “prototypical” or “classical” diaspora communities, including the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian populations dispersed around the world. Increasingly, the term has been applied to any dispersed population living outside its place of origin. The lack of distinction between the now diverse groups of people coined diasporic has led to debates about the defining qualities of true diasporic communities, particularly their relationships to their place or places of origin. Khatchig Tölölyan notes the definitive characteristic of the “classical” conception of a diasporic community as

a social formation engendered by catastrophic violence, or at the very least, by coerced expulsion from a homeland, followed by settlement in other countries and among alien host societies, and, crucially capped by generations of survival as a distinct community that worked hard to maintain its old identity or to create new ones that sustained its difference from the host society. (“The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies” 648)

He admits the limitations of this early definition, citing the exclusion of Indian, Chinese, and African communities living outside their ancestral lands; however, Tölölyan urges that certain distinctions be placed when using the term diaspora. He writes, “when ethnics, exiles, expatriates, refugees, asylum seekers, labor migrants, queer communities, domestic service workers, executives of transnational corporations, and transnational sex workers are all labeled diasporas, the struggle to maintain distinctions is lost, only to resume in another guise”(649). Roger Brubaker finds the overuse of the term similarly problematic, noting that “[a]s the term has proliferated, its meaning has been stretched to accommodate the various

intellectual, cultural and political agendas in the service of which it has been enlisted. This has resulted in what one might call a “‘diaspora’ diaspora” – a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space”(“The ‘diaspora’ diaspora” 1). William Safran designates seven specific criteria¹ that mark expatriated communities as diasporic, basing his model on the “Jewish Prototype”.² Safran’s second and fourth criteria deal directly with the individual’s relationship to the homeland. He writes that diasporic peoples “retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, achievements, and, often enough, sufferings” and “[t]hey regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—if and when conditions are

¹ 1. They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more peripheral, or foreign, regions.

2. They retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, achievements, and, often enough, sufferings.

3. Their relationship with the dominant element of society in the hostland is complicated and often uneasy. They believe that they are not, and perhaps cannot be, fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it.

4. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—if and when conditions are appropriate.

5. They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity, which reach across political boundaries, are importantly defined in terms of the existence of such a relationship. That relationship may include a collective commitment to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its independence, safety, and prosperity. The absence of such a relationship makes it difficult to speak of transnationalism.

6. They wish to survive as a distinct community—in most instances as a minority—by maintaining and transmitting a cultural and/or religious heritage derived from their ancestral home and the symbols based on it. In so doing, they adapt to hostland conditions and experiences to become themselves centers of cultural creation and elaboration.

7. Their cultural, religious, economic, and/or political relationships with the homeland are reflected in a significant way in their communal institutions. (“Jewish Diaspora” 37)

² In an earlier essay, “Myths of Homeland and Return” (*Diaspora*, 1991), Safran contends that the Armenian, Maghrebi, Turkish, Palestinian, Cuban, Greek and Chinese diasporas meet most of the criteria he lists, “although none of them fully conforms to the ‘ideal type’ of the Jewish Diaspora”(84). In “The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective,” (*Israel Studies*, 2005) Safran redacts the statement citing that “it has been misconstrued by some as implying an ‘ideal’ situation”(56).

appropriate”(“The Jewish Diaspora” 37). While, Tölölyan, Safran, Brubaker and others³ call for distinctions between the diverse communities formed by dispersion, scholars including Stuart Hall⁴ and James Clifford encourage a more inclusive approach to the concept of diaspora.

Clifford argues that presupposing a center from which diasporic communities are dispersed does not accurately reflect the allegiances of these communities. Addressing Safran’s criteria directly, he writes,

If this center becomes associated with an actual “national” territory—rather than with a reinvented “tradition,” a “book,” a portable eschatology—it may devalue what I called the lateral axes of diaspora. These decentered, partially overlapping networks of communication, travel, trade, and kinship connect the several communities of a transnational “people.” The centering of diasporas around an axis of origin and return overrides the specific local interactions (identifications and “dis-identifications,” both constructive and defensive) necessary for the maintenance of diasporic social forms. The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*. But *there* is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation. (321-322)⁵

³ See also: Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997. Print.

⁴ I discuss Stuart Hall’s argument for reexamining the concept of diaspora in Chapter Three.

⁵ In the “The Diasporic Imaginary,” Brian Keith Axel offers an alternative to the homeland-centered definition of diaspora, citing the Sikh diaspora which emerged out of the conflicts between the Indian nation-state and Sikhs fighting to *create* a homeland called Khalistan (Land of the Pure)(412). He argues that brutal violence against Sikh’s as a result of their demand for homeland has resulted in a diasporic identification not necessarily tied to the place of homeland that is being disputed; he aims to “foreground violence as a key means through which the features of a people are constituted” and “account for the creation of the diaspora, not through a

Clifford's contention with the inclusion of national territory as central concern for diasporic peoples raises interesting questions about the "center" or "centers" from which diasporic peoples are dispersed and their relationship to these spaces. Tölölyan's view of the center is less abstract than Clifford's, as he posits the physical space of homeland as key point of negotiation; however, his interpretation of the diasporans' relationship to that space is flexible. For Tölölyan, an important

characteristic of diasporas, especially those dispersed by catastrophic destruction in the homeland, is a rhetoric of restoration and return that, in practice, takes the form of a sustained and organized commitment to maintaining relations with kin communities elsewhere, and with the homeland, to which diasporans either return literally or, more commonly, "re-turn" without actual repatriation: that is, they turn again and again toward the homeland through travel, remittances, cultural exchange, and political lobbying and by various contingent efforts to maintain other links with the homeland. ("The Contemporary Discourse" 649)

Tölölyan's emphasis on "re-turning" to the homeland without actually living there amends Safran's criteria of a permanent and physical "return," or "desire to return," without eliminating the national space as important component of diasporic identity.

The varying theoretical debates about the benchmarks of diasporic communities and identities find points of contention in dispersed communities' relationship to the homeland or spaces of allegiance, as well as in how these spaces function in the communities'

definitive relation to place, but through formations of temporality, affect, and corporeality"(412).

understanding of themselves. This dissertation project does not necessarily take sides in the debate about diaspora criteria, rather builds on them through the lens of late twentieth century Armenian diaspora literature. Through critical readings of the literary works of Hakob Karapents, Vahé Oshagan, and Vahe Berberian, I examine the relationship of the diasporic characters in these works to their homeland(s) and their host countries. While the centers of negotiation, whether they are spatial, temporal, or theoretical, oftentimes change, the desire for a sense of belonging, frequently equated with physical spaces, remains consistent. Focusing on Karapents' novel, *Adam's Book*, Oshagan's novella, "The Unction," and Berberian's novel, *Letters from Zaat'ar*, I propose that rather than finding a distinct sense of identity within a space, ideology, or community, the diasporic identity of the protagonists in these texts becomes embedded within the search for identity, a search which unfailingly involves negotiations between *here(s) and there(s)*.

Throughout their history Armenians have been subject to mass relocations: the Seljuk raids of Crimea in the eleventh century, the conquest of the Cilician Kingdom of Armenia in the fourteenth century, and the Ottoman conquest of the Crimean Peninsula in the mid fifteenth century, contributed to migrations of Armenians throughout the world. The forced relocations of Armenians by Shah Abbas in the early seventeenth century enhanced a preexisting Armenian trade network and the Armenian monopoly of the Persian silk trade for a large part of the seventeenth century.

The largest mass dispersion of Armenians from their native homelands in modern history occurred between the years 1915-1921, during the mass deportations and genocide of Ottoman Armenians by the Young Turk regime. The Genocide significantly expanded

existing expatriate communities in the Middle East, largely concentrated in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Egypt. Armenians also fled to France, the United States, and various countries throughout South America. For a brief period after World War II, Soviet authorities urged repatriation of diaspora Armenians to Soviet Armenia and roughly 100,000 Armenians repatriated. In the following decades historic events including the Lebanese civil war, the Iranian Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union prompted further migration, creating a sense of double-displacement of Armenians who, again, were impelled to leave their homes and establish communities in less hostile, economically more stable regions of the world. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent independence of the Republic of Armenia has added new elements of discussion about diasporic identity and belonging, as, for the first time since the short lived independence of Armenia from 1918-1920, the Armenian people have an internationally recognized nation state and official homeland. More recently, the U.S.-Iraq war and the Syrian civil war have prompted migration to the United States and to a lesser extent repatriation to Armenia.

As a consequence of a history of dispersion, Armenian diasporic communities have adapted to host cultures while developing tight knit communities preserving cultural traditions, language and a sense of ethnic identity. After the inception of print media in 1512, Armenians actively worked toward promoting a more unified sense of national identity to the communities living around the world. Historically, the Armenian Church has played a prominent role in the Armenian cultural identity, particularly for Armenians in predominantly non-Christian countries; The Mekhitarist Armenian Catholics also significantly contributed to Armenian cultural identity with the establishment of the

Benedictine Order of Mekhitarists in 1719. Based on San Lazzaro Island in Venice, they are “dedicated to piety, literary scholarship and service to the nation”(143).⁶

Due to the long absence of official statehood

“[b]y default, church leaders, who presided over the most established and pervasive Armenian institution, became the predominant leaders of the ‘nation’ as well...the leadership of the church over Armenians was affirmed by imperial structures, namely the millet system of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans reinforced the religious nature of the Armenian community and accepted the head of the Armenian Church, The Patriarch of Constantinople/Istanbul as the head of all Armenian subjects in both sacred and profane matters. (Panossian 128)

Together, the Armenian Church, a collective historical consciousness of genocide and survival, along with active political organizations and Armenian schools have served as unifying forces for Armenians and continue to play a significant role in the building and sustaining of Armenian communities around the world; these traditions, while at times separately debated, have gone relatively unquestioned as markers of Armenian identity and belonging.

The mass exodus of Armenians from Turkey significantly shifted the sites of Armenian literary production and activity, with writers and intellectuals basing their production in Beirut, Paris, Boston, and, more recently Los Angeles, and elsewhere.

⁶ For an overview modern Armenian intellectual production see Oshagan, Vahe. “Modern Armenian Literature and Intellectual History from 1700-1915.”

Although losing a majority of its Armenian intellectuals to execution or exile, Istanbul struggled to remain an important center of literary activity.

While the corpus of scholarship on Armenian diaspora literature remains lacking and sparse, scholars and critics, including Marc Nichanian, Krikor Beledian, Rubina Perroomian, and Lorne Shirinian have contributed on varying levels to the discussion of Armenian diaspora literature. Literary magazines and newspapers, including, but not limited to, *Haraj* (Paris), *Hairenik* (Boston), *Bagin* (Beirut), and *Horizon* (Montreal) have published Armenian literary works as well as articles about Armenian literature. I refer to relevant articles from Armenian magazines throughout the dissertation; however, even as these publications provide a necessary and important cultural value for the Armenian community, the greater part of the articles do not necessarily fall under the category of literary scholarship.

Editor of the literary journal, *Gam*, Marc Nichanian is one of the most significant contributors to Armenian diaspora literary scholarship. Among several articles and edited works, his book *Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Volume I) is a critical study of writers, Yeghishe Charents, Gurgen Mahari, Zabel Esayan and Vahan Totovents. Nichanian examines the writers' relationships to catastrophe and totalitarianism, examining weight of tragedy in their literature. Rubina Perroomian's literary scholarship has focused on representations of the Armenian Genocide in Literature. Her series of books⁷ look at genocide literature in a comparative context, tracing the impact of the Genocide on literature and identity. Krikor Beledian, a novelist and poet based in Paris, also contributes to literary scholarship on 20th century diaspora through his examinations of Armenian diaspora

⁷ See Rubina Perroomian's "Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and Jewish Experience" (1993), "And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey After 1915: The Metamorphosis of Post-Genocide Armenian Identity" (2008), and "The Armenian Genocide in Literature: Perceptions of Those who Lived Through the Years of Calamity" (2012).

literature based in France.⁸ Anahid Aramouni Keshishian's book *Hakob Karapents: Worldview and Art* [*Hakob Karapents': ashkharhĕnkalumĕ ev arvestĕ*], is the only full length project about Karapents. Keshishian's study examines major themes and motifs in Karapents' works, positioning him as a cosmopolitan writer. Scholar and writer, Lorne Shirinian examines Anglophone Armenian-American literature, concentrating on the symbols and cultural markers of identity in these texts. He places the "collective symbol of the Armenian genocide" as "the basis for understanding the body of texts...[he calls] Armenia-North American literature"(Shirinian 91).

Vahe Oshagan and Hakob Karapents, two of the key subjects in this dissertation, have also contributed to critical dialogue in the form of scholarly and literary essays in various media forums. Oshagan as founding editor and contributor to the literary magazine *RAFT*, provided an English language forum for Armenian literary criticism and translation. Alongside his fictional works, Karapents also wrote nonfictional pieces⁹ and contributed to Armenian literary media. Oshagan's and Karapents' articles about literature do not necessarily critique works, but rather serve as much needed synopses of the Armenian diaspora and literature, and, often in Karapents' case, read as literary essays.¹⁰

⁸ See Beledian, Krikor. *Cinquante ans de littérature arménienne en France*, (2001).

⁹ Karapents' *Two Worlds: Literary Essays* [*Erku Ashkharh: Grakan Pordzagrut' iwanner*] (1992) is a collection essays covering a wide array of subjects, including but not limited to: specific writers, writing as a craft, the role of the writer in society, etc. Karapents' book, *A Man and A Country: and Other Short Stories* [*Mi mart u mi erkir ew ayl badmuatsk'ner*] (1994) also includes literary essays.

¹⁰ My brief literature review is not meant to serve as a comprehensive list of individuals writing about diaspora literature; rather, it provides a list of the main group of scholars working on diaspora literature. Articles about diaspora literature by other individuals appear sporadically throughout Armenian literary magazines and newspapers.

Although this dissertation concentrates only on Armenian language literature from the diaspora, I find it essential to introduce the Armenian-American literary tradition composed in English. William Saroyan is the best known of the first generation Armenian-American authors writing in English.¹¹ Tölölyan writes that Saroyan's

fictions frequently begin by celebrating the enduring Armenianness of his characters; next, they note the duality of their identities; then they insist on the *integration*, (incomplete, hence rarely amounting to *assimilation*) of these characters into American life. Saroyan's authorial personae insistently assert the uneasy compatibility of these two identities, even as his stories fail to demonstrate plausibly such reconcilability in narrative terms. Saroyan finally insists, in humanistic terms that were convincing to American audiences during the ascendancy of left-populism in the 1930s, but sound merely hollow now, that all people are the same, in that they experience, at bottom, dualities that can be mapped upon, and assimilated to, the original duality of the mad/sad Armenian. ("Armenian-American Literature" 28)

The texts of second and third generation Anglophone Armenian writers include Peter Najarian's *Voyages* (1971), Michael Arlen's *Passage to Ararat* (1975), Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* (1997), Nancy Kricorian's *Zabelle* (1998), Carol Edgarian's *Rise of the Euphrates* (1994), Micheline Aharonian Marcom's *Three Apples Fell from Heaven* (2001) and Aris Janigian's *Bloodvine* (2003), among others. A majority of these texts are written in the form of memoirs, autobiography, and autobiographical fiction, oftentimes addressing genocide related issues, both political and personal. Exploring childhood memories,

¹¹ David Kherdian's anthology, *Forgotten Bread: First Generation Armenian-American Writers* (2007), provides a glimpse into the literary texts of first generation Anglophone Armenian writers, with introductions to each writer by second-generation Armenian-American authors.

depicting caring grandparents, and relaying the history of genocide in the shaping of the characters' Armenian diasporic identity, these texts provide important insight into the lives and identity issues of second and third generation Armenian-Americans. Of Peter Najarian's *Voyages*, Lorne Shirinian writes:

the characters exist within two cultures in a stratified social relationship in which the old heritage is relegated to a subculture within a foreign American context. As a subculture, the Armenian heritage is placed under great stress and begins to weaken. As life becomes disjointed, the marginal being is put into conflict with both the old and the new culture as the discourse has clearly shown. Aram [protagonist of *Voyages*] stands in relation to his father and mother who carry remnants of life from the old country. The discourses in the text constantly shift from the present to the past and back again as Aram interrogates his family history. (140)

Shirinian's analysis of the central concern in *Voyages* reads true to several Anglophone Armenian-American texts. Although identity takes center stage in both the Anglophone and Armenophone traditions, the marginalization of Armenian culture against the American one does not appear as prominently in the Armenian language of the newer diaspora immigrants I discuss in this project. Facing a distinct set of questions and issues in their host countries, protagonists in the Armenian language texts often grapple with adjusting to new cultures and geographical spaces. The characters' relationships to the past are laden with their own experiences in a distant country. Their personal narratives often involve the cultural consciousness passed down from generations alongside their own journeys from one country to another. Hence, the understanding and formulation of identity differ. Typically

born in the U.S., the Anglophone writers attempt to situate their ethnic heritage within their identity as Americans. Conversely, in the Armenian-language texts, the key concern becomes how to reconcile feelings of estrangement within the new space. In an analysis of Armenian-language literature produced in the U.S. after the 1970s, Oshagan states that almost all the writers

had come to the U.S. from the East and had brought with them an ingrained distrust of the technological civilization of the West. Ill adapted to both worlds, carrying the pathos of a double exile—one from their fatherland of Armenia and the other from the beloved, memory-laden country they had now just left—these writers suffered the worst plight, and they took their frustration out on America....To date, not a single Armenian writer has accepted the real America or simply described it dispassionately (“Literature of the Armenian Diaspora” 227-228).

Oshagan’s reference to a “real America” not only essentializes and objectifies the diverse and subjective qualities of the U.S., but also places the Armenian writer in opposition to that apparent “realness.” Proposing an amendment to Oshagan’s statement, I believe that rather than not accepting a “real America,” the Armenian writers in question are unable to fully adjust to their position within what they individually envision as the real “America.” Their antagonism is not wholly directed against the U.S., instead at their function within it. Unlike the Anglophone Armenian writers, their status as writers in the U.S. fall outside the dominant norm both linguistically and culturally.

Literary scholarship on both the English and Armenian language texts from the Armenian diaspora has predominantly centered on the impact of the Armenian Genocide in the formation and conception of identity. This scholarship has been important on many levels. Politically, it has increased awareness about the Genocide even as the Turkish government continues to deny the Ottoman government's responsibility for the events. On a community level, the emphasis on the literature of genocide and trauma has provided a necessary form of validation and collective mourning amidst Turkish denial. On a larger scholarly level, this scholarship has made significant contributions to trauma studies, genocide studies, and literary criticism as a whole.¹²

This dissertation, while addressing issues related to the genocide when necessary, primarily examines the construction and deconstruction of diasporic identity in the Armenian-language literary works of Hakob Karapents (1925-1994), Vahé Oshagan (1922-2000), and Vahe Berberian (b.1955). Karapents' novel *Adam's Book* [*Adami Girk'ë*], published in 1983, follows protagonist Adam Nurian as he searches for a sense of belonging and identity in the United States. Oshagan's novella, "The Unction," ["*Ödzumë*"] published in 1988, centers on the generational and ideological conflicts in an Armenian community in Philadelphia. Berberian's *Letters from Zaat'ar* [*Namakner Zaat'arēn*] published in 1996, chronicles the experiences of Los Angeles based architect, Zohrap Anmahuni, as he moves to the imaginary country of Zaat'ar to serve as consul general for the newly independent Republic of Armenia. The main characters in this core group of texts being studied have all immigrated to the United States and grapple with memories from their homeland as well as

¹² Recent scholarship in these categories include Jean Murachanian's "Léon Tutundjian: Trauma, Identity and Modern Art in the Aftermath of Genocide" (2009) and Talar Chahinian's "The Paris Attempt: Rearticulation of (National) Belonging and the Inscription of Aftermath Experience in French Armenian Literature Between the Wars"(2008).

with the powerful cultural narratives passed down by generations, all while intellectualizing their experiences and desiring a cosmopolitan understanding of self and identity.

Simultaneously embracing and denouncing ideas of mythical or concrete homelands, these texts attempt to construct a cultural identity that combines this duality.

I argue that through their respective texts, Karapents, Oshagan, and Berberian challenge and reconceptualize traditional notions of Armenian identity by: addressing and questioning the role of language in identity formation; critically examining the role of the “other” (the non-Armenian), in the understanding of Armenian diasporic identity; and confronting the constant sense of accountability to the Armenian community at large, all while grappling with the insecurities and instability that come with major relocations.

Highly suspicious of essentialist discourse, yet eager to establish a place for their Armenianness in their host country, these writers question, reject, and reconcile notions of Armenian identity outside of an Armenian nation-state. Karapents, Oshagan and Berberian bring complexity to the concept of the diasporic identity by both acknowledging the duality of living outside one’s “home” country and going beyond this binary understanding by rejecting and questioning the simplified and romanticized narratives of origin, place and subject-hood. Through close readings of these select texts, I explore the psychological obstacles that arise when the pull of nostalgia and nationalism is pitted against the relativism and skepticism of the intellectual.

My analyses of the characters’ relationships to their past and present spaces, both real *and* imagined, undeniably define their understanding of self. These texts approach the issue of space and diaspora in both “traditional” and more “inclusive” ways. While the existence (or in some cases, lack of existence) of the homeland as territory is critical in their identity as

diasporans, the idea of homeland also takes on more abstract forms, via cultural narratives and experiences that blur the boundaries between geographic spaces and ideas of home. My readings of these texts argue that the state of “comfort,” the “home” becomes located in process of working through the contradictions and spatial allegiances, rather than in the resolution of these conflicts; searching and wandering, paradoxically, become the only stable fixture in the lives of the core characters in these texts. The longing for and thoughts about nation, heritage, and concrete place to call home become the identity rather than merely the means toward it.

Along with considerations of space and place, I examine the significance of language in the contemplation of identity Karapent's, Berberian's, and Oshagan's texts. The question of the role of written and spoken Armenian in the expression of identity is expressed explicitly and implicitly through dialogues between characters, between the writers themselves, and via the structure and tone of the language. I compare the authors' use of the Armenian language, how they deviate from traditional forms and what those forms reveal in the context of diasporic identity. Writing in Armenian, these authors are conscious of how strongly language scripts experience, and repeatedly contemplate the powers and limitations of placing language at the center of identity and belonging. But once more, the narrators in these works fall back and at times whole-heartedly accept the scripted narratives of identity and subject-hood for the sake of a survival that their own works stop at little in critiquing. There is a simultaneous willingness to critique the constructed aspects of nation and origin and an unwillingness to nihilistically toss the whole of it out as mere construction. The inability to reconcile the contradiction, at least within the context of these narratives, places

the contradiction and the attempt at working through it, again at the core of diasporic identity.

Language becomes one form of fulfilling a sense of obligation toward the Armenian community at large. The performance of responsibility also takes the form of political awareness and action, duty toward the family, ultimately leading to overall uneasiness, a continued sense of culpability towards the newly adopted geographic and cultural spaces as well as the past spaces, both lived and culturally passed on. Furthermore, the continuous presence and consciousness of a past within the present contributes to the inability to fully assimilate within the host country and intensifies the need to find a desirable medium between the past and present. Duty, oftentimes presented as an antidote against a loss of the “past”, whether experienced or imagined, becomes the nagging conscience preventing the fulfillment of a realistic acceptance of present situation.

Chapter One, “The Pursuit of (National) Identity in Hakob Karapents’ *Adam’s Book* [*Adami Girk’ē*],” examines the impact of national and historical narratives on the intellectual identity of Karapents’ adult protagonist, Adam Nurian, a middle-aged man who has recently left his job as editor of a prestigious English language newspaper, to focus on writing his novel. Already unhappy and unfulfilled, Nurian’s exit prompts further soul-searching; his journey is accompanied by Zelda, an American woman who eventually convinces Nurian to write his novel in Armenian, rather than English. The core narrative is consistently interrupted by flashbacks from Nurian’s past as well as editorials he composes in his mind, which illuminate his worldview and provide insight into his issues with identity.

The beginning of the chapter offers biographical information about Hakob Karapents,

outlines his literary career, and discusses the themes of displacement that pervade his fiction. Next, it provides a glimpse into the literary scholarship available about Karapents and his work. My reading of *Adam's Book*, the central text in the study, begins with an analysis of the impact of prominent Armenian writer, Raffi's, nationalist novel, *The Madman* [*Khentĕ*], on Adam Nurian's ethnonational consciousness. I argue that Raffi's powerful narrative of historic injustices against the Armenian people together with its utopian vision of the future, shapes Nurian's vision of himself and his responsibility toward the nation. The following section examines the function of language and writing in the text's formulation of identity and belonging. The choices and discussions about the values of writing in one language over another (Armenian vs. English) mirror the protagonist's vacillations between identifying as American or Armenian; writing, in effect, becomes a form of identity performance that continuously proves unfulfilling. The final section returns to the dominant role of the past within the present and examines how the Armenian genocide voluntarily and involuntarily defines Nurian's relationships with his surroundings.

Chapter Two, "Exilic Forms in Vahé Oshagan's "Alarm" ["Ahazank"] and "The Unction" ["Ādzumĕ"]," investigates the various manifestations of exile in Oshagan's poem "Alarm," and novella, "The Unction." In "Alarm," the speaker reveals his relationship and feelings toward his city of residence, Philadelphia. Consumed with a sense of panic and urgency, the speaker, disengaged from the realities of his surroundings, seeks to relay a warning to the citizens. "The Unction," centers on the violent attack by a trio of young Armenians against an Armenian Church in Philadelphia. The trio performs blasphemous acts within the sacred space in an attempt to shock and change the conservative cultural mores led

by the authoritative voice of the church establishment that holds the Armenian community together. Although initially doubting his role in the church, the priest refuses to allow the attack to disrupt his sermon and the attack reignites his devotion to his profession. The youth are jailed for their actions but reconvene to plan their next attack immediately after their release.

This chapter begins with an introduction to Vahé Oshagan's life, his body of work, and his reception by the Armenian-reading public. Next, I explain my use of the word "exile" in relation to the texts in this study. Relying on Edward Said's more figurative conception of the term, I argue that Oshagan experiences exile in several ways: he is physically detached from the homeland of his people; through multiple instances of relocation, he has become physically detached from his past homes and communities; his Armenian-language literature seals him off from the literary communities of the various host countries he inhabits; and finally, the lack of readership from the Armenian reading community isolates him from his own literary circle. The chapter reads these manifestations of exile through the speaker of "Alarm," and the core characters in "The Unction." My reading of "Alarm" argues that the speaker's inability to feel "at home" in Philadelphia, leads to an interrogation of city life and a self-imposed exile from the city itself. Examining the various forms of failed communication in "The Unction," alongside the characters' unsettling relationships with the physical spaces they inhabit (Philadelphia, the church, the home), I argue that the text posits the simultaneity of doubt and conviction as core symptoms of exile.

Chapter Three, "Anchoring the Nation: Space(s) of Belonging in Vahe Berberian's *Letters from Zaat'ar* [*Namakner Zaat'arēn*], examines the ways in which the sudden

independence of the Republic of Armenia in 1991 can alter long held assumptions about homeland, repatriation, and national duty. Berberian's novel follows protagonist Zohrap Anmahuni from his unhappy, yet financially comfortable, middle-class life in Los Angeles, to the imaginary nation of Zaat'ar where he is to serve as consul general for the Republic of Armenia. Anmahuni does not accomplish anything during his stay in Zaat'ar; he is unable to communicate with officials, he does not have a constituency to serve, and his wife and children leave the country soon after they arrive. Despite his ineffectiveness in Zaat'ar, he feels fulfilled and does not want to return to Los Angeles. At the end of the novel, we learn that the entire narrative based in Zaat'ar is a figment of Anmahuni's imagination, a result of a mental breakdown in Los Angeles.

The beginning of the chapter offers an overview of Vahe Berberian's cultural and artistic contribution to the Armenian diaspora community and briefly discusses the absence of scholarship on Berberian's artwork, fiction, and theatrical productions. My readings of the novel begin with an overview of the contemporary discourse on diaspora studies as it relates to notions of homeland, geographic spaces of allegiance, and the desire of return. Examining Stuart Hall's argument that the increase in global mobility and migration has allowed for less rigid associations between place and identity, I argue that for older diasporic communities, association between place and identity continues to be inseparable due to powerful national and cultural narratives tying together place and belonging. The subsequent section discusses the parallels I read between the Republic of Armenia and the imaginary nation of Zaat'ar. After providing a historic overview of both countries, I argue that for the diasporic intellectual, Berberian positions the only viable "homeland" to which he could "return" as

one which encompasses all the characteristics, real and imagined, to which the individual feels allegiances.

This dissertation contributes to the fields of Armenian literary studies and diaspora studies by concentrating on a time period in Armenian literary history not hitherto studied in depth. The scarcity of critical scholarship on 20th century Armenian literature, especially written in the diaspora, reflects a significant void in the field of both Armenian and diaspora studies. I have chosen Armenian language texts that have been published in the United States on or after 1980. The core group of texts being studied marks the United States as the primary residence of the literary characters; the U.S. simultaneously serves as both a familiar and foreign space from which to negotiate identity. For many Armenians, moving to the U.S. has meant transitioning from one diaspora to another, creating a layered sense of belonging in which the previous host states also function, to various degrees, as “homes.” My readings of Karapents’, Oshagan’s, and Berberian’s texts add to contemporary debates about diaspora classifications, especially with regards to issues of homeland and return, by examining the complicated relationships of the diasporic characters to the geographic and imaginary spaces, which they consider home. In these texts, the attempt at formulating a solid sense of identity and belonging can only occur alongside the considerations of homeland(s). Identity, decentered by the multiple locations and narratives attached to the diasporic characters, emerges as the constant process of negotiation between these numerous spaces and ideas. The endeavor toward a concrete sense of identity essentially defines the diasporic character.

Chapter One

The Pursuit of (National) Identity in

Hakob Karapents' *Adam's Book* [*Adami Girk'ē*]

If wandering, considered as a state of detachment from every given point in space, is the conceptual opposite of attachment to any point, then the sociological form of 'the stranger' presents the synthesis, as it were of both these properties. (Simmel, "The Stranger"143)

George Simmel's opening lines in "The Stranger" redefine our understanding of the place of the "wanderer" within society. Expanding the definition of "the stranger" beyond its conventional use, Simmel creates a category for the individual who "comes today and stays tomorrow—the potential wanderer, so to speak, who although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going"(143). Contextualizing his discussion with examples of the position of traders and merchants within a society, Simmel argues that the "specific character of *mobility* (143)," assigned to the stranger through his trade, situates him as both near and far, simultaneously, to the locations and peoples with which he comes in contact. His characterization of the trader's relationship, both spatially and ideologically, to the various localities, strongly correlates with the experience of the diasporic individual, who, either by force or circumstance, is relegated to living away from his point of "origin" or the multitude of intermediate points that have served as homes.

Simmel's description of society's view of the stranger poetically encapsulates the complicated relationship between the wanderer and his hosting locales. In this chapter I will explore a similar "nearness" and "farness" as experienced by the diasporic "wanderer" found

in Hakob Karapents' novel *Adam's Book* [*Adami Girk'ē*]. While Simmel investigates society's perception of the wanderer and his role in a given location, I will be looking at the wanderer's self-view, within that state of wandering. The nearness and farness, that to Simmel is seen as promoting a benign quality of objectivity on the part of the stranger and ultimately benefitting the host society, I argue, creates a tension within the "wanderer" or "stranger" as to his own position within that destination. Resulting in a constant negotiation between past and present spaces, and the experiences contained within those spaces, Karapents' protagonist, Adam Nurian, remains a stranger to himself,¹³ as he is repeatedly driven to relinquish one self for another, the inability to reconcile multiple selves leading to the creation of an identity defined by this constant negotiation.

Adam's Book [*Adami Girk'ē*], Hakob Karapents' second novel, begins with the Armenian protagonist, Adam Nurian, leaving his job as editor of the New Haven Register and embarking on a road trip up the East Coast of the United States. Recently divorced and going through a mid-life crisis of sorts, Nurian reevaluates the choices he has made in life and how these choices have shaped his identity. Geographically and emotionally separated from Melinē, his ex-wife who is about to remarry, his son Vahē who lives in Paris, and his daughter Seda in San Francisco, Adam relies on the emotional support of his non-Armenian lover, Zelda, during this transitional period of his life.

The novel is framed in third person narrative accounts of Nurian's encounters in the city, oftentimes relaying inner conflicts pertaining to displacement and identity. These

¹³ In *Stranger to Ourselves* (1991), Julia Kristeva meditates on the role of the foreigner within a society. Her analysis offers distinct, often essentializing, observations about strangers' relationships with their surroundings and themselves. The argument I am proposing can be considered a bit more literal and straightforward, in that the foreignness of the individual as perceived by the given community that he or she is in transfers onto the foreigner himself/herself. The mere fact of being foreign elicits questions about self and identity tied to space and locality.

narratives are intermittently interrupted by editorials that Nurian composes in his mind, which address problems of a consumer driven American society and its effect on the American psyche. We also see first person recollections of Nurian's past, mostly in Iran and his visits to Soviet Armenia. Composed in long, stream of consciousness musings, the first person narratives reveal details of not only Nurian's past but the Armenian diasporic one as well, focusing on a cultural and national identity fragmented by geographic and historic displacement.

Issues of displacement and a constant sense of being in motion, whether on foot, in a car, train or airplane, pervade Hakob Karapents' fiction. While not an attempt to attach the fictional narratives of Karapents' texts to his own life events, I believe it important to acknowledge the multicultural nature of Karapents' lifelong experiences as well as his geographic and national ties, which unfailingly inform his texts. Furthermore, the use of metanarrative in *Adam's Book* brings about questions of the efficacy and role of authorship and intellectual activity that correspond with Karapents' life and role in the Armenian literary tradition. The similarities between Karapents and several of his literary characters, in particular, Adam Nurian, who like Karapents is both a journalist and creative writer, oftentimes place Karapents within his own texts. Karapents as intellectual and cultural producer within the Armenian diaspora and American mainstream culture provides unique perspective on the straddling nature of the transnational individual and provides a perspective on how he sees himself within various communities.

Karapents was born to Armenian parents in Tabriz, Iran, in 1925. At the time, Tabriz had the largest population of Armenians in Iran and was home to several Armenian-Iranian

cultural institutions. Alongside his family, these cultural institutions make up a significant part of Karapents' early upbringing. Karapents himself later became a significant contributor to Armenian cultural life in Tehran. Along with like-minded Armenians of his age, he was founder of the youth group "Light and Mind" [Luys ev Mitk'] in 1939 and later in 1944 was instrumental in establishing the Ararat Armenian Cultural Foundation [Hay Mshakut'ayin Ararat Miut'iwn] of which he was the first president (Keshishian 17). Strong Armenian cultural influence was accompanied by Karapents' formal education, which included Russian schooling, later Persian, French, and Armenian, and finally American when he moved to the United States to attend college. This geographically substantial move was preceded by smaller, but no less significant relocations. At a young age, Karapents was separated from his mother and placed in the care of his aunt. Later, he and his family moved from Tabriz to Tehran where he completed his secondary education. In 1947, Karapents relocated to the United States to attend the University of Kansas in Missouri. He then moved to New York where he received a graduate degree in journalism. A short move to California preceded a move back to New York and later Massachusetts. (Ghazarian 10-16)

After his death in 1994, Karapents' personal library was moved to the Armenian Cultural Foundation in Arlington, Massachusetts. In 1999, Blue Crane Books published a comprehensive bibliography¹⁴ on Karapents. Despite these efforts, Karapents is not widely read. Written in Eastern Armenian, his literary works fall outside the traditional Western Armenian paradigm of diasporic Armenian literature;¹⁵ moreover, in the diaspora readership

¹⁴ See *Hakob Karapents: A Complete Bibliography* edited by Ara Ghazarian (1999).

¹⁵ The canon of Armenian diaspora literature focuses mainly on Armenian literature produced in Western Armenia by survivors of the Genocide or descendants of survivors. The literary culture of the Armenian diaspora has localized in various countries in the Middle East and in France. A large percentage of print culture was carried out in Western Armenia. A product of the Armenian community in Iran, Karapents spoke and

of literature written in Armenian is rather low. Unfamiliarity with Karapents' works in Soviet Armenia, and now The Republic of Armenia, comes in large part due to the censorship of diaspora writers during the Soviet period. More recently efforts are being made to familiarize both diaspora literature to readers in Armenia, and Armenian literature from the Republic to readers in the diaspora. A two-volume translation of Karapents' short stories has been made available in English,¹⁶ but a majority of his work remains untranslated.¹⁷

Very little academic scholarship exists on Karapents' writings. Apart from Anahid Aramouni Keshishian's book *Hakob Karapents: Worldview and Art* [*Hakob Karapents' : ashkharhēnkalumē ev arvestē*], which provides a comprehensive review and analysis of Karapents' works and is the only book length study on the author, most articles and scholarly works are comprised of praise for Karapents' books and his depiction of the diasporic Armenian condition. Efforts at recognizing Karapents' literary contribution to the Armenian diasporic community include various articles in Armenian periodicals and journals discussing, in broad terms, the scope of his work and its significance for the Armenian literary community. In an elaborate review of Karapents' short story collection *American Rondo* [*Amerikean shurjpar*], Vehanush T'ekēan discusses Karapents' writing style as well

wrote in Eastern Armenian. While the language and cultural barrier is not an immense one, it nonetheless effects reception and access. For more on the Armenian Literary tradition in the diaspora see, Vahé Oshagan's "Literature of the Armenian Diaspora" published in *World Literature Today* (1986).

¹⁶ See Tatul Sonentz-Papazian's translations of Hakob Karapents' works: *Return of Tiger and Other Short Stories* (1995) and *The Widening Circle and Other Early Short Stories* (2007).

¹⁷ The scantness of literary translations is not reserved to Karapents' works. Very few Armenian literary texts have been translated into other languages. During the Soviet period, all published translations were commissioned by the state. Armenian diaspora organizations have yet to establish significant funds or presses devoted to translations. In the current Republic of Armenia, there has been some movement towards translations but understandably a majority of the translation projects are from international languages into Armenian.

as the means by which he encapsulates the Armenian diasporic condition. Somewhat acknowledging the limitations of her essay, T'ekean states, "I am going to reflect on *American Rondo*, rather than explain the work, because it is difficult to explain a work that ties together different levels of thought that go beyond the typical means of understanding the world. How does one remain definite and specific, when a work of art, in its essence, must remain unbounded and expressive"(53) T'ekean's review continues with comments on quotations from *American Rondo* as well as some informative observations on Karapents' style. She writes, "Writing is a form of self-exploration, with its inner games of memory, its angst, loyalties. But the power of the angst decreases the loyalty towards the "subject".... It is the consequence of this that Karapents free himself from the superficial, the external, and offers the symbolic" ("Hakob Karapentsi "Amerikean Shurjparë" 56).

Armenian literary critic and member of the Armenian Writer's Union, Hrant T'amrazian's essay "Karapents' World" ["Karapentsi Ashkharë"] includes a discussion of the constant dissatisfaction experienced by the protagonist of *Adam's Book*. T'amrazian writes, "Is it the Armenian/Armenianness that bothers him or something else? Maybe it comes from the discontent that one often feels about life, that pushes him, however overdue, toward new examinations"(47). Literary critic and author Vahé Oshagan mentions Karapents' contribution to Armenian literature in discussions of Armenian diaspora literature as an important one but does not go into much detail about his work.¹⁸

Like Vahe Berberian and Vahé Oshagan, Karapents' contribution to the Armenian literature is valued and respected in Armenian intellectual circles, but has not been given adequate scholarly attention. The examples of literary critique included here provide a

¹⁸ See, Oshagan, Vahé. "Literature of the Armenian Diaspora" (1986).

glimpse into the reception of Karapents' work in literary circles as well as a glimpse into the characteristics of the traditional critical press on Armenian literature. While there is a definite move toward more contemporary critical analysis of literature in both Armenia and the diaspora, we still await large-scale canonization and thorough readings of more contemporary Armenian authors.

As acknowledged, a body of literature exists on Karapents and his work, through literary articles, tributes, and one full-length book; however, much of this literature has focused on Karapents as author, rather than thorough analyses of the texts themselves. While the presence of Karapents as authorial figure within his literature is important and valuable, the autobiographical elements in his fiction make up a fraction of the literary merit imbued in his work. I believe that a thorough reading of his texts as fiction reveal broader and more interesting implications of immigrant and diasporic experiences. Focusing on Karapents' second novel, *Adam's Book*, this chapter interrogates protagonist Adam Nurian's pursuit of attaining an unwavering sense of self and contentment outside his country of birth.

Recognizing the somewhat clichéd duality of the diasporic identity, Karapents' *Adam's Book*, literally and figuratively positions an "American identity," oftentimes conflated with a transnational one, against an ethno-nationalist Armenian identity¹⁹ via the novel's protagonist Adam Nurian. This figurative battle, embodied by Nurian's experiences in and reflections on various places around the globe, conjures questions about living as both a transnational and

¹⁹ I am using the definition of ethno-nationalist as defined by Anthony D. Smith. Smith differentiates between Western and non-Western forms of nationalism, tying Western conceptions of the nation and nationality to land and the state and the non-Western conceptions to ethnic and community ties. Essentially, in the Western idea of a nation, an individual can belong to whichever nation he or she chooses. If a person leaves his or her nation-state of origin, he or she can choose to belong to that new nation. In the non-Western case, one always belongs to the nation and community he or she was born into regardless of where he or she resides at any given time. For more see: Smith, Anthony D. *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991) and Smith, Anthony D. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell, 1999).

national in a world suspicious of and no longer conducive to clear definitions of self and authenticity. While simultaneously a critique of the effects of capitalism/consumerism on individual identity and a questioning of the oftentimes incongruous and primitive sentiments of nationalist ideologies, the text becomes an attempt to reconcile two equally undesired worlds trapped in one person. By refusing to wholly accept either position, the text marks Nurian as unidentified, or unidentifiable.

The modern intellectual, as represented by Nurian, essentially becomes unidentifiable in terms of ethnicity, nationality, and philosophy, when all labels and affiliations are questioned, accepted, and rejected simultaneously. More specifically, the inherent struggle between these two worlds, two identities, in a sense, the old and the new, render both inadequate as the character is unable to find solace in one, the other, or both concurrently. In *Adam's Book*, identity, and identifying, yield no conclusivity and hence the attempt at identifying, itself becomes the identity. This rather defeatist approach to the transnational subject renders arguments for multiculturalism and an embracing of hybridity obsolete or useless. Multiculturalism, dual identity, the hyphenated individual, become a mere figment of the imagination, or rather, a desperate attempt to come to terms with the incompatibility of the multiple selves and the locations attached to them. The self itself becomes obsolete and only a figment within the incongruity of the modern world. Thus, to locate the self within the process of identification leads to a constant movement and an unending search which ultimately defines the self.

In the following sections of this chapter I examine various means by which Karapent's main character Adam Nurian, is prompted to identify with groups, ideologies, and national interests within the various physical environments he comes across. His birthplace, Iran, his

place of residence, the United States, and his ethnic origins, represented by Western Armenia²⁰ and Soviet Armenia, all carry their respective affiliations, ideological inconsistencies, and historic trauma, which erupt in a sense through the writing of his novel in Armenian; however, rather than being revelatory, the process of identification itself becomes estranging, leading to yet more self-reevaluation on the part of the protagonist.

Establishing Nationalist Roots: *The Madman [Khentë]* and Gabo's death

The identity crisis Adam Nurian faces in *Adam's Book*, centers around obligations and allegiances to multiple geographies, nations, and ideologies. His past, both personal and collective, represented by his hometown of Tabriz, Iran, and the larger historic territory of Armenia, respectively, do not correspond with the lived experience of the present, represented by the United States. Nurian's potential future, thus, becomes a desire to make compatible multiple locations within one. The collective obligations to culture, people, and history conflict with his desire to be a part of a more mainstream American culture. The failure of the family unit and his newfound isolation fractures the immediate sense of identity and prompts Nurian to evaluate himself as an individual outside that sphere. No longer attached to the family unit, which in Armenian cultural views is oftentimes closely associated with the nation, Nurian's sense of alienation intensifies. The once tangible comfort of the family as community is replaced with an ardent desire to locate belonging elsewhere by reexamining current relationships and places, past experiences and places, and imagined experiences and places.

²⁰ Armenians often refer to the eastern region of the Ottoman Empire (now eastern Turkey) as Western Armenia

In order to begin examining Nurian’s cultural and national affiliations and the strength of his ties to these national interests, it is important to look at the formative moments in Adam Nurian’s past, which he recalls in one of several flashbacks in the novel.

A tense visit with his aunt in Harlem, New York, leads to a discussion of the fate of Armenians, which Nurian’s aunt deems the “black destiny”²¹ determined to disperse and isolate Armenians all over the world. Adam strongly disagrees with her ominous outlook, asserting that one’s fate lies in one’s own hands. His aunt responds:

If that is the case, then why are you not controlling your own destiny? Your wife left you, your children are scattered here and there, and you go from one city to another. Is this what you call life? And it deeply pains me that you’ve moved away from your Armenianness.²² Why don’t you write in Armenian?...
(65)²³

Nurian’s aunt’s comments point to the core issues of identity and belonging that the protagonist deals with throughout the novel. As previously noted, Nurian’s wife has recently left him, and his children, Seda and Vahe, live in San Francisco and Paris, respectively. The breakdown of Nurian’s family unit and its subsequent destabilizing effect on his sense of home, both physical and spiritual, embody the “black destiny” to which his aunt refers.

²¹ Nurian’s aunt’s mention of a “black destiny” refers the Armenian peoples’ centuries old history of subjugation through displacement, foreign rule, and Genocide.

²² I am using the word Armenianness for the word “hayutiwn” [հայութիւն]; however, “hayutiwn” can also mean “Armenians” or “the Armenian people” as a whole. In this instance, the author seems to be suggesting both meanings.

²³ [«Եթէ այդ այդպէս է, հապա ինչն՞ է դու քո նախնորսի տէրը չես: Կինդ տունը թողել գնացել ա, գաւակներդ այս ու այն կողմ, դու էլ քաղաքից քաղաք, սա էլ կեանք եղաւ, յետոյ ինձ խոր ցաւ է պատճառում, որ դու հեռացել ես հայութիւնից: Ինչն՞ է հայերէն չես գրում...»]

Affixing Armenianness within the context of the loss of Nurian's family posits an essential relationship between familial ties and ethnic/national identity and shakes Nurian's already vulnerable sense of self.

In her analysis of Nurian's preoccupation with relocation Anahid Aramouni Keshishian writes:

The frequent change of address, and the unstable, restless roaming, resemble and point to a painful matter, that of the house/home. In the Armenian traditional worldview, the house/home is not purely a material, physical concept, not just a form of shelter, rather signifies moral worth--the hearth. (132-133)

Keshishian's reading of the Armenian cultural notion of "home" as an essential element to the Armenian cultural psyche is significant on two levels. While the significance of the "home" is not rooted in its physical location, it nonetheless needs to exist somewhere in order to have the "moral worth" [baroyakan arzhek'] as referenced by Keshishian and implied by the aunt. Nurian's experience denies him both the physical concept of home (as his life moves him from country to country, city to city) and the psychological as well. The disintegration of his family further destabilizes Nurian's already volatile experience up to that point. His aunt's close association of "moving away from Armenianness" to Nurian's broken nuclear family signals the importance of the family to the Armenian perception of the stable "home" and "family" as indicators of national/cultural identity and belonging.

Later in the novel, we learn that aside from the strained relationship between Nurian and his wife, Nurian and his son Vahe also share tension. During a dinner at Seda's house in San Francisco, Nurian and his politically conservative son become involved in a heated

argument about the United States' economic policy. Nurian's critique of capitalism and consumer driven American culture, as presented through his editorials, clash with his son's views of trickle down economics. Already separated from members of his family by geography, the ideological differences exacerbate an already alienated relationship. The very brief reunion (lasting less than twenty-four hours) between Nurian and his children, while touching and loving, is alienating in its temporariness and relies on food and memories to create a fleeting unity and cultural cohesion.

The now fragmented nature of Nurian's personal life and his "Armenian" family is placed alongside his public life as editor of the New Haven Register, an English language newspaper. We see Nurian's aunt correlating Armenianness with writing in Armenian, staying in one place geographically, and maintaining a stable family life. Her question as to why Nurian no longer writes in Armenian shifts the text to a flashback of Nurian's life in Iran. The relationship of family and language to Nurian's sense of identity, be it ethnic, national, or transnational is determined in part by the narrator's references to Nurian's past and the cultural and geographic complexities embodied in his youth. These complexities are later aggregated with his move to the United States and the introduction of new cultural norms he needs to encounter and accommodate within his identity. Adding both language, culture, a new space, and a completely new way of identifying the self (one, as outlined by his editorials, which revolve around reactions to consumerism and the capitalist marketplace), the protagonist is forced to harmonize an identity based on national interests, a national/cultural past, and family, with one based on individual interest, wealth, status, and consumption. Karapent's text posits this process of negotiation as the embodiment of the diasporic self.

Following the aforementioned conversation between Nurian and his aunt, a first person flashback in Nurian's narrative voice recounts the details leading up to the death of the protagonist's childhood friend, Gabo, illustrating the foundation and costs of nationalism and nationalist sentiments among Adam and his Armenian childhood friends in Iran. Prior to a turf war between the ethnic Armenian and ethnic Turk children in the Tabriz neighborhood, ten-year-old Adam²⁴ physically assaults a Turkish²⁵ boy he had seen harassing a young Armenian girl. Adam's confrontation with the Turk aggravates an already present feud between the Armenian and Turkish youth in Tabriz, and the two groups decide to go to war with one another. During the actual day of "combat," Gabo is struck on the head with a rock and killed. As explained shortly thereafter, this battle becomes a manifestation of Adam and Gabo's fantasies of war, nationhood, and patriotism.

Karapents uses Armenian writer, Raffi's²⁶ seminal novel *The Madman* [*Khentë*]²⁷ as the awakening of revolutionary fervor and nationalist sentiment in young Adam's life. Framing this awakening around the account of Gabo's untimely death, the text emphasizes the psychological *and* concrete implications of historical events on succeeding generations.

²⁴ I will be referring to the young Adam Nurian by his first name Adam in order to avoid chronological confusion.

²⁵ Nurian refers to his neighborhood rivals as Turks but later clarifies that they were Azeris, Kurds, and other ethnic minorities living in the area.

²⁶ Raffi (1835-1888), born Hacıp Melik Hacıbıyan was an Armenian prose writer born in Salmas, Iran. His novels and short stories have shaped generations of Armenian political and cultural ideology. For more on the impact of Raffi's ideological works see: Gevorgian, Svetlana, Zaveni. *Hay azgayin azatagrakan payk'ari khndirner Raffi hrparakakhosut'yunum*. Yerevan: Hayastan, 1990. Print.

²⁷ I have translated the title of Raffi's novel *Khentë* as *The Madman*. The word "khent" can be translated as "crazy," "mad," or "fool." Donald Abcarian's English translation of the novel uses the title *The Fool*, which I find insufficient in encapsulating the protagonist's, Vardan's, character and motivation for his actions in narrative. While the actions can be translated as being crazy, risky and possibly foolish, labeling him as a fool implies a certain thoughtlessness and ignorance that does not fit his character.

Adam recalls: “Gabo had read Raffi’s *The Madman* and had gone crazy. He gave the book to me, I read it, and went crazy as well. We decided to form an army, go to Armenia and free ourselves from the Turks. We decided to become pioneers” (66).^{28,29} The inclusion of *The Madman* and its impact on the children’s sense of identity points to the impact of this particular text on the collective Armenian psyche and represents a response to the novel not atypical in the Armenian communities of the time.³⁰

Raffi’s *The Madman*, published in 1880,³¹ is an historical, romantic novel set during the Russo-Persian war of 1878. The novel depicts the struggles of rural Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire in the mid-19th century. The novel’s hero Vardan, a merchant and trader, is an outspoken Armenian revolutionary intent on changing the mindset of the Armenians who are regularly subjected to mistreatment by the Turks and Kurds of the region. Vardan believes that the Ottoman Armenians should voice their frustrations and fight against the injustice to which they are being subjected. His character becomes the revolutionary voice within the novel as he, in hopes of raising national consciousness through literacy and

²⁸ Adam and Gabo are referring to the Young Pioneers of the Soviet Union, a group for children in the USSR similar to the Scouting organizations but with a clear communist political agenda.

²⁹ [Գարօն Րաֆֆու «Խենթն» էր կարդացել ու խենթացել: Գիրքը ինձ տուեց, կարդացի, ես էլ խենթացայ: Որոշեցինք բանակ կազմել, Հայաստան գնալ, ազատուել թուրքերից: Որոշեցինք գնանք դառնանք պիսներ:]

³⁰ Simon Vratzian, the last prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Armenia (1918-1920), cites Raffi’s writings as critical in the shaping of national identity amongst himself and his friends, and in his of decision to join the Dashnak Party:

The curly haired young man explained that there were two parties, the Hnchakist and Dashnaktsutium, that the Hnchakist was centralist while Dashnaktsutium was decentralist, that the Hnchakist was doomed to self-destruction, and that the true revolutionaries were Dashnakists, that Raffi was a Dashnakist, that Khrimian Hairik, the firebrand patriarch, was a Dashnakist. Centralist-decentralist didn’t mean a thing to us, but that Raffi and Hairik were Dashnakists was enough for us to realize that it was foolish to think further about becoming Hnchakist. And so we became Dashnakists, swearing upon the programme to serve the party until death. Our circle became the first Dashnakist youth group in New Nakhichevan. (“Simon Vratzian and Armenian Nationalism” 196)

For more on Vratzian and Armenian nationalism see, Hovannisian, Richard G. “Simon Vratzian and Armenian Nationalism” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Oct., 1969), pp. 192-220

³¹ Initially, the novel was published in serialized form in the Tiflis based Armenian newspaper, *Mshak*.

education, gives countless speeches about maintaining self-respect and protecting the pride and property of the Armenian people. *The Madman* is clearly meant to evoke the revolutionary spirit of its Armenian readers, hoping to motivate and empower the population to change their subordinate state of living. The conclusion of the novel, although marked by the destruction of the village, presents a utopic vision, through Vardan's dream, of a future Armenia marked by social, gender, and fiscal equality.

The significance of *The Madman* in the formation of national identity in young Adam and his friends is twofold. First, the content of the novel lends itself to nationalist sentiment, as Gabo and Adam seem to immediately identify with, and desire to emulate the protagonist's rebellious, nationalist spirit. Raffi's Vardan is outspoken and strong, while the other Armenians in the narrative are subjected to humiliation and taken advantage of on a regular basis. He remains courageous and hopeful despite the many losses he comes to witness. Secondly, while Gabo and Adam's self-proclaimed madness is rooted in the content of *The Madman*, the ability of the text *as text* to transcend physical and cultural boundaries otherwise difficult enables Gabo and Adam to categorize themselves with Ottoman Armenians and adopt their struggle, thus entering what Benedict Anderson terms an "imagined community."

Anderson's concept of the "imagined community," as basis for the nation and national identity clearly reveals itself in Gabo and Adam's story and in Raffi's role in the awakening of Armenian national consciousness in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Like Raffi's protagonist Vardan attempts to spread a nationalist spirit among his fellow Armenians

in the Ottoman Empire, Raffi's *Khentë* successfully does the same across multiple boundaries and throughout the Armenian diaspora.

Anderson notably states that the nation “is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”(7). His statement can be expanded beyond the realm of the spatial when taken in context of Nurian's experience. First, the sense of nationalism and camaraderie as written by Karapents spreads across historic, state, and even linguistic lines. Second, the camaraderie, in the case of Adam and his friends, recreates or reenacts historical feuds in the local sphere of the childhood playground. The pervasiveness of nationalist discourse is important here, because it builds a foundation of nationalism and identification that later in Adam's life causes internal conflict and exacerbates feelings of displacement, both mental and physical.

The revolutionary impact of print culture on this “image of communion,” reveals itself in both Vardan's insistence on the education and literacy of the Ottoman Armenians and Raffi's influence/impact on Adam and Gabo's national consciousness.³² The conflicts in *The Madman* take place in the mid-19th century Ottoman Empire. Nonetheless, the young boys' ethnic ties are reinforced and broadened, psychologically and geographically, vis-à-vis Raffi's novel as well as a collective consciousness of historical oppression passed on through the generations.

Young Adam and Gabo's wish to travel to Armenia, free “themselves” from the “Turks,” and become Soviet pioneers signals the incongruity of their collective imagined

³² See Hovannisian, Richard G. and David N. Myers eds. *Enlightenment and Diaspora: The Armenian and Jewish Cases* (1999).

experience conflating both geographic and temporal boundaries. Becoming a pioneer would entail going to Soviet Armenia while freeing themselves from the Turks would entail going back in time, to historically Armenian lands of Turkey. Unclear as to which “Armenia” they are planning to return, their hostility against the “Turks” in their neighborhood is not founded on real-time oppression, rather narrative authority. Soviet Armenia becomes the geographic space free of “Turkish” oppression and the location from which justice can be served. By deciding to become Soviet “pioneers” Gabo and Adam ally themselves with a Soviet occupied Armenia as the only viable option and hope to combat the loss of a homeland, however distant, and the threat posed by the Turks in their neighborhood. In the meantime the imagined, idealized Armenia, represented by both Soviet Armenia and an amalgam of historical Armenian lands to be reclaimed, is temporarily materialized on the streets of Tabriz.

Anderson writes that the nation is

imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (7)

Gabo as casualty of war reinforces Anderson’s microcosm as the boy dies, not in an imaginary childhood game, but in a literal war between neighboring children based on real-world historical conflicts. The national community moves from the realm of the imaginary to that of the real. Ironically, the concreteness of Gabo’s death itself becomes allegorical of the

power and impact of nationalist ideology and indoctrination. This rather literal parallel between Anderson's theoretical perspective on nationalism and Karapents' narrativization of Nurian's childhood experiences simultaneously reinforces and questions the power of narrative in shaping and understanding identity. Specifically, as the text reveals the difficulty of Nurian's relationship with his multiple senses of self, we come to see the burdens of the powerful narrative. Essentially, the abundance of cultural and national narratives which Nurian consumes during various periods in his childhood, during his life in the United States, and his visits to Soviet Armenia, naturally conflict at times. While this conflict is expected, what becomes significant and most interesting is the simultaneity of these narratives in Nurian's consciousness. The text questions the feasibility of transitioning from one world to another. How does one maintain or let go of ingrained beliefs? Will one self always triumph over the other? The central problem thus becomes adjusting to or allowing room for multiple selves and their associated narratives to coexist within one.

Explaining the relationship between the rival groups his neighborhood, Nurian states:

The Turks would attack us when we passed by their neighborhood: It was our turn now...Actually, the Turks we knew were not Turks, rather Tatars, Azeris,... a group that considered itself a minority in Iran, to a certain extent not unlike ourselves: And it was us youngsters who, pointlessly or not, created disagreements. To us, a Turk was a Turk, whether in Azerbaijan or Turkey. We were fanatic creatures. (67)³³

³³ [Թուրքերը մեզ բախում էին իրենց թաղից անցնելիս: Հիմա հերթը մերն էր... Փաստորէն, մեր հանաչած Թուրքը բուրֆ չէր, այլ թաթար, ազերի, Ատրպատականում ծուարած մեծամասնութիւն, որն իրեն փոքրամասնութիւն էր նկատում

Nurian's recognition of the diversity in the ethnic identities of the neighborhood children points to the aforementioned "imagined community" as the source of nationalist fervor. The rivalry between these two communities, based mostly on ethnic and religious ties, is exacerbated by the knowledge of their historic rivalries in neighboring lands. Nationalist fervor is not only learned but heightened by nationalist literature and the presence of intellectual activity in the city.

The Turks in Adam's neighborhood become an aid to the imaginary community that Gabo and Adam envision based on their communal historical consciousness and magnified by the Armenians' reading of *The Madman*. Here, Anderson's metaphorical imagined community becomes literal as the Kurdish children become representative of the Kurds who oppress Armenians in Raffi's novel. The complexity of this situation is further heightened with Adam's recollection that in actuality, the community of Armenians and "Turks" in Tabriz had similar experiences as minorities.

The admission similarities between the "Turks" and Armenians of Tabriz subtly points to a critique of the nationalist climate in the neighborhood. Nurian's adult account of the turf war and Gabo's death does not completely villify the Turkish children, nor their cause, whatever it might be. Instead, the cruelty and "fanaticism" of the children, fueled by nationalist rhetoric and collective historic memory, is put on display. At the same time, however, the strength of the Armenian national narrative and the sincere sentimentality takes center stage in Karapents' telling of the story. Nurian recalls:

Պարսկաստանում, որոշ չափով մեզ հետ բախտակից: Յետոյ մենք՝ փոքրերս էինք, որ տեղի անտեղի անախորժուքիւններ էինք ստեղծում: Մեզ համար թուրքը թուրք էր, լինի Ազրբեջանում թէ Թուրքիայում: Մուլեռանդ բաներ էինք:]

That evening Gabo and I went up to our roof. They said that on clear days, if you looked long enough, you could see Masis on the horizon. We looked. We looked but didn't see anything. Then, we saw it. We saw gold, we saw flames and fire, we saw a throne hanging from the sky.

‘Adamik, Adamik, it’s over there. It’s there. It’s Masis,’ said Gabo.

‘Where is it?’

‘That fire! You see? That’s Masis.’³⁴

‘Yeah yeah, I see it. But where’s the snow on top?’

‘There it is. It’s shining. You don’t see it?’

‘Who said I didn’t see it? I see it better than you.’ (67)³⁵

The mystification of the mountain and the majestic images that Gabo and Adam project on the national symbol of Armenia reinforce the nationalist sentiments they have grown up with and reveal the power of those sentiments. The mountain is geographically out of reach; however, the powerful symbolism of the mountain makes it desirable and accessible to the two boys; its visibility becomes an expectation for the national narrative to survive. Adam’s defensive affirmation that he can see what Gabo is describing, however unlikely the vision is,

³⁴ Masis is another name for Mount Ararat. Located in Eastern region of Turkey, bordering Iran, Armenia, Azerbaijan, for Armenians, Masis a powerful symbol of national identity and unity.

³⁵ [Այդ երեկոյ ես ու Գաբոն բարձրացանք մեր կտուրը: Ասում էին, որ պայծառ օրերին, եթէ երկար նայես, հեռու հորիզոնում կը տեսնես Մասիսը: Նայեցինք: Նայեցինք, բան չտեսանք, յետոյ տեսանք, ոսկի տեսանք, բոց ու կրակ տեսանք, երկնքից կախուած մի ջահ տեսանք:

- Աբամիկ, է՛ն ա, է՛ն ա, Մասիսը, - ասաց Գաբոն:
- Ո՞ւր ա ...
- Էն կրակը որ տեսնում ես, հենց Մասիսն ա:
- Հա, հա, տեսամ, բա գլխի ձիւնը ո՞ւր ա:
- Այտա, փայլում ա, չէ՞ս տեսնում:
- Ո՞վ ասաւ չեմ տեսնում, քեզից էլ լաւ եմ տեսնում:]

reaffirms his identity as an Armenian who will one day reach Ararat, reclaiming centuries old lost lands.

The gaze toward Ararat becomes forever instilled in Nurian consciousness and lives on through Gabo's death. Nurian recalls,

Gabo was the grandson of Vahagn, his gold and light, with blue eyes and fiery hair. We could barely reach his waistline. There was an animalistic passion in his bones, he was flexible like a tiger, it seemed like invisible spirits were balancing the weight of his life. (68)³⁶

Vahagn, the ancient Armenian god of war and fire, becomes embedded within Gabo's story and his untimely death. Nurian's description of Gabo dignifies his death by incorporating it into Armenian national and cultural narratives of bravery and martyrdom in the face of injustice.

Performing the Self: Language, Writing, and Nurian's Book

The flashbacks recounting the events leading to Gabo's death illustrate the foundations of Nurian's ethnic ties and sporadic nationalist leanings. Raffi's *The Madman*, historic cultural narratives of martyrdom and resistance, along with symbols of land as belonging, envelope the reality of Nurian and his childhood friends in Iran. As previously noted, this recollection is placed immediately after Nurian's aunt's accusations that he has abandoned his Armenianness by writing in English. The profound impact of *The Madman* on

³⁶ [Գաբոն Վահագնի թոռն էր, նրա սսկին ու լոյսը, բոցահեր ու կապուտաչեայ, մենք հագիւ էինք նրա գօտուն հասնում: Կենդանական կիրք կար նրա մկաններում, վագրի պէս ճկուն էր, կարծես ինչ-որ աներեւոյթ ոգիներ քաշնաւորում էին նրա կեանքի կոտորքը]

raising nationalist sentiment and promoting self-determination and action for Adam, Gabo and presumably the other Armenian children in their neighborhood somewhat substantiates the aunt's critique. She, unlike Nurian, has not given up on this nationalist cause.

During their meeting, Nurian's aunt complains to her nephew, regretting that she ever came to America, wishing she had stayed in Iran. Confused and often contradicting himself, Nurian reminds his aunt of her purpose in America, offering consolation in the fact that she teaches Armenian children their language and culture, thus protecting a people from assimilation. His aunt answers, "that is my only comfort, but the rewards are very small....We need standard day-schools. Otherwise, America squeezes and absorbs everything (63).³⁷ Notwithstanding these efforts at preserving culture and national relevance, she, like her nephew, is unhappy. Her experience as an active participant in a diaspora, intent on contributing to the preservation of a nationalist cause, while rewarding to some degree, is shrouded by the assimilating forces of the host country, the US.

Interestingly, however, Iran, as country of birth, does not receive patriotic sympathies, either from Nurian, or his aunt. Aside from his aunt's doubts about leaving Iran for the United States, Iran as nation and embodiment of nationhood is an afterthought, merely a location from which to view Mount Ararat—Armenia—the envisioned space of homeland. Like the historic narratives that inform the children's actions and sentiments towards the "Turks," the significance of place and locality lies in the imagined rather the actual. Legal, internationally recognized boundaries do not determine nationalist alignment, nor does citizenship. The inability of the nation-state to produce unified nationalist sentiment makes

³⁷ [«Իմ էլ միակ մխիթարությունը այդ է, սակայն արդիւնքը չի՛լ է։... Մեզ պէտք է ամենօրեայ կանոնաւոր դպրոցներ։ Այլապէս Ամերիկան հզմուն, տանում է ամեն ինչ։»]

the physical and political configuration of state borders one more perplexing element in the formation of identity marked by displacement.

Observing his aunt's apartment, Nurian notices the

faded gold curtains had restrained the light, old left-over furniture from who knows which New York antique dealers cellar perched on the dark Persian rug, middle ages, old American, or remnants of the Victorian era, and mixed with all of that, tall, rough leather chairs....why had she left Iran's sun and huddled in this unbelievable cave of Manhattan? (61)³⁸

The medley of cultural relics, both related and unrelated to the aunt's past, points to a crisis of cultural identity, similar to Nurian's, but manifested through her physical surroundings.

In his discussion of the "ethnoscapes of a new global economy,"³⁹ Arjun Appadurai addresses the complexity of locating concrete markers of identity and belonging in an increasingly globalized world:

the central paradox of ethnic politics in today's world is that primordia (whether of language or skin color or neighborhood or kinship) have become globalized. That is, sentiments, whose greatest force is in their ability to ignite intimacy into a political state and turn locality into a staging ground for identity, have become spread over vast and irregular spaces as groups move

³⁸ [գունաթափ ոսկեգոյն վարագոյրները գապել էին դրսի լոյսը, պարսկական մուգ կեռասագոյն գորգի վրայ թառել էին յայտնի չէ նիւ Եսրփի ո՞ր հնավաճառի նկուղում մնացած հնօրեայ կահոյքը, միջնադարեա՞ն, վաղ ամերիկեա՞ն, թէ Վիկտորիա Թագուհու շքանի մնացուկներ, թերեւս խոտնուրդը այդ բուրբի, բարձրադիր կառուէ կոշտ արտոներ...այս կիներ ի՞նչ գործ ունի այստեղ, ինչու՞ է թողել Պարսկաստանի արեւը եւ կուշ եկել Մանհատանի այս անկարելի անձավում:]

³⁹ Appadurai's "ethnoscape" category is one of "five dimensions of global cultural flows" that he outlines in "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." Appadurai argues that the fluidity of global capital aided and accelerated by technological innovation has shifted once concrete modes of identifying cultural categories and understanding global cultural flow. Creating five categories of "global cultural flow," "ethnoscapes," "ideoscapes," "mediascapes," "financescapes," and "technoscapes," Appadurai suggests that an analysis of the interplay of these "scapes," is necessary for reading the cultural landscape of globalization. See: Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference" (1996).

yet stay linked to one another through sophisticated media capabilities. This is not to deny that such primordial are often the product of invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) or retrospective affiliations, but to emphasize that because of the disjunctive and unstable interplay of commerce, media, national policies and consumer fantasies, ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality (however large), has now become a global force, forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders. (“Disjuncture and Difference” 41)

Appadurai’s assessment of the impact of globalization on the once clear markers of ethnicity and belonging—primordia (whether or not invented) and locality—is evidenced in Nurian’s description of his aunt’s disorganized apartment and her dejected view of her situation in Harlem. It is also significant that Nurian’s observations about the apartment and his aunt’s decision to leave Iran mention nothing about Armenia as a place of return. The absence of Armenia, Soviet or historic, signals to some degree a disorientation in the conception and confluence of homeland, nation, and culture. The fluidity of culture cited by Appadurai manifests itself in Nurian’s incongruous logic. His aunt’s role in educating Armenian children in the culture and language of their heritage is posited as futile in the U.S., but not Iran. Here we see the text’s positioning of the U.S. as the epicenter of the ills of globalization and cultural erasure.

Like Appadurai, Nurian links this confusion of identity with globalization and capitalism. In one of the several editorials he composes in his mind, Nurian writes:

Our consumer society has not only drained the natural resources and filled domestic and international markets with useless products, it has also created a

diseased civilization, where man, having lost his individuality, has also been deprived of his logic, searching for his satisfaction in dissatisfaction. The result is that modern man has become greedy, eternally displeased, searching for his happiness in boundless spaces when in fact, aside from the domain of culture, limits and weights are the keys to the advancement of civilization.

(12)⁴⁰

Nurian's assessment of the trampling power of globalization, an evaluation more condemnatory and moralistic than Appadurai's, concentrates on the effects of globalization on the individual who is unaware of how to navigate in an environment continuously devoid of clear cultural markers. In an "editorial" interrupting the conversation about writing between Nurian and his aunt, Nurian writes:

[In America] corporations threaten unstructured monotony, be that in the economic or cultural realms. That serves as a warning that a certain social system's potential for advancement has been satiated, that it has begun to cling to ancient and proven creeds instead of ascending to the arena of the new, no matter how uncertain the result or future. (64)⁴¹

⁴⁰ [Մեր սպառողական հասարակարգը ոչ միայն ֆամել է բնական պաշարները եւ անպետք ապրանքներով ողողել ներքին ու համաշխարհային շուկաները, այլ նաեւ ստեղծել մի հիւսանց ֆաղափակըրթուիւն, ուր մարդը կորցնելով իր անհատականութիւնը, գրկուել է նաեւ տրամաբանելու կարողութիւնից՝ իր բաւարարութիւնը փնտռելով անբաւարարութեան մէջ: Հետեւանքը եղել է այն, որ արդի մարդը դարձել է ազահ, յաւիտենապէս դժգոհ, անսահմանութեան մէջ որոնելով իր երջանկութիւնը, երբ փաստորէն, բացի մշակութային բնագաւառից, սահմանն ու ֆելիը ֆաղափակըրթութեան զարգացման բանալիներն են:]

⁴¹ [ընկերութիւնը սպառնում է անկառոյց միտրինակութիւններ, լինի այդ տնտեսութեան կամ թէ մշակութային բնագաւառներում: Այդ գալիս է ահագանգելու, որ տուեալ հասարակարգի զարգացման կարողականութիւնը յագեցել է, որ սկսել է կորչել հինաւուրց, փաստուած հանգանակներին, փոխանակ փորձնականի կամ նորի գրապարակն իջնելու, թեկոսզ որչափ էլ անորոշ լինի արդիւնքն ու ապագան:]

Both Nurian and his aunt continuously tie the loss of identity and the emptiness of contemporary life to larger economic and global issues. For Nurian, editorializing on these issues initially serves as a means of understanding and mitigating these issues. For his aunt, however, writing in Armenian is the only answer. Her job as an Armenian teacher in the U.S. provides consolation against these larger concerns. Language, thus, to use Homi Bhabha's terminology, becomes the "location of culture," and more specifically, the medium for national preservation and the only means of combating the erosive forces of globalization.

The aunt's accusatory questioning as to why Nurian does not write in Armenian raises the question of identification and the significance of cultural narratives, text, and in Nurian's case, the novel specifically, in shaping identity and national allegiance. By choosing to write exclusively in English about topics central to American or Western cultural concerns, Nurian as intellectual has halted what Raffi began. The profound influence of *The Madman* on Nurian and his friends that begins to resurface as the protagonist's identity is continuously questioned by those around him. Nurian's decision to leave this editorial job to "find himself" and begin work on his novel becomes a step against participation in the global marketplace—a participation that although grounded on critique, is performed in English.

Upon his departure from New Haven, Nurian visits his lover, Zelda, in New York. Zelda, whom he will later marry, is described as a white American. She works at the corporate level for Bloomingdales, an upscale department store. Essentially, she is the opposite of Nurian, unconcerned with her background and identity, and complicit in the consumption driven society described by Nurian in his editorials. Their relationship is characterized by Zelda's immense love for Nurian. She becomes Nurian's emotional rock

through her support for his endeavors and willingness to comply with anything he wishes.

Toward the end of the novel, Zelda asks Adam why he has chosen to write his autobiographical novel in English and not in Armenian. After a swift reply that “no one reads Armenian books (207),”⁴² Adam inquires into the source of Zelda’s question. Zelda insists that,

Armenian is the only way to write about Adam Nurian. In English, the book will lose its colors. Besides, Americans won’t understand you anyway....My worry is that English words will not do justice to your world. For example, you yourself told me that there is no English equivalent for the word *karōt*. And your life is, in its entirety, *nostalgia*. (207-208)⁴³

Adam responds,

“But Armenian has become so foreign to me.” (208)⁴⁴

to which Zelda replies,

“Still it’s an intimate foreignness, since it is through language that foreignness becomes foreign.” 208⁴⁵

Zelda’s use of the word *karōt* and its untranslatability into English as justification for writing in Armenian is significant on several levels. The Armenian word *karōt* can be translated into English as *longing*, *missing*, or *yearning*; however, in the Armenian cultural

⁴² [Հայերէն կարդացող չկայ:]

⁴³ [Ադամ Նուրեանի մասին միայն հայերէն կարելի է գրել: Այլապէս անգլերէնով կը գունաթափուի գիրքը: Ամերիկացին չպիտի հասկանայ քեզ:...Իմ մտածողութիւնն այն է, որ անգլերէն բառերը չպիտի կարողանան հարազատօրէն պատկերել քո աշխարհը. Օրինակ, դու ինձ ասել ես, որ անգլերէնում կարօտ բառ չկայ, իսկ քո կեանքը համակ կարօտախտ է:]

⁴⁴ [«Բայց հայերէնը այնքան խորթացել է ինձ:»]

⁴⁵ [«Այդուհանդերձ, հարազատ խորթութիւն, մինչ այլ լեզուով կը դառնայ խորթ խորթութիւն:»]

context and usage it often connotes a deep sense of nostalgia for an unreachable past and a space attached to that past. Zelda's claim about the untranslatable nature of the word is rooted in Karapents' psyche and experiences, or what she knows of it. The word *karōt* becomes the symbol of the untranslatability of the Armenian, exiled, diasporic experience that Zelda presumes will be at the core of Nurian's novel.

Zelda's assertions raise questions of authenticity, cultural identity, and the ways in which one ought to express the self. Karapents employs Zelda, the "American," to convince Nurian to write in Armenian and essentially to decide what constitutes and communicates Nurian's identity and Armenianness in the most accurate way. Already confused and lost, Nurian's sense of agency further diminishes as he relies on Zelda's assurance and confirmation to begin the process of writing in Armenian, a task encouraged earlier in the novel by his aunt. Zelda's exoticism of Nurian's ethnic difference and the anxiety it causes him provides an interesting perspective on Zelda's role in the relationship. Whereas the aunt dictates Nurian's choices, oftentimes conflating her issues with his, Zelda as an outsider places value on Nurian's eccentricity. Essentially, her attraction to Nurian is grounded in "otherness" and the turmoil it causes him. Unlike Zelda, Nurian's ex-wife Meline does not find Nurian's issues attractive. Explaining her decision to leave him, the following ensues between them:

'We are the product of two different worlds. You always show me two faces. I don't know which one of you is Armenian, which is American.' [Meline]

'What's the difference?' [Nurian]

'Your Armenianness suffocates me.' [Meline]

'But you're Armenian too, Meline.' [Nurian]

‘I don’t feel what you feel. I want to be free of your chains.’ [Meline] (31)⁴⁶

While Meline’s relationship with Nurian’s “Armenianness” proves debilitating to their relationship, Zelda’s distance from his issues allows a better means of coping with those same idiosyncrasies. However, the benefits of Zelda’s assumed position within the relationship only go so far.

Zelda’s contention that language constitutes identity and culture becomes problematic when she herself does not speak or understand the language that she claims makes Nurian who he is. Does the language barrier mean that she does not understand Nurian, even though she seems to be dictating who he is and how he should represent himself? Does her exoticizing of Nurian’s difference place her in a power to appropriate his experience? To answer these questions, we must take into account how Zelda is written into Karapents’ novel. The love story between Zelda and Nurian, although significant within the frame of the novel, is, on a literary level, weaker than other sections of the novel. Oftentimes seeming forced and uncharacteristic of Karapents’ style, the characterization of their relationship is rather trite. While this weakness may be intentional on the part of the author, possibly to denote an inherent artificiality in their relationship, it nonetheless results in an artificiality within the text itself.

Notwithstanding Zelda’s role in the discussion on language and identity, language and otherness play an interrelated role in the novel. Language and the foreignness of

⁴⁶ [«Մենք տարբեր աշխարհների ծնունդ ենք: Դու ինձ շարունակ երկընտրանք ես պատճառում: Չգիտեմ ո՞րն է հայը, ո՞րը ամերիկացին:»
«Ի՞նչ տարբերություն:»
«Քո հայությունը ինչպես է ինձ:»
«Սակայն դու էլ հայ ես Մելինե:»
«Ես չեմ զգում այն, ինչ դու՛ ես զգում, ես ազատությի՛ն եմ ուզում քո կապանքներից:»]

language ultimately determine the figurative borders that both unite and separate the characters from each other, and even from themselves. Amidst the fleeting and replaceable symbols of identity that Karapents discusses in his texts, language becomes the last resort for transmitting and expressing a cultural experience as a diasporic, transnational citizen.

Discussing the power of language to transmit culture in *The Language of African Literature*,⁴⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes:

Culture embodies [the] moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eye-glasses, through which [people] come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next. (14-15)

Thiongo's statement reaffirms the aunt's concern about Nurian writing in English, Zelda's claims about language and identity, *and* Nurian's decision to leave his editorial job. The desire to retain a specific cultural significance within the United States, essentially to combat the powerful assimilating force of American consumer culture as outlined through his editorials, prompts Nurian to tell his story from literally an Armenian voice; however, the diasporic experience complicates the use of solely Armenian, or any *one* language, in the telling of such a story.

⁴⁷ For an overview on the debate about language and African literature see, Adejunmobi, Moradewun. "Routes: language and the identity of African literature" *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (1999) pp 581-596.

Adam's Book concludes with Zelda's sudden, accidental death. Nurian and Zelda have gotten married and are vacationing in a cabin in Vermont. With Zelda's enthusiastic support, Nurian is diligently working on completing his Armenian-language novel. During an outing to collect wildflowers, Zelda is hit by a mechanical crane and dies on the mountain. Zelda's sudden death coinciding with the completion of Nurian's novel becomes symbolic of the inability of even language to wholly represent and transmit culture and identity. By choosing to write in Armenian, Nurian essentially casts off a large portion of his cultural experiences, those in the United States. Zelda's relationship with Nurian takes place in the United States and is only possible through their communication in English. Essentially, by refusing to acknowledge and thus casting off the American cultural elements within his own identity, Nurian unconsciously rejects Zelda's presence in his life. Karapent's decision to kill-off Zelda essentially problematizes arguments that place emphasis on one's *native* language as sole carrier of culture.

Thiongo writes:

Culture is a product of the history which it in turn reflects. Culture in other words is a product and reflection of human beings communicating with one another in the very struggle to create wealth and to control it. But culture does not merely reflect that history, or rather it does so by actually forming images and pictures of the world of nature and nurture. Thus the second aspect of language as culture is an image-forming agent in the mind of a child. Our whole conception of ourselves as people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly

correspond to the actual reality of the struggles with nature and nurture which produced them in the first place. (15)

Thiongo's emphasis on the impact of language on the understanding and integration of culture in childhood, places a temporal limit on the significance of cultural experiences.

While "language as culture" as "image-forming agent[s]" holds true, especially in the case of Nurian and his recollection of his childhood experiences with Gabo, the statement's emphasis on childhood fails to take into account noteworthy, character altering experiences, such as relocation, occupation, war, etc. on the individual's cultural psyche, as well as the introduction and use of new languages alongside those experiences.

Thiongo states:

Language as culture thus mediating between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature. Language is mediating my very being. And this brings us to the third aspect of language as culture. Culture transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through the spoken and the written language, that is through a specific language. In other words, the capacity to speak, the capacity to order sounds in a manner that makes for mutual comprehension between human beings is universal. This is the universality of the struggle against nature and that between human beings. But the particularity of the sounds, the words, the word order into phrases and sentences, and the specific manner, or laws, of their ordering is what distinguishes one language from another. *Thus a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written literature*

and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries [emphasis added]. (5)

Here, the power of language to transmit culture is compelling in its ability to illustratively place the invisible within language; however, Thiongo's argument is compromised by his insistence on the cultural power of one, more dominant language over another, and the assumption of a "specific history" as *the* main determiner of cultural identity and belonging. In effect the individual's relationship with culture and history becomes secondary to the collective cultural experience that Thiongo claims is embedded within the native language of the group. The partiality toward the collective politicizes language and the act of writing by granting agency to a grand narrative inherited at birth and embedded through the language and society of one's early life. While one can argue that all writing is a political act, the de facto politicization of writing in the native tongue places individual experience always within the communal one. More specifically, Thiongo's argument suggests that even the task of writing about the individual essentially performs the task of writing about the group. In this scenario, the self becomes solely rooted in its collective cultural history, not taking into account the external or even internal sources of influence.

Let us return to Karapents' text as upholding the idea of language as one carrier of culture and one factor in distinguishing and expressing an "authentic" experience.

Readership, or the lack thereof, becomes secondary to the act of writing itself, to the search for authenticity, truth, and absolute belonging. Zelda's coercion to write in Armenian is somewhat convincing for Nurian, providing an affirmation of difference to the protagonist; however, the logic behind the argument is inconsistent with the diasporic experience. Nurian's world is full of contradictions and dualities that the protagonist consciously

grapples with, and which, in accordance with the link between language and culture, cannot be expressed exclusively in Armenian or English.

Zelda and Nurian's conversation takes place in English, but is presented to the reader in Armenian. While Nurian's adult life is led mostly in an English-speaking environment. Transforming that environment to an Armenian written one violates the motivation for choosing Armenian over English. Language, like the cultural symbols and associations critiqued in the novel, ultimately fails to be an authentic carrier of culture and identity, in that it fails to represent a large part of Nurian's world. Nurian's decision to write in Armenian is a last resort in maintaining a sense of individuality and difference amidst what he sees as an environment devoid of substance and culture. While a significant part of the novel critiques the obsessive desire to find "Armenianness" in objects and endeavors, it essentially falls into the trap it has been actively avoiding by seeking and being satisfied with language as a definitive solution to the question of identity.

In effect, Zelda's death symbolizes the inability of the diasporic Nurian to successfully manifest both cultural experiences at once. Ironically, it is Zelda who sells the Armenian nationalist voice, something Adam is grappling with throughout his life. Her romantic and exoticized vision of the Armenian experience convinces Nurian to look at his experience in a way no Armenian character in the novel is able to do; however, Zelda's ability to understand Nurian's turmoil contradicts with her assertion that the English language cannot express that same turmoil.

Perhaps the poetic weakness exhibited in the sections between Nurian and Zelda can be attributed to the contradictory elements in the dialogue. It becomes difficult to empathize with Nurian's angst when much of it is rooted in the duality of his existence, a duality that is

represented also in his relationship with Zelda, but not in the actual dialogue between them. Because we read Zelda in Armenian, Nurian and Zelda's bond becomes less complex as Zelda convinces Adam in Armenian to write Armenian. Zelda confidently asserts:

Adam, you can earn your living by writing in English, while sustaining your national identity by appealing to Armenian In your complete essence, Adam, you are a duality.... you need to write your novel in Armenian if you want to penetrate into the pure tragedy that is Adam Nurian. (208-209)⁴⁸

Inevitably, the duality that is Adam Nurian is not reflected in the language that Karapents writes him in and cannot be reflected unless the change in languages is distinguishable throughout the book.

For Nurian, writing in Armenian becomes a performance of Armenianness through language, a choice of embracing one cultural identity over another. By continuously pushing away the desire to write his editorials, even in his mind, Nurian begins the process of writing the “self,” to a certain degree. He moves from editorializing on issues pertaining to American cultural identity in English to writing his autobiographical novel, in English, and finally transitioning into writing this same novel in Armenian. This eventual destination becomes as limiting as the place where he began.

The desire to perform, both literally and figuratively, a sense of national duty through language and literature, serves as a form of exoneration for physical absence from the homeland. Nurian's visit with Vahan, an old friend, demonstrates yet another instance of

⁴⁸ [Ադամ, դու կարող ես վաստակել քո ապրուստը անգլերէն գրելով, սակայն պահպանել քո ազգային ինքնութիւնը հայերի և պարսիկների: Սակայն քո ամբողջ էութեամբ, Ադամ, դու երկուութիւն ես: Իսկ այդ երկուութիւնը բեկ ավելի հարստացրել է, խորացրել, դարձրել եզակի:....քո վեպը պիտի հայերէն գրես, եթէ ուզում ես թափանցել այն ազնուագոյն ողբերգութեան մէջ, որ Ադամ Նուրեանն է:]

conscious performance. Having just moved his family from Soviet Armenia to Harlem, Vahan and his family attempt to recreate a sense of home in their apartment in Harlem. When Adam enters the apartment, he momentarily forgets that he is in Harlem;

The inside of the apartment...was like a lost oasis of Armenian-ness, Ararat on the wall ahead, and relics from Armenia on the furniture and the bookshelves, the seal of a caring hand on...the objects....The room would have seemed like an exhibition without the presence of Parandzem [Vahan's wife]. The woman's presence softened the Swedish furniture's rough, impersonal lines. (49)⁴⁹

The symbol of Ararat and the ubiquity of objects representing Armenia and Armenianness clearly show an attempt to maintain a tie with the Armenian homeland and successfully (although momentarily) serve as an escape from the present location and the cultural influences within it. Vahan and his wife express their desire to be among Armenians and insist that their stay in Harlem is temporary, as they plan on moving to Long Island or Flushings where they say, "there are Armenians, [Armenian] schools, many things, we won't be alone"(52).⁵⁰ While their reason for leaving Armenia is not clear, their emotional ties to the country and the nation persist.

Nurian challenges his friend's decision to move to the United States, but Vahan is adamant that he has made the right decision and has no plans to return to Armenia, in the

⁴⁹ [Յարկաբաժնի պատերից ներս հայութեան մի կորած ովագիւ էր, դիմացի պատին Արարատը, իսկ շուրջը կահոյքի վրայ ու գրադարակներում մատուցներ Հայաստանից, խնամոտ ձեռքի կնիքը իրերի ու առարկաների վրայ, գուրգուրանք ու կարգապահութիւն, ամեն ինչ նոր ու մաքուր: Սենեակը ցուցածանդէտային կը լինէր առանց Փառանձեմի: Կնոջ ներկայութիւնը մեղմացնում էր շվեդական կահոյքի չոր, անանձնական գծերը:]

⁵⁰ [«հայութիւն կայ, դպրոց կայ, շատ բան կայ, մենակ չենք մնայ:»]

belief that he can have a happy and successful life among the Armenians in Long Island.

Ironically, Adam criticizes Vahan's move to the U.S., but does not speak about relocating to Armenia himself, adding to the contradicting nature of his identity and highlighting the central anxieties in the text.

Sitting in Vahan's apartment, Nurian reflects to himself:

we have fled our homes and are wondering in the streets of the world, building churches in Kuwait, in Madagascar six people have joined and established an Armenian club, Mr. Ambassador, I've been waiting for my quota for two years, do something so I can move from this place, oh, Kirakos,⁵¹ where are you going? 53⁵²

Nurian's concerns with his own identity become expanded here as he laments the scattered state of the Armenian people. The passage presents the creation of diaspora centers and establishments outside of the homeland as hollow and ineffective, reinforcing Nurian's own feelings of ineptitude and disorientation.

Nurian sees Vahan's apartment as an "exhibition," suggesting an out of place, unnatural display of culture in Harlem. Interestingly, the reference to the Swedish furniture amidst the "lost oasis of Armenianness," signals the blurring of cultural distinction and the inability to sustain wholeness and authenticity of one specific culture amidst copies of others. Like the description of the aunt's house earlier, Karapents places significant attention on the characters' physical surroundings. The attempt to evoke authenticity and belonging within

⁵¹ Throughout the novel, Nurian addresses several of his questions and concerns to a man named Kirakos. Kirakos's relationship to Nurian is unclear and he only appears in these scattered musings.

⁵² [«...մենք մեր տնից փախել աշխարհի փողոցներն ենք չափչփում, Քուվեյթում եկեղեցի են կառուցում, Մադագասկարում վեց հոգի հառափուկ Հայուց Ակումբ են հիմնում, Պարոն դեսպան, երկու տարի է ինչ քոթայիս են սպասում, մի բան արե՛ք տեղիցս շարժուն, օ՛ր, Կիրակոս, ու՞ր ես գնում...»]

one's four walls serves as a source of reinforcement and comfort for these characters. Nurian, unlike his aunt and Vahan, has not managed to establish such a place and is further isolated by his lack of the aforementioned *ōjakh* (hearth).

In an effort to demonstrate to Nurian his commitment to Armenia, Vahan asks his thirteen-year-old son Vahag to recite the patriotic poem, "I Love the Sun Sweet Taste of Armenia" ["Es im anush Hayastani"]⁵³ by the prominent poet Yeghishe Charents.⁵⁴ Vahag begins reciting the poem, but is unable complete it; he begins to cry and expresses that he yearns for his friends in Armenia. Immediately afterwards, the text switches to a flashback of Nurian recounting his own experience, reciting a poem in Tabriz, Iran. In a stream of consciousness style, the text reads:

'You idiot, why are you dazed/stupefied? continue! I've been separated from my dear mother,' from my dear mother!'...The audience was waiting for a verdict, a sea of heads, Mr. Khachatur's reprimand was heard from behind the curtain, start from the beginning, I have departed from my homeland, I'm a poor wanderer, I have no home, from my dear mother, don't they know I don't have a mother? Mr. Khachatur's iron fingers were scratching Adam's side continue stupefied idiot, I've been separated from my dear mother I've been separated from my dear mother I've been separated from my dear mother I've been separated from my dear mother

⁵³ This poem is one of the most well-known and memorized poems in the Armenian literary canon. Unlike the majority of Charents's work, it is uncharacteristically formal and patriotic. For a more extensive look at tenor of Charents's poetry see, Nichanian, Marc. ed. *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2003. For English translations of Charents's works, *Land of Fire: Selected Poems* Trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (1986)

⁵⁴ Yeghishe Charents (1897-1937) was an Armenian poet living in Soviet Armenia. He was imprisoned by the Stalinist regime and died in prison.

why is the hall undulating at least if the sounds from the back seats stopped I
can maybe open up my arms and swim in the warm red river... (55)⁵⁵

Nurian's ability to relate to Vahag's sense of loss commiserates in both individuals' inability to complete the task of performance. Like, Vahag, the young Adam, prodded to display his skill in recitation and cultural performance, falls short. Longing, or more precisely, *karōt*, gets in the way. Interestingly, the scope of this longing has been narrowed to a certain degree. The *karōt* for the homeland insinuated throughout the text is being expressed through Vahag's desire to see his friends and Adam's longing for his absent mother. Here, loss placed on a smaller scale becomes just as significant, if not more, than the collective loss of a diasporic people. By personalizing this notion, Karapents amplifies the significance of the narratives of nationhood, belonging, and loss. Furthermore, what Nurian seems to experience and contemplate on a metaphysical, theoretical level, is experienced by Vahag in a very visceral way. Nurian's decision to produce in one language over another is, like Vahag's recitation of the poem, an unsustainable mode of performance, attempting to heal a loss that will inevitably replace itself with another equally jarring one.

Returning briefly to Appadurai's notion of ethnoscapas,

deterritorialized communities and displaced populations, however much they may enjoy the fruits of new kinds of earning and new dispositions of capital and technology, have to play to the desires and fantasies of these new ethnoscapas, while striving to reproduce the family-as-microcosm of culture.

⁵⁵ [«Տօ, ապուժ, ինչու՞ ես շօմեյլ, շարունակիր՝ ազիզ մօրէս բաժանուել եմ», ազիս մօրէս... Հանդիսարահը սպասում էր դատաստանին, գլուխներին ծով, նորից լսուեց Պարոն Խաչատուրի սաստը վարագոյրի յետելից, սկսիր սկզբից, Հայրենիքէս հեռացել եմ, ինչո՞ւ պանդուխտ եմ տուն չունիմ, ազիզ մօրէս, միթէ՞ չգիտեն որ ես մայր չունեմ: Պարոն Խաչատուրի երկարէ մասները քերում էին Ադամի աջ կողը, չարունակի՛ր շօմած ապուժ, ազիզ մօրէս բաժանուել եմ, ազիզ մօրէս բաժանուել եմ, ազիզ մօրէս բաժանուել եմ, ինչու՞ է ծփում սրտը գոնէ լուենն յետին նստարանների ձայները եթէ թւերս բացեմ կը լողամ տաք կարմիր գետում...]

As the shapes of cultures grow less bounded and tacit, more fluid and politicized, the work of cultural reproduction becomes a daily hazard.” (45)

While Nurian identifies with Vahag’s breakdown and his longing for home, it is the father, Vahan’s attempts at reproducing the home outside the homeland that suggests the futility of the act—the “daily hazard.” Vahan’s son becomes Nurian’s pen.

Under the Shadow of Genocide; or the Presence of the Past

As indicated in the introduction to this project, the Armenian Genocide does not take a central role in the discussion of identity and belonging in the three main texts I am working with; nonetheless, the impact of the genocide, its denial, and the psychological implications on the collective consciousness are not ignored. As discussed in previous sections, the knowledge of genocide and violence against Armenians in the Ottoman Empire exert a great impact on the protagonist’s childhood; however, just as his childhood memories do not remain in Nurian’s past, the real world implications of history continue to impact his life.

During a stroll in the United Nations Plaza in Manhattan, Nurian witnesses the bombing of a Turkish Travel Agency. Slightly injured, he remains on the site and is soon approached by FBI agents who take him to headquarters for questioning. After confirming that he is Armenian, FBI agent Robert Green strongly advises Nurian to secure a lawyer and begins the interrogation. Green assures Nurian that they do not suspect him of committing a crime, but would like information about the Armenian Liberation Army,⁵⁶ a terrorist organization, which has taken responsibility for the attack.

⁵⁶ For a historical analysis of Armenian terrorist activities see: “Terrorism in Modern Armenian Political Culture.” *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups*. Ed. Leonard Weinberg. UK: Frank Cass, 1992. 8–22.

In the ensuing conversation we see Nurian defending the actions of the Armenians and challenging agent Green's proposals to demand justice by working within the frameworks of international law. Green asks, "Don't you [Armenians] not have any other means of fighting back?"(93).⁵⁷ Karapents writes, "The plural came and sat on Nurian's shoulders" (93).⁵⁸ Green's accusatory position laments the bloodshed, to which Nurian responds, "Without bloodshed, there is no independence"(95).⁵⁹ Immediately after Karapents writes:

Nurian was outright surprised. He didn't know that that was him. Fire under the ashes, he had become the ideological spokesperson, the metamorphosis occurring so fast that he had become lost within the mirrors of his multiple identities. (95)⁶⁰

For the most part, Nurian's contemplation of issues of identity in the novel is subjective, complex, and restricted to the personal realm. The anxiety and distance he feels toward the spaces he is supposed to call home are a result of internal conflicts. On the day he quits his job as editor Nurian looks out of the office window and remembers

the central square in Yerevan in 1973 when he had visited the Soviet Union with a group of editors. Everyone at that square was Armenian. They were also rushing. I wonder where they were going. He felt his otherness in that

⁵⁷ [«Միթե՞ պայքարի այլ միջոց չունե՞ք:»]

⁵⁸ [Թոզմակին եկաւ նստեց Նուրեանի ուսերին:]

⁵⁹ [«Առանց արեան անկախութիւն չկայ:»]

⁶⁰ [Նուրեանը ուղղակի գարմացել էր, չգիտէր որ ինքն է, մոխիրի տակ կրակ, դարձել էր գաղափարախօս, մետամորֆոզիսը այնքան արագ էր տեղի ունեցել, որ կտրել էր իր բազմաթիւ ինքնութիւնների հայելիների մէջ:]

square. He felt that same otherness in New Haven's central park as well. And as often happened, in a crowd or during a party, suddenly, out of the blue a pale chill would appear, settle in his intestines, and begin gnawing at the thread of his existence. (14) ⁶¹

Essentially, Nurian feels his otherness wherever he goes, even, or perhaps especially, in the locations where he is supposed to feel at home; his otherness, however, is generally not imposed on him by the outside world. Leaving his very public job as editor, the protagonist is somewhat free from public scrutiny and resigns to scrutinizing himself; however, once witness to a terrorist incident involving the Turkish embassy, all philosophical complexity with regards to identity and belonging is erased as he is reduced to those aspects of his ethnicity that mark him as suspect. Though he is contemplating sensitive issues of belonging, place, and ethnic identity endemic to the twentieth century exile, when confronted in the political and historic sphere, simple markers such as name and surname flatten all such complexity and force him to confront the banal and systematic way in which his otherness is unproblematically visible to others. Furthermore, this involuntary involvement rather than prompting a refusal to engage in dialogue about national allegiance as one would expect based on the protagonist's frustration with his identity problems, elicit a rather forceful, unapologetic defense of Armenian national interests.

No longer pondering identity in the cerebral realm, the Genocide fortifies national allegiance in a way even language and family do not. Nurian's defense of the terrorist act

⁶¹ [Թիւեց երեսանի կենտրոնական հրապարակը 1973 թուին, երբ խմբագիրները մի խմբի հետ այցելութեան էր գնացել Սովետական Միութիւն: Հրապարակում բոլորն էլ հայ էին: Նրանք էլ էին շտապում: Տեսնես ո՞ր էին գնում: Այդ հրապարակում զգաց իր օտարութիւնը: Այդ օտարութիւնը զգաց նաեւ Նիւ Հէյվընի կենտրոնական զբօսայգում: Եւ ինչպէս լինում էր հաճախ, ամբոյսի մէջ կամ խրախճանքի ժամանակ, յանկարծ չգիտես որտեղի՞ց վրա հասաւ անգոյն ցուրտը, նստեց նրա աղիքներում՝ կրծելով նրա գոյութեան լարը:]

takes us back to his childhood war with the “Turks” in Tabriz. The Iranian-Armenian historical experience becomes conflated with the Ottoman-Armenian one, and is now embedded within the American-Armenian experience as well. The trauma of genocide and persecution crosses linguistic, geographic, and cultural lines. The omnipresence of a traumatic historical event engrained within those bearing cultural witness essentially solidifies forms of identification based on survival and the right to existence.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused heavily on protagonist Adam Nourian’s attempts at working through issues of identity and belonging. My reading of Karapents’ novel essentially argues that the process of working through concerns of displacement, loss, and national allegiance for the diasporic individual, constitutes identity itself. Rather than presenting a clear-cut resolution to the internal and external conflicts troubling the protagonist, Karapents introduces new sets of issues as a result of resolutions to previous ones. The inability to reconcile, whether through writing, additional relocation, or philosophical allegiance, the multiplicity of selves that have resulted from a lifetime of voluntary and involuntary movement and cultural influence, essentially creates an identity defined by the process of the negotiation with itself.

Nourian’s eventual choice to write his novel in Armenian becomes a conscious decision to momentarily end that process of negotiation and grasp, through writing, a sense of self afforded through language and literary construction. The metafictional elements of the *Adam’s Book* and the language in which it is written place author Hakob Karapents within the conversation that Nourian finds himself in.

Composing yet another editorial in his mind, Nurian contemplates,

And finally, what is culture if not man's mortal and panicky cry, and an attempt to give meaning to the misshappen chaos and make immortal the self in the transitory process of this deceptive dissemination. You are not a man of your word, Adam, Nurian scolded himself, you had decided to stop writing these unnecessary editorials, your obsessive habit, when your intention was to write a letter to Melinē, alright, we got it, it's like a matter of habit, an instinctive desire, but wouldn't it be better to devote your time to your so called novel? Regardless of his intentions, the editorial was pouring out, as he was sitting in the restaurant by the bay and enjoying the fish and red wine, with a great appetite. Take all the world's museums, the artistic monuments and books, and in a huge fire burn to ashes man's centuries-old cry, if not one tear is to drop from all of that; because a tiny bit of conscience is worth more than all old and new civilization, because in the depth of every creative breath is man's perrenial struggle with God, against God, to become God-like, man-like, to become liberated, or as Christ says, declare victory against death. Because he who does not fear death is free. Already, each creative act is an attempt at liberation...to break the hungry clay walls, to break the forced laws and to smash society's rusting chains, to become human and liberated, and to break free from prison. (196-197)⁶²

⁶² [Եւ վերջապէս ի՞նչ է մշակոյթը եթէ ոչ մարդու մտկանացութեան խուճապահար հիշքը իմաստ տալու տձեւ փռոսին եւ յաւերժացնելու իր եւր վաղանցիկ երթի այս խաբուսիկ ծիրում: Դու խոստմանդուժ մարդ ես, Ադամ, ինք իրեն պախարակեց Նուրեանը, որո՞ւ էլ իր ձերք փաշել տեղի-անտեղի խմբագրականներ գրելու քն հիւանդագին սովորութիւնից, երբ քն նպատակը Մելինէին նամակ գրելն էր, շատ լաւ, հասկացանք, որ տարիների վարժութեան հարց է, օրգանական պահանջի պէս մի բան, սակայն լաւ չէ՞ր լինի եթէ ժամանակդ տրամադրէիր քն գրուած-չգրուած վէպին: Անկախ Նուրեանից,

Nurian's characterization of the creative act as a form of controlling one's space in the world and creating meaning within it dismantles notions of essentialism and authenticity in that it allows the creative process, in his case writing, to construct or dismantle spaces of belonging and significance.

In her examination of the practice of metafictional writing, Patricia Waugh's writes

for metafictional writers the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's 'reality'. Writing itself rather than consciousness becomes the main object of attention. Questioning not only the notion of the novelist as God, through the flaunting of the author's godlike role, but also the authority of consciousness, of the mind, metafiction establishes the categorization of the world through the arbitrary system of language. (24)

Through Nourian, Karapents essentially categorizes his own world through a conscious decision of language. The novel in its form and content becomes the conscious, constructed form of identification. By writing in Armenian, about writing in Armenian, Karapents places himself within a national literary tradition, both within the text and without. Identity, here, becomes not what one finds, but what one creates at any given time. Nurian's failed attempts at finding belonging within the multifarious narratives of his life and the spaces attached to

խմբագրականը ըստ ինքեան մշակուել յորդում էր, երբ նա նուամատուցի հաւարանում նստած մեծ ախորժակով ըմբոշխնում էր տարածամ ձուկն ու կարմիր գինին: Առէ՛ք աշխարհի բոլոր բանգարանները, արուեստից կորոզներն ու գրէրը եւ մի վիթխարի խարոյկի մէջ մտխրացրէ՛ք մարդկութեան բազմադար հիզը եթէ այդ բոլորից մի կարիւլ արցունք չպիտի գոյանայ, որովհետեւ մի պուտ գուրը աւելի արժէ քան հին ու նոր բոլոր քաղաքակրթութիւնները, որովհետեւ ստեղծագործական ամեն մի հեւքի խորում մարդու յարատեւ պայքարն է Աստծոյ հետ, Աստծոյ դէմ՝ աստուածանալու, մարդանալու, ազատագրուելու, կամ, ինչպէս Քրիստոսն է ասում՝ պարտութեան մատնելու մտքը: Որովհետեւ նա ով չի վախենում մտէից, ազատ է: Արդէն ստեղծագործական ամեն մի արարքն ազատագրման մի փորձ է՝ քակելու կաւէ տնօրի պատերը, խափանելու պարտադրուած օրէնքներն ու ջարդելու հասարակութեան օրէ օր ժանգոտոյ կապանքները՝ լինելու մարդ ու ազատ, ազատագրուելու բանտից...]

them, result in the conscious construction of a narrative, depicted literally through his novel, that defines his identity *as* the search for identity.

Chapter Two

Exilic Forms in Vahé Oshagan's

“Alarm” [“Ahazank”] and “The Unction” [“Ōdzumě”]

The intellectual in exile is necessarily ironic, skeptical, even playful—but not cynical.
(Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* 61)

In an article memorializing the death of Vahé Oshagan, literary critic Marc Nichanian writes, “Vahé achieved the task of obliterating with this book [*The City*], once and for all, all habitual points of reference for Armenian readers...the poetic oeuvre of Vahé Oshagan was a continuing process of *desacralization*, applied iconoclasm in progress”(“In Memoriam: Vahé Oshagan,” 167-168). Nichanian, possibly the only literary critic writing about Oshagan's work in depth, reveals the main tenets of Oshagan's work, that of resisting cultural mythologies through either complete referential omissions in his poetry or through overt criticism as in his prose. Unlike the greater part of Armenian language literature of the diaspora, Oshagan's poetry refrains from addressing directly national, diasporic, and cultural signifiers. Instead, through omission, Oshagan universalizes experience and grievance by situating notions of exile and alienation within the everyday. The desacralization as indicated by Nichanian, thus becomes a rejection of not only specific Armenian national and cultural norms but of more universalized societal norms inhabiting the consciousness of the everyman.

Notions of exile and displacement omnipresent in Vahé Oshagan's work mirror the reality of the author's experience, which involved constant relocation beginning at an early

age. The son of prominent Armenian novelist, Hagop Oshagan,⁶³ Vahé was born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria in 1922. Soon after, his family moved to Egypt. In 1926, they moved from Egypt to Cyprus, then from Cyprus to Jerusalem in 1934. Oshagan left for Paris in 1946 to study literature at the University of Sorbonne. From 1952 to 1975 he resided in Beirut, Lebanon, where he taught at the local Armenian schools and at the American University of Beirut. He then moved to the U.S. in 1975 where he taught literature and culture at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. A brief move to Australia brought him back to the United States, where he passed away in June of 2000. (Nichanian, “In Memoriam: Vahé Oshagan” 168).

In addition to publishing several volumes of poetry,⁶⁴ two collections of short stories,⁶⁵ and *Fatherland* (2010), a joint project with his son, photographer Ara Oshagan, Vahé Oshagan was active in Armenian intellectual life, editing the English language literary journal, *RAFT*, which featured Armenian poetry, translations of Armenian poetry, and literary criticism. He also produced academic articles about Armenian literature and was a regular contributor to Armenian language newspapers in the diaspora.

This chapter will focus on Vahé Oshagan’s poem “Alarm” [“Ahazank”] (1980) and novella “The Unction” [“Ödzumě”] (1988). Acknowledging the vast differences in both content and form between these two works, I will argue that what essentially binds them is

⁶³ A prolific writer and literary critic, Hakob Oshagan (1883-1948) is one of the most important figures in Armenian literary history. For a detailed look at Oshagan's literary production and contribution see Tēōlēlean, Minas. “Hakob Ōshakan-Kiifechean” Dar më grakanut‘win: Hator A. 1850-1920 Boston: Steven Day Press 1997: 617-630. Print.

⁶⁴ *The Window* [*Patuhanē*] (1956), *City* [*K‘aghak*] (1963), *Crossroads* [*Karughi*] (1972), *Alarm* [*Ahazank*] (1980), *Panic* [*Khuchap*] (1983), and *Suburbs* [*Arvardzanner*] (1990).

⁶⁵ [*Pakhstakanē*] (1987) and [*Takardin Shurj*] (1988)

the revelation of the complexities and anxieties of the intellectual living in exile. My use of the word exile relies heavily on Edward Said's reconceptualization of the term. In "Intellectual and Exile: Expatriates and Marginals," Said outlines his understanding of the individual in exile:

while it is an *actual* condition, exile is also for my purposes a *metaphorical* condition. By that I mean that my diagnosis of the intellectual in exile derives from the social and political history of dislocation and migration... Even intellectuals who are lifelong members of a society, can in a manner of speaking, be divided into insiders and outsiders: those on the one hand who belong fully to the society as it is, who flourish in it without an overwhelming sense of dissonance or dissent, those who can be called yea-sayers; and on the other hand, the nay-sayers, the individuals at odds with their society and therefore outsiders and exiles so far as privileges, power, and honors are concerned. The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives, so to speak, tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being. Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. (52-53)

My decision to follow Said's interpretation of exile is twofold. First, the extension of the term "exile" to go beyond its traditional meaning, often defined by a person's relationship to the geographic space or spaces he has either left behind or been cast out from, allows for

applying the complexities of the traditional exile to those experiencing similar sentiments within a community without being physically separated from it.⁶⁶ Said's reinterpretation allows the concept of "exile" to be investigated as a psychological "state of" being, rather than a straightforward relationship between an individual and the space left behind.

Secondly, the opening up of the term, allows for the "state of exile" to be examined as a *condition* rather than a *symptom*. My definition of the "condition of exile" assumes a totality of feeling in the sense that the experience of exile exists within itself, irrespective of the location of the exilic individual. Whether born into exile, voluntarily exiled, or forcibly exiled, the individual continuously experiences the "loss" or disconnect associated with the term. A definition that rejects the metaphorical as outlined by Said, relegates exile to a symptom, one that can essentially be relieved, either by a return to the territory of origin or the hope of return to said territory.

In the literary texts of Vahé Oshagan, as well as those by Hakob Karapents and Vahe Berberian, which I discuss in the other two chapters of the dissertation, the position of the diasporic exile as outlined through the literary characters as well as the biographies of the authors themselves, is complex. Each individual, both literary and real, must negotiate with the presence of multiple homelands, former residences, and ancestral points of reference.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ For an in depth historical analysis of the term "exile" see Tölölyan, Khatchig. "A General Introduction to Exile." *Les diasporas dans le monde contemporain: Un état des lieux*. Ed. William Berthomière and Christine Chivallon. Paris: Karthala. 195-209. Print.

⁶⁷ Historically, the Armenian Genocide of 1915 perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire and its preceding massacres in the late nineteenth century began what is considered as the modern Armenian diaspora. Along with the massacre of approximately one and half million Armenians, the deportation and escape of a majority of the Armenian population from their historic lands in what is modern day Turkey, led to a dispersal of Armenians mainly to neighboring countries in the Middle East, as well as to France and the United States. Further relocations from these host countries, due to political turmoil or personal circumstances and the incorporation of the short lived First Republic of Armenia⁶⁷, into the Soviet Union in 1920 added further elements to the already multifarious notions of homes and homelands affecting the dispersed population of Armenians around the world.

The realities of exile, both literal and metaphorical, engulf many of the main characters' sense of self and ultimately shape their world-views and relationships.

This chapter investigates the various forms of exile embedded in Vahé Oshagan's poem, "Alarm" and novella, "The Unction" alongside Oshagan's personal experience with exile through his relationship with his own literary and intellectual output. Said's conception of the metaphorical exile allows for a multifaceted reading of spaces and relationships within those spaces.

Oshagan as an intellectual and immigrant represents several levels of exile and his literary works become a collective emblem of these multiple forms. Oshagan's physical detachment from the homeland of his ancestors as well as the absence of a permanent home base place him in the traditional category of exile; however, being physically separated from a homeland is but one of several exilic experiences consuming the author and his work.

The literary engagement, or lack thereof, of Oshagan's work disengages the author from the communities, which share his cultural and literary experiences. Oshagan was involved in the political and literary scene of the Armenian diaspora; however, while his name is recognized in the community, his literary work is not widely read in the diaspora or in the Republic of Armenia.

The dispersion through Genocide and its political aftermaths marks the initial uprooting of the Western Armenian population from their historic homeland into host countries. The subsequent departures from the adopted home country or countries are, for the most part, not through force. Political turmoil and uncertainty, war, and greater prospects for success prompt further migration into Europe and the United States. Nevertheless, the feelings of isolation, a longing toward a homeland, a general discontent in the host countries is evident to a significant extent in Armenian diaspora literature. The sense of responsibility to spaces left behind alongside the responsibility toward the present space creates a necessity to address and be accountable to all locations simultaneously.

Marc Nichanian continuously emphasizes the lack of appreciation for Oshagan's literary contribution. He writes,

Before the arrival of the newest generation, there were two books that completely renovated the language of poetry. One is Sarafian's the *Ebb and Flow* and the other, Vahé Oshagan's *City*. Amazingly, in the five-hundred page Anthology of Diasporan Poetry published in Yerevan in 1981, seven pages are dedicated to Sarafian, and simply avoids Vahé Oshagan.

(“Shshukner” 139)

Nichanian continues to recall that during a jubilee for the author held in Armenia, then President of the Armenian Writer's Union, Vahagn Davtyan referred to Oshagan as a “great poet,” moving on to openly confess that he has not read any of his works

(“Ink‘nameknabanutiwn” 145). This lack of readership applies to the diaspora as well.

Nichanian questions public accolades given to Armenian writers:

Vahé Oshagan is also somewhat recognized, at least in the Diaspora. In his case, I am not certain if his published works have any role in that recognition. The author's name is known by all. His poetry remains amazingly unknown.

(“Shshukner” 138)

The near absence of literary scholarship on Oshagan solidifies Nichanian's assessment of the author, further establishing him as a cultural figure only recognized by name.

The absence of readership, to a certain degree, places Oshagan in a literary exile from his own community. Essentially, if the majority of the Armenian reading population is not reading or has not read his intellectual output, Oshagan becomes isolated from his core audience. As intellectual, Oshagan, not for lack of merit, becomes an exile within the

Armenian reading community. Furthermore, Oshagan's poetry and literary prose is written in Western Armenian and, save for a few poems, has not been translated into any other language. His written language restricts his exposure to audiences who do not read Armenian. *Literarily*, he becomes exiled from his French, Arabic, and English reading host countries and their respective readership. A true intellectual in exile, Oshagan's literary production and the multiple communities' relationship with (or lack thereof) to his literature, mirror the omnipresent theme of exile within the content of the literature.

Vahé Oshagan is mainly recognized as a poet. It is not until his later years that he begins publishing prose. While I believe the literary merit of his poetry surpasses that of his prose, I have decided to focus on his novella "The Unction" alongside the poem "Alarm" in order to maintain the continuity of the dissertation as a whole, which focuses mainly on Armenian diaspora prose published in the United States. Moreover, Oshagan's prose examines more overtly Armenian issues of identity and belonging in the diaspora, further situating it within the scope of my project.

Issues of identity, Armenian cultural and national ties and their relationship to the host country are evident in a large part of Oshagan's, Karapents' and Berberian's prose. Oshagan's poetry, unlike his prose, is less referential as "Armenianness," Armenia, and the historical and cultural anxieties that can come with it, are not overtly addressed. While one can interpret the themes of isolation, exile, and crises that arise in the poetry as stemming from his personal background as an Armenian active in diaspora politics and culture, we cannot justify a direct correlation. Reading themes of exile within a broader scope, my analysis of "Alarm" attributes feelings of isolation and angst to a severance from the

common goals and expectations of society. Comparing these threads of isolation to those in the more ethno-centered “The Unction” allows for a more comprehensive examination of notions of exile, or the “sentiment of exile.” While accepting the historical and territorial foundations embedded in notions of exile, a broader approach introduces psychological and more nuanced understandings of modern-day forms of belonging and isolation.

“Alarm”: The Omnipresence of Exile

Vahé Oshagan’s poem, “Alarm,” is imbued with a sense of urgency and panic. The speaker traverses the streets of Philadelphia agitated and unsettled by the most familiar characteristics of city life. Published in 1980, “Alarm”⁶⁸ is the first poem in a collection bearing the same name. The speaker of the poem takes the reader from his apartment to the streets of Philadelphia. Running through the city, he appears paranoid and afraid, but ready to alert the public to an imminent, yet undefined, threat. The sound of bells and alarms permeate his environment and signal an ominous tone throughout the poem. Claiming the trajectory of the day as a rather typical one, the poem begins:

Every morning
the alarm penetrates
from the ceiling, from the cracks in the windows, from underneath the doors,
still drowsy, half-naked, crusty-eyed and hungry
I rush out, jumping off the stairs

⁶⁸ The pages in *Alarm* (A. Sewak: 1980) are not numbered, so I will not be providing page numbers for my quotations from the poem “Alarm.” Also, although a translation of the poem appears in Volume 12 of the journal *RAFT*, I have chosen to provide my own translations, which are more literal and closer in form to the original. For the translation by Peter Reading see: Oshagan, Vahe. “Alert!” *RAFT: A Journal of Armenian Poetry and Criticism* (1998-1999), pp 52-63.

I head toward the street
running, frightened (“Alarm”)⁶⁹

The anxiety and panic which marks the beginning of the poem proceeds throughout the text as the speaker runs from one part of Philadelphia to another, observing the bleakness and uncertainty of his surroundings, feeling useless, in fear, and ultimately lost. The poem concludes with the speaker ensuring his audience that they too will one day feel the need for the alarm and will experience similar panic. Hopeless and dejected, the speaker’s only sense of certainty comes from his unwavering conviction the alarm will sound. He states,

the less I speak about myself, the better,
the newspaper on my desk is dying, my eyes are burning
sooner or later, I’m not sure –
I wait for the alarm (“Alarm”)⁷⁰

The poem does not overtly state the reason for the alarm and panic that spawns the speaker’s desire to warn the citizens. In fact, the ambiguity ingrained in his fear of the city and the encounters he comes across points to a mistrust and lack of connection to the city, its meaning, its people altogether. Omnipresent danger and uncertainty indicated through the

⁶⁹ [Ամէն առտու
առաստաղէն, պատուհանիս նեղէրէն, դրան տակէն
ահագանգը կը թափանցէ,
բուն չառած, կիսամերկ, բիծոտ աչքով ու անօրի՛
սենեակէն դուրս կը նետուիմ, սանդուխներէն չորսը մէկ
փողոց կ’իջնեմ խուճապահար կը վագեմ]

⁷⁰ [որքան քիչ խօսիմ իմ մասին՝ այնքան լաւ,
սեղանիս վրայ օրաթերթը կը մեռնի, կ’այրիմ աչքերս
ն՛ւշ է թէ կանուխ՝ չեմ գիտեր –
ահագանգին կը սպասեմ]

image of alarms seeping through the “ceiling,” the “cracks in the windows,” and from “beneath the doors,” engulf the speaker’s apartment and follow him outside into the streets. The encroachment of exterior elements into his home eliminates the sanctuary of personal space.⁷¹ By equating the personal space with the public one, the insecurity and fear felt by the speaker seemingly becomes a threat to the entire community.

The sense of turmoil and fear within the personal space thus seeps into the public sphere as borders are erased and all are exposed. Oshagan extends the lack of division between the inside and outside to the temporal realm, as markers of time begin to blur as well. The speaker claims: “I don’t know if it’s early or late./I’m just waiting for the alarm” (“Alarm”). A flattening of all general notions of normalcy and order become replaced by an all consuming anxiety as the speaker waits for the elusive alarm.

Oshagan further flattens common determinants by questioning notions of self and individuality. Like the lack of distinction between the outside and inside, the poem begins to eliminate personal markers of identity. Self-reflection through the metaphor of unreliable mirrors, missing documents and anonymity operate throughout the text as markers of identity or the lack thereof. Oshagan writes,

they stole my identification, how will I get a new one before the office closes
I lost my watch, there’s no one I can ask for the time or date,
They change the names of the streets every night,

⁷¹ Marc Nichanian’s reading of Oshagan’s *City* [*K’aghak’*], sheds light on the merging of the personal and public space. *City* contains five sections: “Street” [“Poghots’”] “Cafe” [“Srcharan”], “Cinema” [“Cinēma”], “Cabaret” [“K’aparē”], “Room” [“Seneak”] and “Church” [“Ekeghets’i”]. Nichanian argues that Oshagan posits the home and the private room as a public space: “Even a person’s most intimate personality, encapsulated within the room has a public nature. It is subject to a neutral authority: And it needs its own turn at an “encounter,” in order to “be.” (“Shshukner” 147).

Who closed the gates of the public park? I needed to take a nap. (“Alarm”)⁷²

A literal loss of identity, time, human contact and accessible space deny the speaker access to essential elements of existence. His voice, through the poem itself, becomes the only means of proving existence, struggle and desire; the voice functions as the *alarm*. We do not know the identity of the speaker. Aside from a few opaque personal references, the poem reveals that he is a resident of Philadelphia. The theft of identification adds yet another layer to his invisibility, by challenging his affiliation within the space of Philadelphia. Furthermore, the loss of access to the time and physical coordinates in the city accentuate the alienation of the speaker with regards to his environment. The bombardment of the “alarm” in the private space of his apartment pushes the speaker outward to the city; however, the theft of his identification, the denial of access to the public park and his inability to recognize where his physical position in the city signal a complete disconnect between the speaker and his surroundings. Like his private space, the “public” sphere becomes off limits as well, thus denying the speaker any place in which to feel secure, at home.

While not overt, the subject of exile reveals itself through the subject’s relationship to his surroundings. The modern city becomes a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, every angle and avenue of which proves the foreignness of the individual; The city itself changes constantly, preventing the speaker from differentiating or identifying himself with or against it. This inability to communicate and access the environment shuts off the individual from his surroundings and results in complete alienation.

⁷² [Անցագիրս գողցեր են, նորը ինչպե՞ս պիտի համեմ գրասենեակը չգոցուած ժամացոյցս կորսուեր է, մէկը չկայ որ օրն ու ժամը հարցնեմ, վաղացներուն անունները ամէն գիշեր կը վախեն, ո՞վ կրպեր է հանրային պարտէզին դռները քիչ մը պիտի հանչէի,]

Oshagan’s notion of the ubiquity of the exilic state is represented through the alienating characteristic of the city and the indistinct character of the speaker. Symbols of big city life—endless streets seemingly leading nowhere, traffic lights, noise, prostitution, anonymity, etc.—paint Philadelphia as antithesis of its moniker as “the city of brotherly love:”

I go down to the street again
to wait until ten o’clock for the birth of the conquering generation
in their thirties, good looking, slick, pure, steal and fatal
the demigods’ of money and power, when
they run over you three by three without seeing you, and they pass
as if you are a useless movie poster pasted on the wall. (“Alarm”)⁷³

If we take Philadelphia as the literal object of scorn, or even a symbol representing the United States, the passage reads as a critique of American society and culture. The perceived disrespect from the younger generation absorbed with self-importance becomes a rift between generations as well as a longing for the old country; however, when considering the poem in its entirety, and even the entirety of Oshagan’s literary production, this analysis does not hold.

Immediately after being rudely overlooked by the youth, he continues to run:

And I run

⁷³ [..նորէն վտղոց իջնեն
սպասելու ժամը 10-ի աշխարհակալ սերունդներու ծնունդին
երեսուննոց, գերվայելուչ, ողորկ անբիծ պողպատ ու մահացու
կիսաստուածներիլ դրամի եւ ուժի՝ երբ
երեւ էրեւ վրայեղ կ’անցնին առանց ղեզ տեսնելու ու կ’երթան
կարծես թէ դուն սինեմայի հին ու անպէտ բոսթըր մըն ես պատին փակած:]

I haven't put a buzzer on my door and no one knows me
no one comes to visit at my loft, not even the manager
whose face I haven't seen all these years. ("Alarm")⁷⁴

Whereas the youth are ignoring him in the previous stanza, here the speaker is ignoring the outside world by denying access to his home. We can read this self-imposed alienation as a reaction to city life, rather than an indication of life in the United States.

Amidst a seeming lack of concrete signifiers denoting time, identity and purpose, exists subjectivity, deterritorialized and out of place. The speaker is lost within the parameters of Philadelphia, because he does not belong. As an outsider, unable to connect with his surroundings, he remains an outsider even within the confines of his home.

Philadelphia, "the city of brotherly love," does not house his brothers and hence provides no love or comfort; however, the exilic state of the speaker is not necessarily rooted in a past trauma or ethnic difference. The ambiguity surrounding the speaker's isolation allows for a broader examination of exile, one stemming from the personal experience, rather than the collective one.

The poem becomes a critique of the alienating components of city life as well as the city dweller, whose inability to accept and adapt to the surroundings, makes him an accomplice to his own exclusion. The citizens' refusal to heed the alarm, however vague, points to the speaker's loneliness, as he repeatedly asserts that he alone understands and is aware of the looming danger; however, the hustle and bustle of the city suggests that perhaps what the speaker understands and knows does not correspond to what these city dwellers

⁷⁴ [Ու կը վազեմ
դրանս զանգակ չեմ դրած ու մէկը զիս չի հանչնար
ոչ ոք այցի կու գայ ձեզնայարկիս, ոչ իսկ տանտէրս՝
որուն երեսը այսօր տարի չեմ տեսած,...]

recognize and understand to be true. He is essentially out of place and unable to connect with his environment.

The speaker's isolation from his surroundings and his unique sense of knowledge becomes a self-imposed exile. Like the city-dwellers he critiques, the speaker also refuses to listen, belong and participate. Philadelphia, the birthplace of democracy, and the "free world," ironically does not retain its meaning when inhabited by the intellectual in exile.

An Ambiguous Past, A Stagnant Present

While Oshagan does not mention Armenia or Armenianness in "Alarm," he briefly refers to an ambiguous past, which seems to prevent the speaker from fully embracing his present. The inclusion of a distinctive history, however vague, signals a past narrative that informs the speaker's relationship to the city. As a group of prostitutes approach the speaker he responds:

my body won't allow me and words from the past weigh me down
'we will be waiting for you over there' they tell me and then become silent.
In this way, I continue to run,
from my father and mother I have inherited a lamentable sadness,
and imagination full of fire, and an enormous sense of anger ("Alarm")⁷⁵

Soon after he exclaims,

It is like this

⁷⁵ [...մարմինս կ'արգիլէ ու բռտերս հեռուներէն զիս կը հեզնեն
«աւելի անդին քեզ կը սպասենք» կը'սեն ու կը լռեն:
Այնպէս որ դեռ կը վազեմ
Հօրմէս մօրմէս ողբերգական տխրութիւն մը
Կրակ ու բոց երեւակայութիւն ու հսկայ բարկութիւն ժառանգած եմ]

that I run from here and there weightless and free
not knowing what I'm looking for
but when I find it, I will know what it is that
threw me, everyday, into the streets of Philadelphia (“Alarm”)⁷⁶

This is one of a few instances in the poem where we are given insight into the speaker’s past and its potential influence on his present. His refusal of the prostitutes on the basis of both physical and mental barriers signifies a disconnect with desire and life to a certain extent. Lacking any form of connection and intimacy, the speaker’s refusal of sexual relations further alienates him from the population at large. It is significant that rejection of the prostitutes is not only on personal moral grounds; he claims that his “body won’t allow” it and the “words from the past weigh” him down. As if programmed to reject anything and everything related to Philadelphia, the speaker’s reaction seems involuntary. His physical being is essentially tied to his history, his emotional state inherited from his parents. By refusing sexual intimacy, willingly or not, the speaker refuses the life-giving properties of his current space.

There is an interesting parallel here between Oshagan’s reference to the refusal of the prostitutes in “Alarm” and Hakob Karapents’ short story “Conspiracy” [“Davadrutiwn”]. In “Conspiracy,” protagonist Minas Minassean roams around Boston attempting to find his bearings in his own city. Throughout the narrative, he is wary of any human contact—unfamiliar and uncomfortable amongst those whom he meets. His main concerns are the

⁷⁶ [Այսպէս է որ
ապիւն անդին թեթև ազատ կը վազեմ
ու չեմ գիտեր ինչ կը փնտռեմ
բայց երբ գտնեմ՝ պիտի գիտնամ ի՞նչ էր որ զիս
ամեն առտու Ֆիլատելֆիոյ փողոցները կը նետեր]

architectural characteristics of the surrounding buildings, his “history” with the environment, and the changes that have taken place there. Much like the speaker of “Alarm,” Minas frantically moves from one street to another attempting to locate himself and his place within this metropolitan city. The actual people in the environment make him uneasy and even more alienated than he already feels. A concern for the lack of human contact and communication hovers throughout the story as Minas continuously encounters strange people whom he does not recognize. When an unfamiliar, “youthful” woman named Nadia approaches Minas, “he hesitate[s] a moment...feel[s] the proximity of death, the mad rush of his years towards conclusion” (Karapents, “Conspiracy” 120). Like the speaker in “Alarm,” Minas rejects the sexual encounter as it existentializes his experience in the city.

Karapents’ Nadia eventually confesses that she wants and has always wanted to be impregnated by Minas. Nadia gives Minas the chance to physically create his own history and a meaningful existence amidst a city owned and created by others. However, Minas, unfamiliar with the concept of creating anything on his own, does not recognize her attempts and tells her she is “mistaking...[him] for someone else...”(Karapents 120). Interaction with the “real,” with the present, is foreign to him.

Throughout the short story, Minas attempts to situate the city based on how he perceives himself, after which he defines himself according to the city. Similarly, the speaker in “Alarm” is unwilling and unable to commit to basic desires and elements of creation, to claim ownership of his present state. While we are not privy to the “words from the past” that weigh Oshagan’s subject down, his continued inaction suggests that they are not in alignment with the present narrative of Philadelphia.

The transition from the prostitutes’ solicitations to the mention of the speaker’s

mother and father become emblematic of the incompatible relationship of the speaker's past and present. The "heaviness" of an unidentifiable past haunting the individual and determining the activities "allowed" in the present limits the speaker's realm of power in the present. Again the inability to move beyond the present/past dichotomy leads to an inability to foresee future endowed with agency. This stagnation is emblematic of the several characters in Armenian diaspora fiction. The poem ends with the speaker steeped in confusion, exactly where he begins: "sooner or later, I'm not sure –I wait for the alarm" ("Alarm"). Thus, negotiating the chaos, the space in between the poem's beginning and end ultimately defines the identity of the speaker. The process of searching the streets of Philadelphia, of alerting the citizens of the allegedly impending danger, and of attempting to connect to anyone or anything in his surroundings completely fails. We are to assume that this same process will repeat itself as the speaker continues to wait for the alarm. The active pursuit of mitigating the uncertainty and angst of the alienating everyday becomes the identity of the exile.

Of Oshagan's "Alarm," Hakob Karapents writes.

Oshagan's "Alarm," more than a personal struggle, is the tragedy of man's exile, and metaphorically the Armenian's, especially the diasporan Armenian's constant maneuvering--the geographical barrier, the standstill of the souls, the constant wound and fading of purpose. (*Two Worlds [Erku Ashkharh]* 227)

Karapents, acknowledging the universal experiences of alienation and isolation in Oshagan's text, nevertheless strongly asserts an Armenian component to the poem. For Karapents, the "Armenianness" in "Alarm" is ingrained within the notion of exile. Oshagan's Armenian

identity essentially fastens a collective diasporic experience with notions of exile and alienation within his texts. While Karapents' reflections are not far reaching, the lack of concrete signifiers (excluding the city of Philadelphia) imbue the poem with larger possibilities, reaching outside national, ethnic or communal lines.

The hyper-consciousness and paranoia of the speaker in "Alarm" reflects the existential angst of an individual perpetually aware of unfamiliar surroundings. With the absence of information about the speaker, isolation and loneliness become embedded within the space of Philadelphia, rather than the self. Philadelphia as space takes center stage in the quest for answers and functions as the source of alienation. The cause of the absence of relationships and contact with people lies within the city itself—its inability to signify home by sheer fact that it is foreign.

Exile thus returns to the notion of disassociation with space and the people within that space. While the reasons behind the speaker's exilic states are not immediately known, the process of attempting to negotiate and come to terms with the foreign space becomes the central concern of exile.

"The Uncion": An Attempt at "Reterritorializing" the Sacred

In "What is a Minor Literature," Deleuze and Guattari examine Franz Kafka's body of work, situating it within what they call a "minor literature," specifying this literature as not written in a minor language, "rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (16). They translate literary attempts of opposition and resistance in terms of topography:

The first characteristic of minor literature...is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. In this sense, Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible, --the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise.

(16)

Essentially, Kafka's resistance to various forms of linguistic and cultural constraint place him within the category of minor literature and mark the significance of his literary output. The act of writing the "impossible" allows for the representation of alienation via the literary output itself. Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "deterritorialization" of language can be seen as, to extend the metaphor, an "uprooting," of the limitations of language to allow for new forms of agency and voice through literature at the same time positioning the author again, under an exilic shadow by his or her rejection of the norm. The framework of minor literature that Deleuze and Guattari present can be extended to apply to literary output that through language and content goes against the established literary norms, uprooting or disrupting the principles previously assumed to be engrained within the language.

Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka relies heavily on Kafka's identity as a Prague Jew writing in German. Kafka's status as a minority writing in a major language is evident. In this section, I propose a slight variation on Deleuze and Guattari's framework, stipulating that Vahé Oshagan's status as a minority is established, because of his writing and his "deterritorialization" of the Armenian language. While he is an Armenian living in the diaspora, bound by a collective history of genocide and trauma, it is his intellectual output

that places him within a minority and situates his work within the “minor literature.” The realities of alienation and exile, already established by birth, become compounded via his handling of language.

Deleuze and Guattari write that in minor literature,

everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn't abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that “master” and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters; what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren't in agreement. The political domain has contaminated every statement (*énoncé*). But above else, because collective or national consciousness is “often inactive in external life and always in the process of break-down,” literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation. It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility... (17)

Deleuze and Guattari's assessment of the political implications of “minor literatures” provide an interesting and oftentimes overlooked insight into the weight of responsibility upon the

“minority” writer. The intellectual writing the “minor literature” becomes a voice of the national and cultural collective by sheer default. Hence, each work of “minor literature,” provides new perspectives and modes of thought for the collective oftentimes leading the creator of the work into further exile from within community.

The following section focuses on Vahé Oshagan’s novella, “The Uction.” My reading of “The Uction,” places the text within Deleuze and Guattari’s “minor literature” category through the author’s choice of language and subject matter. Considered sacred space in Armenian cultural consciousness, the church along with its followers is a prime target of critique in the novella.

Before examining the notion of exile in Oshagan’s “The Uction,” I will provide a brief introduction to the central plot of the text as well descriptions of the principal characters. Oshagan’s novella focuses on a small diaspora Armenian community in Philadelphia. It begins with a description of the early morning activities of Ter Avetis,⁷⁷ the priest at Philadelphia’s St. Sarkis Armenian Church and his assistant Sukias. As Ter Avetis prepares for the Sunday morning services, we are introduced one by one to the parishioners of the church, all Armenian. The narrator provides details about each of the churchgoers’ backgrounds, personality traits, quirks, and their reasons for attending church. A total of sixteen parishioners, unless they have entered the church together, sit separately and wait for Ter Avetis.

In the first half of the text, a second narrative runs somewhat parallel to the church narrative, intermittently interrupting the initial story. This second narrative revolves around Sona, Jacques and Bruce, a trio of diaspora Armenian youth who are planning a sacrilegious

⁷⁷ “Ter” is the Armenian word for “Lord” and is used to address a priest. Ter Avetis translates to Father Avetis.

attack on St. Sarkis Church and its parishioners. Sona has immigrated to the United States from Beirut, Lebanon where she was a member of an Armenian terrorist organization.⁷⁸ Jacques, a socialist originally from France, is the ringleader of the group; he is adamant and secure in his plans against the church. Highly knowledgeable about and involved with Armenian diaspora politics and culture, Jacques feels the need for an abrupt change in the status quo, which he feels is stagnant and detrimental to the well being of the Armenian diaspora community. Bruce, the most passive member of the trio, is identified as only half-Armenian and from Fresno, California. Having a newfound interest in Armenian cultural and political issues, he seeks guidance from Sona and Jacques.

Jacques's plan to shake-up the Armenian community involves entering the church wearing black masks and blaring loud rock music while Bruce and Sona passionately kiss in the pews. He then plans on literally disrobing the priest, Ter Avetis, as a symbolic act of revealing the façade of not only the church, but the Armenian diaspora community as a whole. Despite continued hesitation by Bruce and Sona, the plan is enacted; however, much to Jacques's surprise, Bruce interrupts Jacques's attempt to physically harm Ter Avetis. We later learn that the youths are arrested and spend time in jail. A few years later they reconvene and begin discussing new ways of producing change in the community without acknowledging their actions in the church.

The final pages of the novella take place in Ter Avetis's home. He recounts in his mind what he perceives as the life altering events of the assault on the church. Additionally, we witness his relationship with his family and his attempt at reconciling with the idea that his daughter has married a non-Armenian and his grandson is learning Armenian very

⁷⁸ For a historical analysis of Armenian terrorist activities see: "Terrorism in Modern Armenian Political Culture." *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups*. Ed. Leonard Weinberg. UK: Frank Cass, 1992. 8–22.

slowly. The ending of the novella displays the priest's apprehension toward the cultural changes taking place at his home while also revealing a more determined and appeased Ter Avetis, who envisions his role in passing on an Armenian cultural identity onto his grandson.

Spatial Enclaves, Mental Enclaves

[W]hile not literally necessary to culture, 'place' seems to act as a sort of symbolic guarantee of cultural belongingness. It establishes symbolic boundaries around a culture, marking off those who belong from those who do not.... It ensures the continuity of patterns of life and of tradition amongst a gathered and interrelated population who have been together, living in the same spatial environment, since 'time immemorial.' (Stuart Hall, "New Cultures for Old?" 268)

The relationship between space and identity has long been established. With the emergence of the nation-state, belonging and communal identity has increasingly been linked with national boundaries; however, in the absence of legitimized territorial belonging or in the case of diaspora communities, the link between space and identity becomes more complex or malleable. In "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference," Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson address the impact of globalization on the link between space and belonging:

The irony of these times...is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient. It is here that it becomes most

visible how imagined communities (Anderson 1983) come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places, or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality. (10-11)⁷⁹

In the case of the Armenian community, the church has served as the longstanding anchor in the midst of invasion, foreign rule and in the 20th century, genocide. Razmik Panossian argues that while nation is a modern construct, the members of the nation see the beginnings of that nationhood in terms of narratives of their past. Of Armenian nationalism, he writes that the “myth of Armenia’s conversion to Christianity is one of the pillars of Armenian identity. Until the age of secular nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the 1915 Genocide, it was indeed the cornerstone of what it meant to be Armenian: a member of St Gregory’s church” (Panossian 126). Moreover, all Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire belonged to the Armenian millet, which was under the management of the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople. The millet system legally tied being Armenian to being a member of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and church leaders became the heads of the Armenian nation. After the Genocide, along with other diaspora institutions, benevolent organizations, and political parties, churches became central locations for diaspora Armenians to establish a sense of home and belonging.

Oshagan’s “The Unction” brazenly challenges the role of the church as sacred national space. In “The Unction,” like Berberian’s *Letter’s from Zaat’ar*, discussed in Chapter Three, the absence national territory substitutes the characters’ homelands with other, demarcated locations representing said territory. In the case of “The Unction,” the

⁷⁹ For an interesting analysis of the way in which language about territory and belonging affects certain groups of “displaced” and “uprooted” peoples, see: Malkki, Liisa. “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees” (1992).

Armenian Church becomes the de facto substitute for the homeland—the space of the nation and national belonging—while outside, the streets of Philadelphia become the otherness threatening the sanctity of Armenian national identity.

The significance of the church as “bastion” of Armenianness is evident through the text’s emphasis on the floor plan of the church as well as the parishioners’ positions within it. In fact, a full-page drawing of the floor plan is placed before the beginning of the title page of the novella. Straight lines designate the pews and altar, while the name of each parishioner marks his or her location in the pews. Three black dots, without names, indicate the location of the three youths who attack the church.

Jacques, the ringleader of the group attacking the St. Sarkis Church, designates himself as “the Anti-Armenian.” His goal is to disrupt the church’s authority over Armenian cultural beliefs. When his motives for the attack are questioned by Bruce and Sona, he explains:

Church, religion, god, they aren’t worth a penny for Armenians. Their connection is with the nation--Armenianness is what is important--and that Armenianness is frozen, stiff, become fossilized within religion’s fraudulent heaven. First let’s break the mystique of church and religion, after that we’ll free the Armenian people from their passive, stagnant condition, we’ll return them to life, to a living thing through which generations can pass. (74)⁸⁰

According to Jacques, Ter Avetis and his parishioners are performing their Armenianness

⁸⁰ [Եկեղեցի, կրօն, աստուած երկու փարա չեն արժեր հայուն համար: Անոր կապը ազգին հետ է, հայութիւնն է կարեւորը, եւ այդ հայութիւնը՝ սառած, քարացած, բրածոյ դարձած է կրօնին կեղծ-դրախտին մէջ: Նախ քանդենք եկեղեցիին ու կրօնին միասիւնը, անկէ ետք հայութիւնը կ’ազատենք իր կրաւորական անփոփոխ վիճակէն, կը վերածենք կեանքի, ապրող բանի որ կարելի ըլլայ սերունդէ սերունդ փոխանցել:]

through their participation in church. Jacques continuously argues that the unceasing connection between a conservative church and Armenian national identity prevents the Armenian community as a group from advancing. The nation's stagnancy can only be shaken by true Christian faith, which he claims does not exist in this case, or a clear separation of church and nation. The Armenian enclave in Philadelphia allows for a passive gesture of duty, both to the nation and to the faith that defines it, temporarily erasing the cultural differences of the new country. According to the youth, the church as respite for the exiled diasporans impedes the potential progress of the nation.

However, the complexity of Oshagan's novella lies in its refusal to vilify the church establishment and in turn applaud the actions of the youth. As the space of the church is questioned as a false bearer of Armenian culture and belonging, the space occupied by the youth is similarly critiqued. Lacking any connection with the church and its parishioners, Jacques, Sona and Bruce are in a way exiled into the streets of Philadelphia. The churchgoers, although having emigrated from different parts of the world, agree that the Church and their ethnicity bind them together. Ter Avetis, the church, and the Sunday service reaffirm their Armenian identity. Unlike the churchgoers, the three youths do not have concrete markers of Armenian identity on which they unite. Moreover, they are as uncomfortable outside of the church as they are in it. Oshagan describes the backdrop of the trio's meeting spaces along with the alienation the youth feel within these spaces. The city is always present through mentions of highway and street names, names of restaurants, the smells of the harbor, and the continued presence of non-Armenians. As Sona and Jacques discuss their plans, the narrator writes, "Beyond the window the one could see a part of Philadelphia's port. Cold, monotonous smell of the rain has probably captured the world and

the echo of Warf’s gray noise has banged the glasses like a suffering endless heart”(69).⁸¹

Philadelphia’s presence in Sona and Jacques’s life is circumstantial and burdensome. The frigid description of the city bombarding the youth with pain and sorrow displace both Sona and Jacques from its parameters, relegating them to the confines of their meeting spaces and their ideas. The outside becomes a reminder of their isolation, of their exile. Oshagan writes, “A boat whistled from somewhere in the distance; the sound came through like a lament and created a moment of sadness”(71).⁸² Already angry and uncomfortable with their Armenian counterparts, the youths are perpetually consumed by the sorrow as reflected through the city.

Just as the physical spaces prove confining to the Sona and Jacques, so does the population inhabiting those spaces. During yet another meeting with Jacques, Sona thinks to herself, “[t]hey are different here...they don’t see each other, they pretend they don’t see, they don’t need each other...each person’s warmth is reserved for himself...it seems as if this freedom...fuck this kind of freedom”(57).⁸³ Much like the speaker in “Alarm,” Sona’s alienation from the city extends to its inhabitants as well. Her critique however, is unfounded, in that we never encounter any non-Armenians in the story and rely solely on her observations. Her sense of isolation is in many ways self-imposed as the characters focus on concerns relating to Armenian national identity in the diaspora regardless of where they

⁸¹ [Պատուհանէն անդին Ֆիլատելֆիոյ նաւամտայցի մէկ մասը կը տեսնուէր: Պաղ, միօրինակ անձրեւի բուրը բոնած ըլլալու է աշխարհը ու նաւակայանի մետաղեայ գործ աղմուկին արձագանգը տառապող անսահման սրտի մը նման զարնելու է ապակիներուն:]

⁸² [Տեղէ մը նաւ սուլեց, ողբի մը նման եկաւ ձայնը ու տխրեցաւ պահ մը:]

⁸³ [Հոս տարբեր են...հոս զիրար չեն տեսներ, չտեսնել կը ձեւացնեն, պէտք չունին իրարու, ստաած են բոլորն ալ օգուտ չունի...իւրաքանչիւրին տախտիւնը միայն իրեն համար է...կ'երեւի աւ է ազատութիւնը...մարը բունեմ ասանկ ազատութեան:]

reside and with whom they share the space. During a meeting at a local restaurant, both Sona and Jacques, internally judge those around them. Oshagan writes: “The waiter of the restaurant came to their table with two large pizzas. She was a chubby, black, fit woman, a bit too chatty and playful. Jacques didn’t listen to her words. The woman left – having a smile on her face”(84).⁸⁴ Ironically, the conservative and disconnected behavior that the youth criticize in the church members, applies to their own actions as well. While preaching openness and inclusion, they fail to apply these behaviors to realms outside those concerned with Armenianness.

Messages and Languages of Exile

Just like the limits of space in the backdrop of “Alarm,” the spaces in “The Unction’s” Philadelphia prove unstable, uninviting, and at times off limits. In both texts, the main pursuit becomes to transmit messages in the midst of those wavering spaces. Perhaps the nature of exile forewarns the temporariness of space, thus making all places suspect, leaving only the conceptual within reach.

In both “Alarm” and “The Unction,” prominent voices attempt to relay what they believe are indispensable messages and warnings to their respective audiences; however, just like the instability of the spaces in question, the messages themselves lack strong anchors. Ter Avetis, as leader of the St. Sarkis Church, works to transmit the message of the Armenian faith to his parishioners. As an Armenian Priest, his mission is compounded to include the preservation of the Armenian identity outside the homeland. While on the surface a beacon of the community, Ter Avetis’s internal conflicts betray the messages he relays. We

⁸⁴ [Ճաշարանին սպասեակը եկաւ իրենց սեղանը երկու խոշոր բիցցամերով: Լեցունկէկ, սեւամորթ, շէն կիւն մըն էր, բիչ մը շատ լեզուանի ու կատակասէր: Զագ ականջ չկախեց ըսածներուն: Ժպիտը երեսին, կիւնը մէկնեցաւ:]

are informed that at one point in the past, Ter Avetis's son was gravely ill; although his son survives, Ter Avetis is left doubting his faith.

During the crisis he had lost his god, and now he found himself guilty for his nation's and the world's suffering, for which had stopped praying. So that with his small mind and with his kind heart he had gone beyond Christ and his family to an imaginary god, completely detached from the pains and hopes of life, a kind of idea and ideal of god, an abstract something equal to his love and longing for his homeland, that had no relation with this liturgy and prayers. (48)⁸⁵

Essentially, the priest continuously relays a message he himself does not believe. While his intentions are genuine, he fraudulently promotes spirituality and faith solely for the sake of nationalism. His loyalty to the nation and his desire to connect to a distant space tie him to the church. Nonetheless, Ter Avetis's doubt and hesitation turn the act of preaching into a mechanical and almost painful process. As Ter Avetis prepares for the Sunday sermon:

A drop of sweat was rolling down from his forehead, his body now had to turn to the right, he had to raise his hand bless the hall but that seemed as impossible as moving a mountain, *now I have to return* he said almost out loud, he raised his head with difficulty, Jesus' image was shining at the altar *even you're good for nothing* he thought, and for a second he hoped for a

⁸⁵ [Տագնապանքին ընթացքին կորսնցուցեր էր աստուածը եւ որ հիմա յանցաւոր ալ կը գտնէր իր ազգին ու մարդկութեան տառապանքներուն համար եւ ուրուն դադրէր էր աղօթելու: Անանկ որ իր պզտիկ խելքովը ու մեծ, բարի սրտովը անցեր էր Քրիստոսէն ու իր ընտանիքէն անդին՝ դէպի երեւակայական աստուած մը բոլորովին անջատուած կեանքի ցաւերէն ու յայտերէն, տեսակ մը աստուծոյ գաղափար ու իտէալ, իր հայրենիքի սիրոյն ու կարօտին չափ վերացական բան մը՝ որ ոչ մէկ կապ ունէր սա պատարագին ու աղօթներուն հետ:]

miracle. (49)⁸⁶

Ter Avetis's inner dialogue confirms Jacques's criticism of the church and its role in Armenian national identity, however, this confirmation does not heroize Jacques, or completely devalue Ter Avetis's contribution.

The trio's attempts at intercepting the church's message and relaying their own, while definitely dramatic, does not work. With Jacques's leadership, the trio forces all things sacrilegious into the space of the church. Jacques affirms that "A horrible blow to the testicles of Armenians, we have to kill the language without speaking, we have to tear up the priest, we have to shred the essential principle of morality and make it disappear- the sick will either die or will recuperate"(95).⁸⁷ Perhaps insincerely, Jacques exclaims that he does not want to destroy the church, rather fortify belief and truth, one way or the other; regardless, his more progressive views critique what he sees as regressive cultural practices stemming from the community's dependence on the church for cultural affirmation.

The attack on the church destabilizes both the trio and the church, but does not result in victory for either. The churchgoers are appalled and terrified by the youths' actions. They scream at the attackers, question their intentions, and at times, to their own surprise, curse at them inside the church. Perhaps the most terrified is Ter Avetis, who standing on the altar does not know how he is going to continue. Seeing the deacon disrobed Ter Avetis says to himself "he wants me to stop the service...no such thing, my friend...you'd have to kill me

⁸⁶ [Ճակատէն քրտինքի կաթիլ մը վար կը սողոսկէր, մարմինը հիմա աջ պիտի դառնար, ձեռքը պիտի վերցնէր օրհնէր սրահը բայց լեռ մը տեղէն շարժելու չափ անկարելի կը թուէր ատիկա հիմա *պէտք է դառնամ* ըստ գրեթէ լսելի ձայնով, գլուխը դժուարութեամբ վեր բարձրացուց Յիսուսի պատկերին խորանի լոյսերուն մէջ կը փայլէր *Քեզի ալ խէր չկայ* մտածեց, երկվայրկեան մըն ալ տնտնաց որ բան մը հրաշք մը արկած մը պատահի:]

⁸⁷ [Մէկ սոսկալի հարուած հայութեան կոկոմերնուն— լեզուն պիտի սպաննենք չխօսելով, քանի որ պիտի քայքայենք, բարոյական էն կենսական սկզբունքը պիտի չուլլենք, օգը հանենք, հիւանդը կամ կը մեռնի կամ ալ կ'առողջանայ:]

to make me stop, understand?...they call me the Armenian priest” (112).⁸⁸ Again, we see the intertwining of Armenianness and the Armenian Church, the combination of which imbues Ter Avetis with purpose and strength to continue leading the church amidst the chaos. Later, he continues communication with his congregation, however shaky and obstructed, even as Jacques disrobes him and threatens his life.

Oshagan’s refusal to grant victory to either side, suggests the difficulty in the successful and expedient transmission of ideology and change. The parishioners are angry, they defend their religious space, and most importantly do not understand why their church is being attacked. The trio’s language of perversion is essentially not understood by the parishioners and their message is not successfully relayed. The Armenian identity as linked to the authority of the Armenian Church is firmly embedded in the collective psyche; however, while the trio seemingly fail in their means of communication and even temporarily lose Bruce to the side of the church, Oshagan does not present a complete loss. He writes:

It was like this that un-noticed by everyone, slowly, like a fatal disease that secretly infects, destroys the human body – with unfamiliar words, unnatural sounds, meaningless talk scattered around, half-modern, vulgar words, incomprehensible fears and probably also under the blows of betrayal within and outside of the church, began to break centuries-old tradition, ritual and inspiration, the fervent faith of countless generations towards their Armenian collective unconscious identity. And it seemed that the feeling of sacredness, the reverence, the terrifying respect derived from the presence of a

⁸⁸ [կ'ուզէ որ կեցնեն պատարազը...նչ տնտեսի բան չկայ, բարեկամ...ինձի պիտի մեղցնես որ ես կենամ հասկցա՞ր...ինձծի հայ ֆահանայ կ'ըսեն:]

supernatural ear and eye that was closing that would close around, would engulf the church, one second, a very short second became absent from the imagination of the people. (79)⁸⁹

The collision of two conflicting messages, one adamantly recited and represented by Ter Avetis, the other unrelentingly acted on by the youth, collide, creating a brief moment of neutrality; rupturing the historically inherited modes of understanding, the attack on the church introduces alternate modes of identification by momentarily eliminating the connection between the Armenian Church and the Armenian identity. Nevertheless, communication between the youth and Church remains absent and ineffective as Ter Avetis returns to his normal life, perhaps with more resolve, and the youths, after their stints in jail, reconvene to plan another disruptive event.

Marc Nichanian discusses in depth the theme of failed communication in Oshagan's poetry. He writes:

The multiplicity of everyday objects has cracked into the communication process and shows gaps and crevice. Next to the telephone [as communication device] we need to place the train and mirror. Those two serve communication as well as interfere with communication. They assume distance. Like the telephone they attempt to bridge distance, but they cannot eliminate it,

⁸⁹ [Այսպէս էր որ, աննկատ բոլորէն, կամաց կամաց, մահացու հիվանդութեան մը պէս որ գաղտնօրէն կը վարակէ կը ֆանդէ ամբողջ մարմինը մարդկային էակին՝ օտար բառերու, անբնական ձայներու, անիմաստ խօսքերու ցիր ու ցան նետուած, լուռած գռեհիկ կէտ-աշխարհաբար բառերու, անհասկնալի վախերու ու հաւանաբար ալ դաւանաւորութիւններու հարուածներուն տակ եկեղեցիէն ներս ու շուրջը՝ սկսաւ խախտիլ այն որ դարերով աւանդութիւն, ծիսակատարութիւն ու ներշնչում, անհամար սերունդներու ջերմեռանդ հաւատքը իրենց հայու հաւատական անգիտակից ինքնութեան հանդէպ՝ շինէր էր մարդոց հոգեբանութեան մէջ: Ու թուեցաւ թէ սրբութեան զգացումը, գերբնական ականջի մը ու աչքի մը ներկայութեան ստեղծած ակնածանքը երկիւղալի յարգանքը ուր շուրջ կը գոցուէր, կ'ամփոփուէր եկեղեցին՝ պահ մը, կարճ պահ մը բացակայեցաւ մարդոց երեսակայութենէն:]

emphasizing more the absence of the other, the impossibility of an essential meeting, the forbidding, the principal loss of a direct presence. (“Shshukner” 152).

Nichanian argues that in Oshagan’s poetry, technological advances, meant to bring people closer together and ease forms of communication, conversely generate less meaningful contact. Suggesting a modernist nostalgia for lost, more authentic forms of communication, Oshagan sees modern man in a perpetual state of isolation. In “The Unction,” the manufactured and ineffective modes of communication are not represented by literal everyday objects, rather by long held ideology. Nichanian writes that in Oshagan’s poetry “trains never arrive where they’re supposed to, or simply never leave” (“Shshukner” 153). A similar stalling of progress appears in “The Unction,” as firmly held beliefs and associations, whether political or religious, hinder progress and real communication.

Vahé Oshagan also maintains language as a source of estrangement, embedded within the ideological status quo of the Armenian diaspora community. While all the characters in “The Unction” (excluding Bruce) communicate in Armenian, the text presents the traditional use of Armenian language as broken, insufficient and restrictive. Rationalizing his contempt for the state of Armenian culture, Jacques contends:

Language is even a responsibility. You can’t tamper with it. If you speak or write it incorrectly, or even if you don’t write or speak it at all...you are not Armenian... The Armenian language is reserved for speeches, for lecture, for writing decrees, preaching, speaking with god, praying, things like that... it is

formal and frozen, it doesn't bring man and woman close to each other, it's not a language of intimacy, not even for anger, cursing or love. (95)⁹⁰

Essentially, Jacques's objection with the state of Armenian cultural values can be located on the linguistic level. Words, or the calculated omission of words, construct attitudes and mores, which deny, according to Jacques, progressive and healthy behavior. Language, like the church, becomes a component of responsibility to the nation. A sense of forced obligation, language, as dictated by the Armenian cultural mores, proves limiting to those who object the status quo.

"The Unction," as text, wholly challenges this notion of linguistic responsibility by not only narrating violence against tradition, but literally writing it as well. Oshagan consistently violates what he proposes have been the "rules" of the Armenian language and literature by incorporating English words among the Armenian, using curse words and sexual language, and by explicitly revealing the oftentimes blasphemous inner thoughts of the priest and his congregation. By inserting "innappropriate" language within the sanctity of the space of the church, literature, and language, Oshagan deterritorializes his inherited language and the traditions embedded within it.

While the physical disrobing of the priest does little to challenge Ter Avetis's faith, the exposure of his inner thoughts via the story's narrator reveals the unreliable foundations on which it lies. As stated earlier, Ter Avetis feels unwell even before the youth enter the church. He doubts his presence and his faith, for a moment wondering if he will be able to

⁹⁰ [Լեզուն ալ, ան ալ պարտականութիւն է, հետը խող չըլլար, վայ որ սխալ խօսիս կամ գրես կամ հէջ չգրես յիտիս... հայ չես...: Հայերէնը՝ քառ խօսելու, դաս տալու, կոնդակ գրելու, քարոզի, աստուծոյ հետ խօսելու, աղօթելու, ալ ի՞նչ գիտնամ...պաշտօնական սառած բան մըն է, էրիկ կնիկ իրար չի մօտեցներ, մտերմութեան լեզու չէ ոչ ալ բարկութեան, հայկոյանքի կամ սիրոյ:]

perform the sermon. The narrator reveals, “His eyes were witness to the sparse presence of human beings, placed their just for him, in a way his property...right over there were his warm, supple choir women...”(50).⁹¹ His carnal feelings toward the women, along with his dismissive attitude towards his parishioners curtail his moral authority over the congregation and question the foundations upon which that morality is based.

Oshagan’s readiness to portray the religious figure in such a way, without villanizing him, becomes a further act of literary defiance. Ter Avetis’s triumph over the youth through his refusal to stop the sermon despite being disrobed and threatened, preserves his authority over the Armenian people. The text presents his moral ambiguity as an institutional one, rather than a personal one. Instead of denouncing Ter Avetis’s doubts and impure thoughts by deposing him, Oshagan, further solidifies the priest’s position in the church by declaring the event an awakening for him. Ironically, Oshagan desacrilizes the church and its language by refusing to allow its surrender.

The final section of the novella takes place in Ter Avetis’s home. We learn that his daughter has married Jimmy, a non-Armenian and they have a son, Mher. Ter Avetis’s wife, Astghik encourages her husband to interact with Jimmy, who is in the other room. Clearly uncomfortable with the situation, Ter Avetis, contemplates the future of his progeny. While formally the head of the household, Ter Avetis does not hold the same power at home as he does in church. While the attack on the church solidifies his mission within the Armenian Church (he reaffirms this change continuously after the attack), the realities of his personal life contradict his strict nationalist beliefs.

⁹¹ [աչֆերը կը լուսցուէին մարդկային ցանցառ էակներով հոն դրուած միայն իրեն համար, տեսակ մը իր սեփականութիւնը, հոն էլին իր մտտ տափուկ դպրուհիները...]

At one point, Ter Avetis's daughter urges her mother to teach Mher Armenian. Astghik says that she'll do as much as she can and that there is still time to learn. Ter Avetis interjects, "Leave the boy alone my daughter, what's the difference if he learns or not...just make sure that you serve as an example of a good Armenian"(136)⁹² Immediately after, he internally questions this assertion and wonders how one sets these good examples. Later, the priest circumvents the issue of language, positing suffering as the key component of being and feeling Armenian:

No leaf moves without pain... if it is going to pass, then through sorry, with fear, with emotions, with hope, pampering through hopelessness, crying from happiness and pain...blood where there should be tears....my grandchild has to suffer in order to understand whose grandson he is, which nation's grandson.... (138)⁹³

In effect, Ter Avetis's emphasis on pain and suffering as markers of Armenian identity eclipse the transmission of identity and belonging through communication. The absence of communication and interaction hence places the individual within an exiled space, further securing the pain and suffering associated with being Armenian. For Ter Avetis, learning the language can be circumvented as long as the Armenian, at some point, feels the pain and suffering embedded within the language. While Ter Avetis initially sees his daughter's marriage to a non-Armenian as a defeat, his daughter proves otherwise. It is his daughter who insists on the continuity of an Armenian identity through her son, Mher, by insisting that the

⁹² [Հանգիստ ձգէ տղան աղջիկս, սորվի նէ ինչ պիտի ըլլայ՝ չսորվի նէ ինչ պիտի ըլլայ...դուն նայէ որ տղուդ լաւ հայու օրինակ ըլլաս:]

⁹³ [Առանց ցաւի տերեւ մը տեղէն չի շարժիր... եթէ պիտի անցնի այն ատեն վիտտին մէջէն վախով յուզումով յուսով, յուսահատութեան մէջէն գուրգուրալով լալով ուրախութենէն ու ցաւէն... արիւն ուր արցունք պէտք է ըլլայ տեղ մը... իմ թոռնիկս պէտք է տառապի որ հասկնայ որուն թոռնիկն է, որ ազգին թոռնիկն է...]

grandparents teach him Armenian.

Conclusion

Oshagan's texts strongly correlate the absence, yet continued attempt of effective communication with the condition of exile. In "Alarm," the speaker states, "On the weekends, I write letters. I don't receive answers, but I continue to write"("Alarm").⁹⁴ He exclaims,

...drive, let's
go back to my room, shut the door, I'll sit at my table
and begin writing letters,
and then I'll go back down to the streets. ("Alarm")⁹⁵

Despite the failure to attain contact, the speaker in "Alarm" continues to write letters, continues to sound the alarm, and continues to roam the streets of Philadelphia to search for answers, and at times to provide them. In a rare instance of transparency, the speaker directly addresses the Armenian diaspora, exclaiming, "I am going to burn the skin of your fingers with acid / so that you run back to the gorges of Urartu⁹⁶ and search..."("Alarm")⁹⁷ Oshagan leaves out the object of the search, just as he leaves the speaker's letters unanswered;

⁹⁴ [Ուիլիամսը անթիւ նամակ կը գրեմ, պատասխան չեմ ստանար բայց կը գրեմ]

⁹⁵ [...բեկ երթանք
Էտ սենեակս, կողքեմ դուռը, սեղանիս գլուխը նստիմ
ու նամակ գրել սկսիմ,
յետոյ նորէն փողոց իջնեմ.]

⁹⁶ Urartu or Araratu was a kingdom in the Armenian Plateau region of the Caucasus from the 9th to 6th centuries, BC.

⁹⁷ [Զեր մատներու մորթին գիծերը պիտի արեւն տախտոյ
Որ էտ վազեմ Ուրարտուի կիրներուն ու փնտտեմ...]

however, regardless of the ambiguity, the act of seeking remains consistent and encapsulates Oshagan's understanding of diasporic identity.

Similarly, in "The Unction," the act of transmitting ideas, warnings, and beliefs comes to define the main characters of the novella, the inability to successfully do so leading to examinations of selves and ideologies. Towards the end of the novella, we learn that Sona and Jacques have been released from jail. They, along with Bruce, meet again at a restaurant and begin discussing methods for reawakening the diaspora, not at all daunted by their past experience. The trio's resolve mirrors Ter Avetis's commitment to the church. Ter Avetis continues his work at the church and even becomes more resolute in his faith as a result of the attacks. Neither side is willing or able to acknowledge the ideas of the other, yet persistently seeks to disseminate its own. Oshagan essentially defines the diasporic identity as the attempt of communicating the self in exile.

As stated earlier, both the form and content of Oshagan's prose and poetry differ. Thematically both "Alarm" and "The Unction" seem to be reactionary pieces speaking against the establishment and the status quo. "Alarm" laments the ambivalence and naivety of an entire city, unaware of the dangers ingrained in its way of life, while "The Unction" rejects and questions the established principles and routines of an ethnic population living in Philadelphia; however, in spite of its ubiquity in the texts, the anti-establishment nature of the voices in the works are questioned as well. The failure of the speaker in "Alarm" to successfully accomplish his self-given task, along with his self-imposed isolation question his goals and methods of reaching resolution. In "The Unction," the unsuccessful attack on

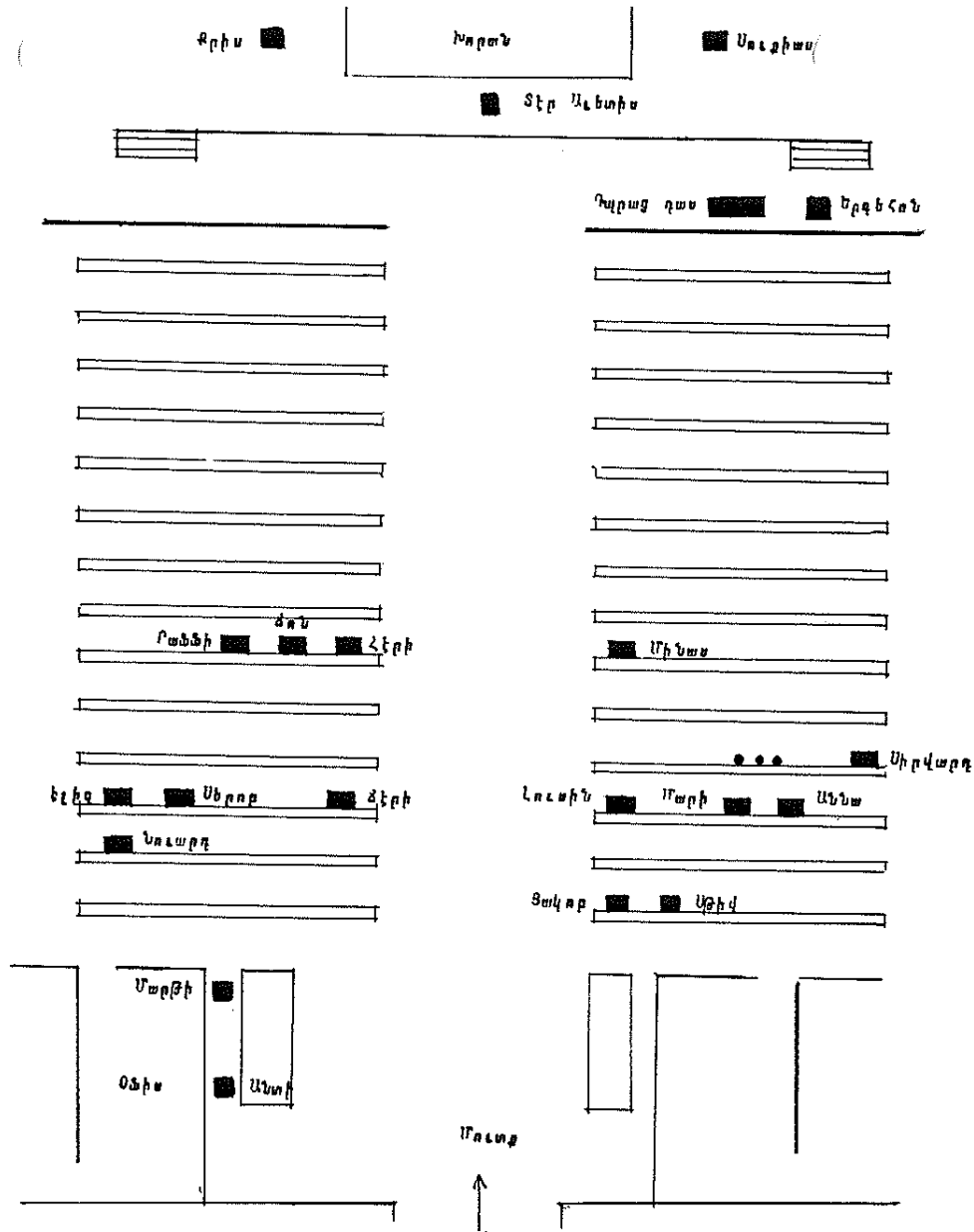
the church and the trio's lack of firm ideological unity question the possibility of significant change in the community.

In "The Uncution," the parishioners and Ter Avetis stand up for their beliefs, however shaky. Bruce essentially saves the holiness of the space by siding with the church and declaring "Father...you...are...stronger...than...us"(121);⁹⁸ however, although the blasphemous actions within the plot fail to enact concrete change, the obstruction of the language which produces the plot remains in tact. Oshagan's infusion of sex, passion, and profanity within the sacred spaces of the Armenian Church, literature and language subvert longstanding norms and culture mores. Oshagan's ideology is found neither in the ideologies of the three youths, nor the people in the church, rather in the language of the text that dares to integrate such things within the sacred space of church and literature.

Vahé Oshagan's literary works can be categorized as "minor literature" within an already "minor literature." His reterritorialization of language and ideology has proved alienating to the Armenian reading audience, limiting inclusions in anthologies, scholarly attention, and much deserved acclaim. Oshagan's texts, his relationship with these texts, as well as his relationship with the readers and non-readers of the texts, become symbolic of not only exile and diaspora, but more significantly, exile from the diaspora.

⁹⁸ [Տէր հայր... դուն... մեզմէ... աւելի... ուժով ես...]

Figure 1 -



Chapter Three

Anchoring the Nation: Space(s) of Belonging in

Vahe Berberian's *Letters from Zaat'ar* [*Namakner Zaat'arēn*]

Vahe Berberian's novel *Letters from Zaat'ar* [*Namakner Zaat'arēn*] (1996) follows protagonist Zohrap Anmahuni's journey from Los Angeles to the imaginary nation of Zaat'ar, where he is to work as consul of the Republic of Armenia following Armenia's independence from the Soviet Union.⁹⁹ Zohrap, a successful architect living with his Armenian wife and two children in Los Angeles, is dissatisfied with the Armenian community of Los Angeles, the restraints of the family environment, and an unfulfilling career. The novel begins with the protagonist relaying the circumstances under which he was approached to become the Armenian consul in Zaat'ar. At a dinner party honoring the Foreign Minister of Armenia, Zohrap and other diasporans are casually asked if they would ever move to the recently independent Republic of Armenia. Shortly after, Zohrap is offered a position as Armenian consul in Zaat'ar. Much to the chagrin of his wife Alice, Zohrap leaves his architecture position in Los Angeles and relocates to Zaat'ar with Alice and their two children. Soon after, Alice, disillusioned by both Zaat'ar and Zohrap's unwavering dedication to his position there, takes their two children, and returns to Los Angeles. Zohrap, now free from what he feels are the nuclear family's restrictive elements and his unfulfilling work-life in Los Angeles, begins his perplexing and problematic journey as Armenian consul of Zaat'ar.

Zohrap's experiences in Zaat'ar, which at the conclusion of the novel are revealed to

⁹⁹ Armenia declared independence from the Soviet Union on August 23, 1990. Details in the novel clarify that Zohrap's position is created shortly after the independence of Armenia; however, the exact year is not specified.

be mere literary musings caused by his psychotic break in Los Angeles, illuminate the anxieties of the diasporic citizen. Multiple sets of obligations, ranging from the familial to the national, from the established local place of residence to distant real and imaginary lands, cause a disorientation, both metaphorical and literal, that take center stage in this text.

Letters from Zaat'ar was published in Los Angeles in 1996 with a print run of one thousand copies. The success of the book marked by its absence from local Armenian bookstores prompted a 2009 second edition. The publication of a second edition of an Armenian language novel written by a diaspora writer is rather rare and points to both the popularity of the novel and its author. Furthermore, it reignites the question of Armenian language readership in the diaspora and the role of language in diasporic identity. This question is regularly discussed in diaspora community settings and brought up in the narrative itself.

Vahe Berberian has a significant presence in the Armenian diaspora community as a writer, an artist, and intellectual. Living in Los Angeles, California, since 1976, he has gained recognition amongst Armenian audiences throughout the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and the Republic of Armenia. His paintings, plays, and monologues, and two novels create a hodgepodge of an artistic career effectively catering to different parts of the Armenian community while reaching an international one. Berberian's popularity among the Armenian community of the diaspora and the Republic of Armenia is due mainly to his original comedic stand-up performances, *Nayev [Also]* (2002) *Yevaylen [Etcetera]* (2000), *Dagaveen [Still]* (2004), and *Sagayn [However]* (2009) and most recently, *Yete [If]* (2013).¹⁰⁰ Based on his life in Beirut and Los Angeles, and performed throughout the world, these

¹⁰⁰ Berberian advertises his plays and stand up performances using Latin characters for the Armenian name of the show. I have used his transliteration of the Armenian words to avoid confusion. See: vaheberberian.com

monologues chronicle Berberian's experiences with family and the Armenian community. The narratives rely heavily on diasporic Armenian cultural markers, such as food, clothing, and inter-ethnic stereotypes. Entertaining, culturally insightful, and replete with self-critique, these performances contribute to the artistic milieu of the Armenian diaspora and reach a large audience.¹⁰¹

Proportionately less widely known, Berberian's novels expand on the issues presented in his monologues and plays, and distinctively contribute to the intellectual debate over issues of diasporic identity, nationalism, and diaspora-homeland relations. While it is important to recognize Berberian's breadth of artistic work,¹⁰² for the purpose of this dissertation and the scope of my project, I will focus on Berberian's first novel *Letters from Zaat' ar*, which follows protagonist Zohrap Anmahuni's complicated and bizarre attempt at self-discovery.

To date, there have been no scholarly publications dealing with or mentioning *Letters from Zaat' ar*. In fact, there is very little written on any of Berberian's work. As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, the tradition of literary and cultural criticism in the Armenian scholarly community is rather new. With the exception of the contributions of a handful of literary scholars, much of the scholarship on modern Armenian literature and culture rely on biographical accounts of the authors and generalizing statements about the

¹⁰¹ Berberian's popularity as an artist is also very significant. His art exhibitions attract large audiences of Armenians and non-Armenians.

¹⁰² In addition to the above-mentioned monologues and *Letters from Zaat' ar*, Berberian has published a novel entitled *In the Name of the Father and Son* [*Hanun Hör ev Ordioy*], which deals with the generational and cultural conflicts between an Armenian father and son. Berberian's stage repertoire also includes several full-length plays which he has been involved in various capacities, including writer, producer, actor, and director. These include: *Gyank* (2012), *Mister Garbis* [*Baron Garbis*] (2008), *200* (1989), *Quicksand* [*Awazakhrum*] (1987), and *Pink Elephant* [*Vartagoyn P'ighě*] (1985). Berberian is also a prolific painter and has had several gallery shows. The book *Pages from a Diary* (1995) showcases Berberian's artwork.

texts. Writing on Berberian is limited to local Armenian newspaper and journal articles either reviewing or advertising his plays, art exhibitions, and novels, almost exclusively in a positive light.¹⁰³ In addition, several print interviews with Berberian discuss the motives for his projects and their connection with his Armenian identity.¹⁰⁴

The popularity of Vahe Berberian as an Armenian diasporic figure and the literary quality of *Letters from Zaat'ar* warrant academic study. With this project, my aim is to incorporate *Letters from Zaat'ar* into diaspora studies discussion by looking critically at how the text positions the diasporan in relation to the host country, or countries, and the homeland.

Too Many Anchors, or the Burdens of Identification

Concerns with locality, multiple centers of obligation and issues of identity inundate Vahe Berberian's *Letters from Zaat'ar*. The text explores how the diasporic subject negotiates between different locations and points of reference and how this negotiation becomes key in deciphering the inner workings of identity and emotional well-being. One of the key concerns of this chapter is to examine the philosophical contradictions that surface from connections to multiple locations, people and histories, and the consequences that arise from these contradictions. Furthermore, I explore the notion of "return" as it pertains to the

¹⁰³ See: Shahinean, Grigor. "Los Angelisyan jamanakgroutyun" *Horizoni Grakan Yaweluats* September 1997: 5-9. Print.; Eramean, Marush. Rev. of *Namakner Zaat'arēn* by Vahe Berberian. *Horizoni Grakan Yaweluats* April 1998: 13-15. Print.; Grigorean, S. D. Rev. of *Namakner Zaat'arēn*, by Vahe Berberian. *Asbarez* 15 July 1996: 9. Print.; Kēshishean, Zhirayr. "Inch'u Kardank'...*Namakner Zaat'arēn*". *Haratch* 22 Oct 1996: Print.

¹⁰⁴ Sarkissian, Hrair Sarkis. "Artist in Diaspora" *Armenian International Magazine (AIM)* April 2000.

Armenian diaspora and definitions of diaspora in general. The desire to return to the homeland as a qualification for identification as a diasporan is a contested issue in Diaspora Studies and a major topic of discussion in Armenian diaspora networks. This chapter will examine Berberian's approach to the question and possibilities of returning to the homeland and the feasibility and ramifications of such a return.

While *Letters from Zaat'ar* explores a man's personal journey of self-discovery, much of his means of mediating his inner turmoil revolves around issues of locality. Discussion of the self and the self's relationship to others almost always points back to geographical and spatial points that contribute to, if not define, the identity of the person or persons in question. Discussing the intersection between identity, culture, and space, Stuart Hall contends that

when we think of or imagine cultural identity, we tend to 'see' it in a place, in a setting, as part of an imaginary landscape or 'scene'...cultural identities tend to have the "landscapes of the mind", their 'imaginary geographies.' There is a strong tendency to 'landscape' cultural identities, to give them an imagined place or 'home,' whose characteristics echo or mirror the characteristics of the identity in question. ("New Cultures for Old?" 268)

According to Hall, this close association between place and identity becomes problematic with the emergence of globalization and the subsequent fluidity of borders that promote migration and for some groups threaten cultural unity. One of the responses to this threat is for communities to adopt "more 'closed' definitions of culture" which consequently deter inclusivity and slow down progress and movement. Hall follows these assertions with a proposal at looking at the term "diaspora" in an "open" rather than "closed" way. By opening

the term diaspora to include any group of people identifying with more than one culture, having lived in more than one place,

the concept of *diaspora* provides an alternative framework for thinking about 'imagined communities.' It cuts across the traditional boundaries of the nation-state, provides linkages across the borders of national communities, and highlights connections which intersect - and thus disrupt and unsettle - our hitherto settled conceptions of culture, place, and identity.

Because it is spatially located but imagined as belonging not to one but several different places, the *diaspora* idea actively contests the way in which *place* has been traditionally inserted into the story of *culture* and *identity*. It therefore forges a new relationship between the three key terms-culture, identity and place. From the *diaspora* perspective, identity has many imagined 'homes' (and therefore no one, single, original homeland); it has many different ways of "being at home" - since it conceives of individuals as capable of drawing on different maps of meaning, and of locating themselves in different imaginary geographies at one and the same time - but is not tied to one, particular place. ("New Cultures for Old?" 274)

Hall's suggestion to make the term diaspora a more inclusive one is a contentious issue in Diaspora Studies discourse. His claim that inclusivity provides a less rigid, and more subjective way of creating identity and meaning can be problematic, especially when dealing with collective cultural notions of identity and historically held beliefs of traditional diaspora communities. The impact of globalization and the economic concerns that instigate much of the migration around the world create a relationship between the migrant or exiled individual

and the homeland that is different than the relationship between what we consider the traditional diasporic groups, such as Jewish and Armenian diasporas, and their ideas of homeland.¹⁰⁵ Hall's assertion that diasporas by having "many different ways of 'being at home'"(274) can teach new diasporic communities how to relate to their displacement is problematic when considering *how* traditional diasporas actually deal with the different ways of "being at home"(274). To define all communities living outside the homeland, regardless of the historic, economic, and socio-political circumstances surrounding their initial migration, is to cast aside very real concerns of unique cultural communities for the sake of inclusivity. The relationship between a group's land and identity is oftentimes complicated and affected by the history of the people and the land(s) in question. My aim here is not to close off the term diaspora, but rather to recognize the drawbacks of taking too broad a view of a peoples' relationship to homeland(s).

It is undeniable that immigration due to war and economic instability, different forms of exile and the increased fluidity of borders has affected notions of home and homeland and communities' relationships with geographic spaces. Through an examination of Berberian's novel, *Letters from Zaat'ar*, this chapter will explore the ways in which identity is tied to notions of homelands and various places of residence. What happens when there are multiple centers as possibilities for identification and as possibilities of return? How are notions of diaspora and ties to place complicated when a subject is either forced to live in or imagine living in different cultural and geographical locations? What are the emotional and cultural

¹⁰⁵ We can even make an argument that the Armenian diaspora is divided into two groups, the traditional, "closed" and the more "open" diaspora. The traditional includes the diaspora whose collective consciousness is tied to the Armenian Genocide and its preceding massacres. The more "open" diaspora becomes a more recent phenomenon, tied to more recent global events such as the breakup of the Soviet Union and the economic concerns that have led to mass emigration from of the Republic of Armenia. These two groups have their own unique relationships to their homelands, which often are not even represented by the same geographic space.

consequences of being able to or allowed to identify with multiple locations, times and spaces? Does the leniency of modern notions of identification inherently cause more confusion?

In order to better understand the sites of dependence and obligation so often denoted in *Letters from Zaat'ar*, it is important to outline the protagonist Zohrap Anmahuni's background. Zohrap was born in Beirut, Lebanon, presumably to parents (or grandparents) who escaped the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by Ottoman government during World War I and settled in Beirut, Lebanon. At the beginning of the novel, Zohrap is a resident of Los Angeles, home to one of the largest populations of Armenians outside the Republic of Armenia.¹⁰⁶ As a product of a diasporic people, Zohrap is at once linked to four localities: the historical Armenians lands (now located in the eastern region of the Republic of Turkey) wherefrom his parents (or perhaps grandparents) were expelled; Beirut, Lebanon, their initial place of refuge; Los Angeles, his current residence; and finally the Republic of Armenia as internally recognized state of the Armenian people. The onset of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 spawned another migration of Armenians from Lebanon, mostly to the United States, establishing yet another home anchor for many dispersed Armenians.¹⁰⁷ In the case of Zohrap, Los Angeles becomes a seemingly permanent home, where a nuclear family is created, and where that family is expected to adopt the successful attributes of the host country while maintaining the cultural traditions of the old.

¹⁰⁶Zohrap, although not directly an autobiographical representation of Vahe Berberian, shares some biographical characteristics with the author. Berberian, a descendent of genocide survivors, was born in Beirut and later moved to Los Angeles.

¹⁰⁷ Hrair Dekmejian provides an overview of the migration patterns of the Armenian diaspora in "The Armenian Diaspora" *Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times* Vol. 2 1(997).

Unlike a majority of Armenian writers of the diaspora, including Hakob Oshagan, Vahe Oshagan, Hakob Karapents, Nikoghos Sarafian and others, Berberian does not address the Armenian Genocide directly. The Paris based, *Menk* writers, although not directly addressing the genocide, deal with the trauma of the aftermath as they escaped massacre and fled to France.¹⁰⁸ In Berberian's text, however, the genocide and issues of trauma or return to the ancestral homeland are not discussed explicitly. Instead of addressing the genocide as a source of psychological mourning, Berberian implicitly illustrates the consequences of genocide on the historical and personal knowledge of the collective nation. Knowledge of and identification with nationhood takes precedent over trauma and feelings of loss. In the text, the Genocide becomes one of several historical events that have had consequences on the unity of the nation and the identity of the diaspora. Zohrap's initial search for information and his later post as consul, although futile, serve as means of recognizing the various disjunctures between diaspora and homeland(s) and illuminating questions of collective cultural identity.

The relatively peaceful existence of Zohrap's family is disrupted by the sudden addition of another space of obligation. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Armenia's subsequent independence multiplies the spatial anxieties already prevalent by the burdens of Beirut, Los Angeles, historical Armenia, and the Soviet Republic of Armenia. The Republic of Armenia can actually function as two locations. The Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia and the Independent Republic of Armenia. Armenians in the twentieth century witnessed three significant and sudden shifts in power and representation with relation to what is now

¹⁰⁸ For more information on the *Menk* group and their writing in relation to the Genocide please see Talar Chahinian's dissertation "The Paris Attempt: Rearticulation of (National) Belonging and the Inscription of Aftermath Experience in French Armenian Literature Between the Wars."

the 11,484 square mile land belonging to the Republic of Armenia—the Democratic Republic of Armenia (DRA) established in 1918, the Sovietization of the DRA in 1922 and the establishment of the Republic of Armenia after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The abrupt change in diaspora-homeland relations after independence marks a shift in relationship between the diasporic individual and her homeland as well. Soviet policies significantly limited contact between the both institutions in and outside Armenia and individuals as well. The post-Stalin era brought changes allowing for more access and communication; however, tensions between certain diaspora political factions who had since its inception opposed the Soviet Republic, remained strong. Diaspora antagonism against Soviet system similarly obstructed communication between Armenia and the diaspora.

The sudden opening of communication and diaspora-homeland ties after the fall of the Soviet Union, while problematic in other ways, created a new, more tangible notion of homeland not seen since the early twentieth century. *Letters from Zaat'ar* is set in the immediate years following Armenia's independence from the USSR. The protagonist Zohrap's psychotic break becomes an allegorical symptom of the multiple identities and, subsequently, multiple senses of responsibility and duty directly and indirectly related to the spatial anxieties inherent in the diasporic experience.

Unlike the fiction of Karapents and Oshagan, Berberian does not explicitly reference or lament the loss of “hairenik” [homeland],¹⁰⁹ or make mention of national symbols such as

¹⁰⁹ “Hayrenik” is the Armenian term for fatherland.

Mount Ararat.¹¹⁰ Rarely does the text nostalgically reference the past or discuss the characters' relationship to it. Instead, nostalgia and symbolic representation of and references to homeland are replaced with seemingly more practical approaches to reaching a lost space of national belonging and identity. Zohrap's decision to leave Los Angeles for Zaat'ar, is simultaneously a personal and national one, oftentimes intertwining, and difficult to separate. The frustration Zohrap feels with the duties of family life and its inherent obligations provides the impetus for departure. He feels unchallenged and stagnating at his job and includes his relationship with his wife among the monotony he dreads. However, unable to leave on just personal terms alone, Zohrap uses the nation, and his obligations to it, as a legitimate reason for abandoning the dullness of suburban life. This legitimacy is questioned in the novel, not only through his vain efforts in Zaat'ar, but the breaking down of the assumptions about nation and national belonging. The Armenian family, as a microcosm of the nation as a whole, becomes disrupted with Zohrap's decision to leave the family unit and commit himself to a greater cause, the Armenian nation. By abandoning the "Armenian family" Zohrap in essence abandons one site of obligation for another. His departure from the family not only breaks up the family unit, but proves unfruitful as a national project. His failure to be productive and useful in the duties assigned by his post in Zaat'ar, while still making him happier than he was in Los Angeles, posit political and patriotic actions toward the nation as ineffective, naïve, and merely, self-fulfilling.

¹¹⁰ Mount Ararat is a national symbol for the Armenian people. It is currently located in Eastern Turkey but can be seen from Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. The image of Ararat, as seen from Yerevan, is commonly used to symbolize Armenian national unity, especially in the diaspora. Armenians also refer to Ararat as Masis.

In his introduction to *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location*,¹¹¹ Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan writes:

Diasporic subjectivity is...necessarily double: acknowledging the imperatives of an earlier 'elsewhere' in an active and critical relationship with the cultural politics of one's present home, all within the figurality of a reciprocal displacement. 'Home' then becomes a mode of interpretive in-betweenness as a form of accountability to more than one location. (xiii)

The issue of "home" becomes imperative in attempting to configure personal identity and a sense of personal well-being. However, when the ideologies and tenets that contribute to defining notions of "home" either conflict or become too convoluted to handle, the *process* of working through these contradictions becomes the conclusive identity of the diasporic subject. Essentially, Radhakrishnan's "elsewhere" becomes Berberian's "elsewheres", the "elsewheres" thus encompassing the diasporic subject rather than prompting a feasible negotiation between two "locations," "histories". The diasporic subject becomes at once an ethnic nationalist, and a western progressive, simultaneously embracing the "other" while keeping it at a "safe," convenient distance. Thus, the negotiating process becomes integral to the identity itself. Berberian seems to posit fatalism as inherent in the search for an identity that is being pulled from too many different places, the present one and the multiple historical locations all in one way or another desired and undesired simultaneously.

While Stuart Hall's proposition that the "open" approach to diaspora allows for an easier negotiating process between location and identity, it assumes a certain level of detachment from or ambivalence to any given location. Conversely, in his essay "Restoring

¹¹¹ In *Diasporic Mediations*, Radhakrishnan aims to remedy the dissonance between theory (poststructuralist, postcolonial and postmodern) and notions of ethnic identity with specific attention given to diasporic identities.

the Logic of the Sedentary to Diaspora Studies,” Khachig Tölölyan argues against the idea that diasporic communities, because of their status as uprooted communities, do not have attachment to place. He states that, “in American scholarly discourse (but not necessarily in the discourse that diasporas produce about themselves) diasporas are conceived as social formation whose culture is transnational and deterritorialized”(137).¹¹²

According to Tölölyan, transnational, post-colonial, and globalization studies have “been critical of the idea of a geographically defined place as an anchor for a nation, a nation-state, a culture, or a collective identity” (148). He continues,

Diasporas are celebrated, in part because mobility is part of what creates them and often becomes characteristic of some part of their population, and because they are often assumed, against some evidence, not to be attached nationalistically to either the homeland as a place or to a secondary, diasporic place. The <<sedentary>>, it is assumed, is not part of the diasporic imaginary. This is a half-truth which becomes problematic when its other half is forgotten; the manifest desire of some diasporas not just to sustain a distinct culture and social formation but somehow to reterritorialize both. As Liisa

¹¹² “Anthropologists who have had to confront and deal with the crisis in the traditional practice of their profession have been particularly persuasive about the need to view diasporas in this way. Ethnography and field work have become difficult as traditional communities, small, remote, attached to a place with definite boundaries in which to cultural memory is anchored, have become scarce. Remote places are easier to reach now, are penetrated by material and cultural goods from larger societies, and migration has sent many of the locals to urban centers in either the Third or First World. As anthropologists have followed and adjusted their concepts and practices to new conditions, they have become eloquent about the displacement and disassociation of all peoples, including diasporic peoples, from traditional notions of locality and place. At its best, as exemplified in the work of figures like Arjun Appadurai, George Marcus, Roger Rouse, Liisa Malkki, Akhil Gupta, James Ferguson and the historian James Clifford, who is most influential among anthropologists, this work has been powerful and productive, but it has also inadvertently contributed to an excessive disassociation of diasporic identity and practices from place. Scholars of postcolonial literature, influenced by Asussure, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida, have also been influential in the formation of a transdisciplinary diasporic discourse in the US that has contributed to the disassociation of diasporas from place. Finally, the real but discursively exaggerated disassociation of diasporas from place is one of the features that makes them attractive to a discourse that sees them as a moral alternative to the nation-state”(“Logic of the Sedentary” 137-138).

Malkki¹¹³ has argued, the fact that diasporas always begin in displacement and are more often mobile does not mean that they are unattached to place. On the contrary, their attachments to homeland and to one or more diasporic places are essential to their identity. (140)

Tölölyan's notion of reterritorializing as essential to diasporic identity becomes even more complex when the territories associated with this identity are numerous, geographically spread out, and at times, unattainable as places of return. Because place, as both a literal and figurative notion, is so closely linked to identity, negotiating these different spaces creates an identity crisis manifested in texts like Berberian's *Letters from Zaat'ar*.

The sedentary diasporan and the multiple spaces on which he is undertaking this sedentariness thus create allegorical locations that encapsulate both the locations of the diaspora as well as the historical and current homeland. This confluence of spaces, represented in our text by Zaat'ar, provide, at times unsuccessfully, a way to mitigate the inability to be at multiple places at one time, a means of living as a diasporan, a more legitimized member of the Armenian Republic and a global citizen, simultaneously. The physically scattered nation as concept becomes even more incomprehensible when the center of nationhood comes to existence, or re-existence as exemplified by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Republic of Armenia. Thus, from the sedentary diasporic location, the nation can only be articulated as allegory, even when the nation-state and its representation of nationhood are recognized by the national and international communities.

¹¹³ Malkki, Liisa. "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees" *Cultural Anthropology*, 7 (1), 1992, p. 24-44. Print

Through *Letters from Zaat'ar*, Zohrap's character is tasked as the antennae of the Armenian state. His occupation as architect proves symbolic as he feels the necessity to build the nation and his identity in relation to it. The modern nation as it relates to the old one becomes impossible to map out, both on a literal and metaphorical scale. Literally, the nation-state rests on a tiny fraction of the historic Armenian lands. Metaphorically, ideas of Armenianness change with the distance of time and physical space. Zohrap's mission becomes to blueprint an idyllic nation, a feat he soon realizes he cannot comprehend and actualize. As no real world articulation of national narrative will match with decades of yearning and abstractions, the nation, *as* abstraction, and people, the only "real" element of this abstraction, create a complicated and unknowable relationship condemned to be in flux and without a finish line.

History and Space, History as Space

Living as a member of a diasporic nation inevitably entails living with notions of loss, longing, displacement, even and in spite of achieving status and power in the host country; Edward Said contends that

for most exiles the difficulty consists not simply in being forced to live away from home, but rather, given today's world, in living with the many reminders that you are in exile, that your home is not in fact so far away, and that the normal traffic of everyday contemporary life keeps you in constant but tantalizing and unfulfilled touch with the old place. (*Representations of the Intellectual* 48-49)

Rejecting the notion that the exiled individual is forced out of his home and never allowed to return, Said explains that the exilic existence involves continued ties to the place of origin and hence a constantly tense situation outside of it. In the Armenian case, this tension is further intensified due to genocide and the diaspora's disaffection with Soviet Armenia.

Armenia's first official republic, because short lived, provided little time to process diaspora/nation-state relationships. The break up of the Soviet Union, nearly seventy years later, and the subsequent independence of Armenia and its new status as a Republic, although almost universally welcomed by the Armenian people, added to the aforementioned uneasiness, yet provided a sense of legitimacy through its politically sanctioned presence. Furthermore, the new republic provided new opportunities for the diasporic subject, most importantly the more feasible possibility of returning to a homeland (whether ancestral or not) or the opportunity to more actively participate in the political and cultural life of the "homeland" from within the diaspora. Independence granted and grants greater mobility and allows the diasporan to resist the once forced distance placed on him by the historical turmoil of the region, later the Soviet government and its isolationist policies, and certain diaspora's organizations' opposition of Soviet Armenia.

Berberian approaches this liberation and seemingly endless sense of opportunity in a complex way. Rather than being a beacon of openness, the new potential for access to the homeland pose even more problems, disrupting the familiar melancholy of detachment with opportunities to actively confront previously unattainable desires and collective national longings. In response, Berberian, through the allegory of Zaat'ar, creates a physical location that provides opportunities tied to the diaspora, the nation state, and the Armenian people as a whole, not available in Armenia, Los Angeles, or Beirut alone. Functioning as both

Armenia and the diaspora, Zaat'ar, even as an unproductive space, allows, although temporarily, the best of all worlds.

From the beginning of the novel, we can see strong parallels between the country of Zaat'ar and Armenian nation/nation-state. Berberian sets up this parallel with a look back at the historical plight of both the Armenian diaspora, Soviet Armenia and now the Republic of Armenia through the political history of the nation of Zaat'ar. For Zohrap, Zaat'ar begins to function, at times discouragingly, as a vehicle toward national and personal enlightenment. Berberian introduces Zohrap and his quest into Zaat'ar with a look into the lack of the country's historical transparency and overall accessibility. After accepting the position as Armenian Consul in Zaat'ar, Zohrap admits:

I had tried to find any kind of information or literature on Zaat'ar so that I could be somewhat prepared before heading there; however, I found almost no information about the country. On one of my last days in Los Angeles, I found a book called *Zaat'ar Today* at the Los Angeles Public Library. Alas, I was disappointed when I realized that the book had been published in 1922. I read the entire book in a few hours but found little other than basic geographical information. (14)¹¹⁴

The lack of information about Zaat'ar provides an interesting parallel between Zaat'ar and the diasporan's relationship to the Republic of Armenia. The year 1922 marks the official

¹¹⁴ [Պատահում էր, որ երբեք չէի գտնում որևէ տեղեկություն կամ գրականություն գտնել, որպեսզի քիչ մը պատրաստուած համբայ իյնայի, սակայն երկրին մասին գրեթէ ոչինչ կար: Վերջին օրերուն, Լոս Անջելեսի Հանրային Գրադարանին «Զատարը Այսօր» անունով գիրք մը գտած էի, սակայն յուսախաբուրին մեծ եղած էր, երբ անդրադարձած էի, որ գիրքը 1922ին տպուած էր: Գիրքը քանի մը ժամէն ամբողջութեամբ կարդացած էի, սակայն երկրին մասին որոշ աշխարհագրական տեղեկություններէ անդին, այլ կարելիք մանրամասնություններուն հանդիպած չէի:]

formation of the Soviet Union and the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Following more than six hundred years of foreign rule and a brief two-year independence as the Democratic Republic of Armenia, Armenia was once again besieged by foreign forces.¹¹⁵

The absence of information about Zaat'ar after 1922 implies not only the disconnect between the Armenian SSR and the Armenian diaspora but the lack of common national and cultural markers shared by the two communities. Soviet policies severely limited interaction between the diaspora and the Armenian SSR, only permitting Soviet approved information from entering or leaving the country. Combined with the strict state censorship of everything ranging from artistic, musical, and literary production to media output, the diaspora, already spread out among different countries in the Middle East, Europe and the Americas, had limited means to connect with or exchange cultural information with brethren in Soviet Armenia. The 1960s allowed for better access and communication, however, the inevitable schism between distant diasporic communities and Soviet Armenia, created and still continues to create cultural and political tensions between the two groups.

Zohrap's inability to access information about the country in which he will officially serve the interests of Armenia, symbolically reiterates the disconnect between his national identity and that of his counterparts in Armenia. Questioning Zohrap's future efficacy in serving the interests of Armenia and Armenians in a country he knows literally nothing about, Berberian foreshadows the inefficiency of Zohrap as diplomat and diasporan hoping to build or rebuild his nation. This inefficiency is highlighted by Zohrap's multiple attempts at reaching high-ranking officials in Zaat'ar without success. Promises of meetings and phone conversations are continuously broken and he is left without much "official" business to take

¹¹⁵ For historical account of the first Republic of Armenia see Hovannisian, Richard. "The Republic of Armenia." *Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*. Vol 2. (303-346).

care of in the consulate.

Furthermore, the title of the only informative book about the country that he can find, *Zaat'ar Today*, and its decades old publication date, marks not only an absence of information, but also implies a lack of change and growth within the country. Essentially, Zaat'ar is in the same state “today” that it was in 1922. Zohrap’s only information about Zaat'ar is geographical, symbolizing the diasporic individual’s fixation with homeland as physical place. Upon reaching Zaat'ar, Zohrap states, “It hadn’t crossed my mind that since that date almost nothing would have changed about Zaat'ar’s reality. Top to bottom everything had stayed the same, the borders, the capital and all other important cities”(14).¹¹⁶ Zohrap knows where Zaat'ar is located, which rivers run through it and the names of villages, but very little about the culture or politics of the country. The greater part of Zaat'ar’s history in the twentieth century remains inaccessible. If we are to take Zaat'ar and its history as a metaphor for the Armenian nation, Berberian’s focus on Zaat'ar’s historical void claims lack of cultural, political, and social advancement as a result of not only the Genocide and the resulting diaspora but of Soviet rule.¹¹⁷ Geographically the information Zohrap attains is accurate; however, he remains ignorant of information outside the physical realm.

Nation as space/territory becomes significant in understanding the diasporic individual’s understanding of identity and identification. However, in the text the physicality of identity becomes problematic in that it proves futile for the diasporic individual whose life

¹¹⁶ [Մտքն անգամ չէի անցուցած, որ այդ թուականէն ապին գրեթէ ոչինչ փոխուած պիտի ըլլար Զաաթարի իրականութենէն: Վերիվարայ նոյնը մնացած էին երկրին սահմանները, մայրաքաղաքն ու մնացեալ կարեւոր քաղաքները:]

¹¹⁷ It is important to note here that Berberian’s allegorical representation of the Soviet Union does not take into account significant progress in Soviet Armenia in areas of urbanization, industrialization, education, and elsewhere.

is mostly lived outside of the homeland. Throughout the novel, Berberian also exposes the futility of such identification through Zohrap's unfruitful mission as consul general. The geographical and mental distance between the diasporic subject and his homeland is reiterated here. Zohrap can only know about Zaat'ar by physically going there. The information he has acquired is not only insufficient but also sets him up for a culture shock.

The connection between the lack of information about Zaat'ar and the diasporan's cultural ties to Armenia becomes more evident as the metaphor of Zaat'ar as a quasi-Armenia is developed throughout the text. Before accepting the position as head Armenian Consul General in Zaat'ar, Armenian Foreign Ministry head Aramays Mnakian challenges Zohrap's sense of duty to the Armenian nation. Zohrap states, "Mnakian grabs my shoulders firmly, then, looking straight into my eyes, asks what my role is going to be in getting Armenia back up on its feet"(4).¹¹⁸ Mnakian's question to Zohrap implies an obligatory relationship between the diasporan and the new homeland that has been ascribed to him. He does not ask *if* Zohrap will have a role in Armenia's future, but what that role is going to be. This interaction comes immediately after Zohrap, disagreeing with his wife Alice, and friend Hakob, suggests that unlike the rest of them, he *would* be willing to live in Armenia: "I just know that all those people live under those [difficult] circumstances in Armenia, why is it not possible for us to do the same"(4)?¹¹⁹ Zohrap's question to his wife and friends, seemingly an affront to the views of the other diasporans, actually implicates Zohrap himself through his willingness to live under difficult circumstances for the sake of supporting his homeland

¹¹⁸ [Մնակեան մատերով ամուր մը ուսս կը սեղմէ յետոյ յանկարծ ուղղակի աչքերուս մէջ նայելով կը հարցնէ, թէ արդեօք իմ բաժինս ի՞նչ պիտի ըլլայ Հայաստանը ոտքի հանելու աշխատանքին մէջ:]

¹¹⁹ [Միայն այն գիտեմ, որ այդքան մարդ այս պայմաններու տակ կ'ապրիկոյր Հայաստանի մէջ, մենք ինչու՞ պիտի չկրնանք:]

never actualizes.

Nevertheless, Zohrap's desire and willingness to live in Armenia proves very interesting in the context of diaspora study discourse where the desire to physically return to and *live* in the homeland has been a contested issue in the criteria for designating a community as diasporic. William Safran lists seven criteria for fitting the prototypical diaspora model. According to Safran, groups fitting several but not all seven criteria places them in the "generic" diaspora category, with the "Jewish diaspora as the paradigmatic one (Safran 205)"¹²⁰ His fourth criterion asserts that the diasporic community regards the "ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—if and when conditions are appropriate" ("The Jewish Diaspora" 37).¹²¹ Zohrap, in this sense, becomes the diasporan "poster-child," willing to leave the comforts of the adopted home for the economically and politically unstable of the newly independent homeland.

Zohrap's subsequent move to Zaat'ar, prompted by both his sense of national responsibility and a desire to escape a rather depressing situation in Los Angeles, posits Zaat'ar as a pseudo-Armenia of sorts, a place without the literal marker of Armenia and all the psychological complexities attached to it, but a location where efforts can be made to connect with the homeland or at least a mythical version of it. Zohrap's work toward

¹²⁰ As stated in the introduction to the dissertation, Khachig Tölölyan considers most forms of sustained communication and engagement with the "homeland" as a form of return and does not necessitate a literal return for as criteria for inclusion: see Tölölyan, Khachig "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora" *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27:3 pp 647-644; James Clifford argues that using the desire for return as a criteria determining a community diasporic, limits the inclusion expatriate communities who do not see the homeland as key marker of their identities. See Clifford, James "Diasporas" *Cultural Anthropology* 9:3 pp 302-338.

¹²¹ For a detailed discussion of all seven criteria see Safran, William "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative Perspective" *Israel Studies* 10:1. pp 36-59.

“putting Armenia back on its feet” becomes a process of identification, of self-healing on both a personal and collective level. As architect, Zohrap moves from the practical and mundane corporate office into an abstract world where he is to build both his sense of self and the well-being of his nation, raising questions about the extent of interconnectedness between the nation and self in the diaspora.

Zohrap’s unsettled state throughout the novel points to both a personal crisis spawned by the archetypal woes of marriage and conventional family life and the larger metaphysical issues of exilic life. While the sources of the more personal woes are revealed—he feels trapped, bored, and uninterested in his family, work, and daily routine—issues of exile, uprootedness, and dislocation reveal themselves through the context of his adventures rather than their clear articulation of them. This posits process and working through as the substance of diasporic identity and identification. The lack of historical information about Zaat’ar, as presented by Berberian, signals the perpetual void in concrete identity and the inability to locate and fully comprehend the exiled self. The subsequent search for it becomes the substitute, the mobile, perpetually ephemeral selfhood of the diasporic subject.

The diasporan’s identity thus becomes twofold—one consisting of the historical narrative of the collective nation, with which the diasporan chooses to identify, and the personal narrative consisting of the search for agency and individuality in relationship to the collective national narrative. History becomes key in identifying the self, and Zohrap’s inability to access “histories in Los Angeles, his permanent place of residence, signals the crisis of self which is ever-present in the novel. Zohrap’s journey to Zaat’ar and his newfound knowledge of the political and social history of that space add to his personal history and understanding of self.

To be denied access to the homeland raises questions about the interconnection between indirect exile and diasporic identity. The desire to connect, spurred by emotional attachments and the actual ability to do so are not always possible, even when the opportunity is no longer officially denied. The disconnect spawned by the historical void, as represented through Zohrap's inability to gauge any valuable information on Zaat'ar, can only be ameliorated by direct contact, even if it is in itself alienating. Information about the outside, the unreachable and eventually palpable becomes information about oneself. The search for identity thus becomes the substitute for it.

Political Spaces, Political Faces

Representing the nation allegorically through Zaat'ar ameliorates attempts at identification in that the allegory provides a metaphorical space on which to resolve issues; however, it also complicates diasporic identity in that the allegory continues to defer a palpable means of dealing with the homeland as it relates to the self. Zaat'ar as allegory for nationhood continues throughout the novel, as we see multiple comparisons and symbolic representations of regime change, nepotism, and generational shifts of power. Zohrap's observation of the city center of Laala (Zaat'ar's capital), point again to similarities with Armenian national history. Berberian writes:

Right at the center of the Old Square stands the previous king Naerazan's, gigantic, headless statue. Zaat'ar is replete with statues of Naerazan, both big and small, all of which, without any explanation, were beheaded on his son Naerēbrēb's command, when six years ago tensions began to brew between the King's and his son's respective supporters giving way to some minor

skirmishes. Naerazan was already dead at that time, but his supporters were more organized than ever, and are now considered a threat to Naerēbrēb's rule, contrary to the fact that most people underestimate their poisonous capabilities. (15)¹²²

Berberian almost forces the analogy of Zaat'ar as Armenian nation onto his reader as he reverses his own last name to identify the King's son. Berberian becomes Naerēbrēb and Nazarian, a common Armenian surname becomes King Naerazan. Berberian positions himself, a recognized diasporic figure/intellectual, as heir to a contested kingdom plagued by internal conflicts, both political and personal; ironically, the strong correlation between Berberian and his protagonist, also position the author into the role of the outside observer, Zohrap. Consequently, Berberian, Zohrap, and Naerēbrēb conflate to become the diasporic subject, dislocated in both character and location, each belonging to multiple spaces and mental allegiances. Personal conflicts between father and son symbolize both common generational tensions exacerbated in cases of diasporic communities by cultural divisions created by immigration and exile. Moreover, the father/son conflict expands to symbolize the larger relationship between a nation and its history.¹²³

Furthermore, Zohrap's inquisitive gaze at the beheaded monuments is twofold in that

¹²²[Հին Հրապարակին ճիշտ կեդրոնը կը գտնուի նախկին թագաւորին՝ Նաերագանին հսկայ, առանց գլուխի արձանը: Զառարը լեցուն է Նաերագանի մեծ ու վտիւր արձաններով, որոնք բոլորին ալ, առանց բացառութեան գլխատուած են իր տղուն՝ Նաերէպրէպ թագաւորին հրամանով, երբ վեց տարի առաջ հօր եւ տղուն կողմնակիցներուն միջեւ լարուածութիւնը սրած էր, մասնակի բախումներու առիթ տալով: Նաերագանը արդէն մեռած էր այդ շրջանին, սակայն կողմնակիցները երբաւէն աւելի կ'ազմակերպուած են ու այսօր, անոնք արդէն սպառնալիք կը համարուին Նաերէպրէպի իշխանութեան, հակառակ անոր, որ շատեր կը թերագնահատեն անոնց թիւն ու կարողութիւնը:]

¹²³ It is worthwhile to note that Berberian's novel *In the Name of the Father and Son* and his play *Mister Garbis*, focus almost entirely on the father/son relationship. The stark cultural division between the parent and child caused by migration further complicates the common generational conflicts that embody such relationships.

his lack of understanding or familiarity with Zaat'ar's politics mirrors his relationship with a newly independent Armenia as a diasporic subject who has been separated from the homeland because of history, politics and by sheer distance. Furthermore, we can take Naerēbrēb's rise to power as an indication of Berberian's or the Armenian diasporic subject's new claim to the Republic of Armenia.

The lack of heads on the statues alludes to the corruption and absurdity involved in changes of regime. The absence of actual substantial change between regimes and people in power becomes a point of critique as we see Zaat'ar's new government repeating the actions of the old in the name of future progress. Although the remnants of past governments continue to plague the population, they also become sources of comfort. Zohrap observes:

I have no clue as to why the Old Square is called that, especially since there is no New Square to be found in the city, nevertheless, that square served as a saving force for me right from the start. Primarily it serves as a place to go for a bit of a change, to see people's faces, it's the only place for this, I spend a lot of time there. (15)¹²⁴

The comforting qualities of the old city square point to unfamiliar and less reassuring aspects of the “new.” There is no “new” square because essentially the old establishment has not been removed; yet, the nominal designation of the “old square” as “old” signals an artificial endeavor toward change. This deception proves comforting on two levels: the old square provides the nostalgic and comforting remnants of a past, “simpler” time—the nostalgia removing negative associations with the actual history; and simultaneously, through

¹²⁴ [Գաղափար չունիմ, որ Հին Հրապարակը ինչն^օ այդպէս կը կոչուի, մտնուանդ, որ նոր հրապարակ մը գոյութիւն չունի քաղաքին մէջ, սակայն այդ հրապարակը առաջին վայրկեանէն փրկարար դեր մը կը սկսի խաղալ: Հիմնականին մէջ քիչ մը փոխուելու, մարդու երես տեսնելու միակ տեղը Հին Հրապարակն է, ուր բաւականին ժամանակ կ'անցնեն:]

its name designation as “old,” implies progress toward a hopeful “new” future.

Later in the novel, we find that the beheaded statues are obtaining new heads. Zohrap is informed of this event by a passerby: “Finally they brought the new head...It’s Naerēbrēb’s head, they have to fasten it on his father’s body”(85).¹²⁵ The placement of the son’s head onto the father’s body complicates the struggle for individuality and freedom, by attaching, in stone, the son’s head onto the father’s body. This signals the obvious residues of the past regime within the new one, through both regime and ancestry. Essentially, the new government becomes an extension of the old, a mere change in face rather than a move toward progress and change. The text literally places the issue of identity and ideology onto a physical space, marking these spaces as battlegrounds for past/present dynamics. The apparent nepotism discounts any glimmer of democracy in Zaat’ar. Rather than creating tension among the citizens, Nairebeb’s rise to power is objected to by the old regime, which rejects Nairebeb’s new ideas. This critique of Zaat’ar, and, if we are to follow the previous analogy, the new Republic of Armenia, is a rather timid one. Because Berberian, like Zohrap, is neither a citizen of the country in question, nor a part of its collective lived past, he is careful not to judge the actions of the government. Rather, like Zohrap, he observes the actions at a distance and only hints at their questionable nature.

As stated earlier, Nairebeb’s rise to power is not without opposition; the previous regime’s continued influence, both political and cultural, creates violent tensions in the country ultimately forcing Zohrap to flee Zaat’ar and return to Los Angeles. This expulsion, although somewhat voluntary, serves as yet another form of exile for Zohrap. Although unproductive and separated from his family, Zohrap is rather content in Zaat’ar. As

¹²⁵ [«Վերջապէս նոր գլուխը բերին.»... «Նաերեկոյրեպին գլուխն է, եօրը մարմնին վրայ պիտի ամրացնեն:»]

Armenian consul in Zaat'ar, Zohrap, though only nominally, serves the interests of the Armenian government and its two citizens living Zaat'ar. By fleeing from the conflict, he confirms his wife's position earlier in the novel that "it would be too difficult to live in Armenia, we are used to the lifestyle here"(4).¹²⁶ Essentially, Zohrap's ideological stance toward his homeland proves unrealistic and in a sense undesirable for the diasporan. Zaat'ar becomes yet another location where Zohrap has established roots and a sense of allegiance. The locations continue to multiply while the sense of self continues to dwindle.

In essence, Berberian positions the Armenian diasporic subject as heir to the newly independent nation-state. No longer mythical, unreachable, or under foreign rule, Armenia as nation-state, finally allows room, albeit contested, for the diaspora.¹²⁷ Zohrap's mission to Zaat'ar addresses, somewhat pessimistically, the avenues of possibility available to the Armenian diaspora with regards to the homeland. This fictional experience raises several questions: Does the emergence of an internationally recognized nation-state, open or close avenues for the diaspora? Moreover, how do these changes affect the psyche of the diasporan along with his or her relationship to the homeland and the diaspora itself? Girard Libaridian tackles this issue in *The Challenge of Statehood: Armenian Political Thinking Since Independence*. Addressing the Armenian diaspora's reaction to the first presidential elections after independence, he writes:

The dismal showing of the ARF¹²⁸ candidate in the 1991 presidential elections

¹²⁶ [«Այստեղի կեանքին վարժուողին համար ուրիշ տեղ ապրիլը շատ դժուար է:»]

¹²⁷ For more on Armenian diaspora/homeland relations see Panossian, Razmik "Between Ambivalence and Intrusion: Politics and Identity in Armenia-Diaspora Relations" (1998).

¹²⁸ The ARF (Armenian Revolutionary Federation [Hai Heghapokhakan Dashnaktsutian]) is an Armenian political party established in 1890.

shattered the illusion—pervasive among party members and sympathizers—that all that the people of Armenia needed was the choice of an ARF candidate to return to the party to the leadership of the homeland. (141)

Explaining the consequent “hatred” of the diaspora toward Armenia, Libaridian continues:

In some respects, that hatred was directed at an Armenia and, by extension, at its people who had dared change the course of history on their own, without asking the Diaspora.... But it is not easy to battle the realities around that dilemma. How could the safety found in the Diaspora, the political certainty of an ideology, the emotional security of blind faith, and the un-challenging simplicity of an idealized homeland be supplanted by a real country whose people are poor and whose institutions are still being formed and tested by forces within and outside its control; whose men have fought battles and whose families have buried their men; whose women are battered by war, economy, and male chauvinism; whose artists, writers, and intellectuals now must struggle to make a living? How can reality fight fantasy, when fantasy is so removed and safe? (142)

Zaat’ar as allegory provides the space for engaging with these often times disillusionary ideas without fully tainting the image of homeland. The disillusionment Zohrap feels toward the country of Zaat’ar and his inability to be a productive member of society does not affect his sense of self. He does not become depressed by the problems of Zaat’ar; on the contrary, he is quite happy there. Although Zaat’ar’s reality parallels that of Armenia’s so convincingly, Zohrap disengages himself from it and only worries about his specific task as consul. Libaridian questions how reality can “fight fantasy, when fantasy is

so removed and safe.”; in the case of the text at hand, reality’s attempt to fight fantasy, removes one fantasy and puts another in its place.

People as Places

The issue of land, territory, and places of residence, come into play throughout the novel, not only when dealing with notions of “home,” “homeland,” as it relates to identity, but also with regards to various forms of personal relationships. The contentious relationship Berberian establishes between “place” and identity carries itself to the realm of the individual as well. The unreliability of places and spaces as markers of identity necessitate another attempt at identification, in this case by defining the self in relation to the Other. The disruption in the two main forms of identification, via place and the Other, lead Zohrap into further confusion and confirm the futility in attempts at identification for the diasporian. Furthermore, Tölölyan’s notion of the sedentary discussed earlier in the chapter, comes to mean something very interesting, in that all movement becomes sedentary, as all people and places become either the same or unreliable as markers of identity. The postmodern leanings exhibited through Zohrap’s realizations during his stay in Zaat’ar contradict with the more nationalistic tendencies inherent in the main character opening up further questions about diasporic nationalism and national identity.

Berberian uses several characters throughout *Letters from Zaat’ar* to help define the protagonist’s character. Zohrap is positioned against the Other in several instances, continuously attempting to identify himself against his companions. Zohrap’s infatuation with Nili, a non-Armenian coworker in Los Angeles, and Nakhshi, his non-Armenian neighbor in Zaat’ar, along with his friendships with Madame Veronica and Naelgatut reveal

who Zohrap's desires to be and how he actually sees himself. Zohrap's continuous unsettled nature and his inability to define himself against presumed Otherness breaks down another system of identification and questions the principle of nationalism and identity to which he has become accustomed.

Upon leaving Los Angeles for Zaat'ar, Zohrap reminisces about his relationship with his coworker Nili and becomes nervous about telling her about his upcoming departure. Their flirtatious relationship, which is later revealed to be a sexual affair, conveys Zohrap's dissatisfaction with what he calls his "petty bourgeois" life and subsequent early onset of a "mid-life-crisis." His attraction to Nili is accompanied by his bewilderment at how similar their lives are. Remarking about their daily mundane conversations, Zohrap states:

What bothered me the most was that Nili's answers were the same pathetic ones that I gave. 'We spent Thanksgiving at Alice's parents,' 'Shahan is a handful for his mother,' 'next week we're celebrating Nina's birthday.' Nili played house with her husband and children, I, with Alice and my little ones; unfortunately, it was there that I realized that there was no real difference between us. She, in her middle class, American home in Colorado, with her high school, and prom night and boyfriends, I, in the narrow, crowded streets of Dora, six people in a one bedroom apartment, with our youth group camps, and revolutionary songs, had reached the same place. Her cereal, hot dogs and hamburger, my vardapet ch'orpas soup, lēhmējun¹²⁹ and t'an¹³⁰ had become the same in the culture-gnawing flatness of Los Angeles, trapping us every

¹²⁹ Middle Eastern flatbread with minced meat and herb toppings.

¹³⁰ Middle eastern yogurt drink.

morning in the same building, with the same worries. (27-28).¹³¹

The significance of space and location to the diasporic consciousness is pronounced throughout the novel and directly through this particular passage. Even in interactions with lovers, coworkers, friends and family, space takes precedent in defining relationships and bonds between individuals. Zohrap's observations on his relationships tend to lend themselves back to the historical and geographical points that mark the people in his life. However, contrary to Zohrap's expectations, Nili's geographic "otherness" does not meet his expectations of difference. Yearning for a fantasy, an adventure that could possibly liberate him, at least temporarily, from his suffocating familial life, Zohrap is confronted with a mirror image of his own existence.

Upsetting Nili or even causing disorder in my own life for the sake of shaking her up a bit had become an itching obsession of mine. I wanted to draw a clear line mapping out the differences between us. (28)¹³²

Nili's "otherness" is embodied in her nationality as an American and her childhood experiences in Colorado. Zohrap specifies that Nili comes from an "American home in Colorado," he from an Armenian one in Lebanon. Americanness here is also associated with middle class comforts and pop cultural markers such as "high school, prom night, and

¹³¹ [Հիմնականին մէջ, հոգիս տակնուվրայ ընողը այն էր, որ Նիլիին տուված իմ պատասխաններս նոյն տեսակի խեղճ ու կրակ պատասխաններ էին. «Thanksgivingը Ալիսին ծնողքին տունը անցուցինք», «Շահանը մօրը շատ նեղութիւն կու տակոր», «գալ շաբաթ Նիւայիին տարեդարձը պիտի տօնենք»...: Նիլին իր ամուսինին եւ գաւակներուն հետ տուն-տունիկ կը խաղար, եւ՝ Ալիսին եւ իմ պգտիկերնուս հետ, եւ դժբախտութիւնը հոն էր, որ հետզհետէ կ'անդրադառնայի, որ իմ եւ իր միջեւ կիմնականին մէջ մեծ տարբերութիւն չկար: Ինքը՝ Քոլորադոյի իր միջին ամերիկեան անուշիկ տունով, կանաչ պարտէզով, հայ սֆուլով, փրամ նայթով, եւ պոյֆրէնտներով, եւ՝ Տորայի նեղ, խնդուած փողոցներով, վեց հոգիով մէկ ննջարանոց յարկաբաժինով, պատանեկան միութեան արշաւներով եւ յեղափոխական երգերով նոյն տեղը հասած էինք: Իր սիրելիքը, հար տակն ու հէմպըրլըրները, իմ վարդապետ շորպաս, լէհմէնուս եւ թանս նոյնացած էին Լոս Անճելէսի մշակոյթ կրծող տափակութեան մէջ, երկուսն ամէն առտու նոյն մտածողութիւններով նոյն շէնքին մէջ բանտարկելով:]

¹³² [Նիլին գայթակղեցնելը կամ առնուազն Նիլիին առջեւ իմ կեանքս տակնուվրայ ընելով զինք ցնցելու, իմ եւ իր միջեւ տարբերութիւնը յստակելու եւ մէջերնիս հաստ գիծ մը քաշելու մարմաջը մտասէւեռումի պէս բուն մը դարձու իմ համար:]

boyfriends.” Contrasting this, Zohrap reveals his own youth, implying a working class upbringing. Berberian’s usage of spaces as markers of identity extend to the living quarters of one’s home. Zohrap’s family’s “one bedroom apartment” is contrasted with Nili’s family’s middle class home. Personal, familial space becomes the microcosm of the national one. Space creates distinctions until those distinctions are blurred by Zohrap’s critique of Los Angeles as “culture-gnawing.” While this may initially seem like a response to a threat against an Armenian identity or culture, the text goes beyond this more clichéd relationship between the immigrant and national. It is not that Zohrap believes he has become an American, that he has assimilated per se, rather that he has succumbed to the ideological, in this case capitalistic, tenets that he had spoken against in the past. He states, “Nili’s presence every morning would put a knife through my self worth and dignity, constantly reminding me of the fact that, with my petty bourgeois lifestyle, I had come to embody everything that I’d fought against for years”(28).¹³³ Zohrap’s attraction to Nili is based on the presumed difference he is trying to locate within her. This difference is necessary for Zohrap to legitimize his own existence and the possibility of an affair between them provides a sense of adventure and passion that he is lacking in his life. Zohrap acts on these feelings in Los Angeles; however, the extent of Nili’s otherness proves insufficient to quell his anxieties. Zaat’ar, as the unknown (imaginary) country, provides both the distance and difference he needs to act out fantasies and feel satisfied. His relationship with Nakhshi, which will be discussed later in the chapter, positions Zaat’ar, again, as the location where desires are actualized on both a personal and national level.

¹³³ [Նիլիին ներկայութիւնը ամէն առտու դանակ կը խորէր իմ ինքնասիրութեան եւ արժանապատուութեան մէջ, մնայուն կերպով յիշեցնելով այն իրողութիւնը, որ ես իմ վերի պուրժուա կենցաղովս սկսած էի մարմնաւորել այն ամենը, որոնց դէմ տարիներով կռուած էի:]

Regardless of their differences in upbringing and history, Zohrap claims that Los Angeles has erased the cultural distinctions between Nili and himself. Los Angeles, as a city, as physical place, is blamed for the erasure of a presumed authentic cultural experience, in this case symbolized by food, cultural traditions, and general ways of life. Zohrap's desire to find himself through difference poses a conflict when he finds that the assumed differences between himself and Nili do not exist in their new "home" —Los Angeles.

Questions of authenticity and the lamenting of its loss in *Letters from Zaat'ar* place Zohrap between two diverging points of view contributing to his emotional crisis and his inability to locate a place for himself, both physically and psychologically. On the one hand, Zohrap is conscious of the lack of difference between himself as an Armenian and his respective Others. At the same time, he feels dejected at this realization. The critical description of Los Angeles as "culture gnawing" and "flat" renders a rejection of his home and signals a final grasp of a more conservative understanding of nationhood and culture. It is not that the authentic does not exist, rather that authenticity has been "gnawed at," destroyed, in this case, by Los Angeles, by capitalism. Yet, despite these longings for the authentic, the text somewhat unconsciously delves into the postmodern realm by inauthenticating its own characters.

The oftentimes cynical tone of the novel challenges the nationalist sentiments of its protagonist and his fellow Armenians. Nili, theoretically the opposite of Alice, ironically becomes her equal. Zohrap cannot release himself from his "Armenian" or "ethnic" world in the way that he wants as he realizes that all worlds are reduced to the same experience, but with different points of reference. Nili's American upbringing and Berberian's Middle Eastern one have brought them to the same place, literally, but psychologically as well. Both

essentially “play house.” They have failed the nuclear family with their insincerity and in a way the nuclear family has failed them emotionally and eliminated their grasp of self and identity.

Tölölyan notes the significance of “relations of difference” in how diasporic communities see themselves and their place in “host” countries:

Diasporicity manifests itself in relations of difference. The diasporic community sees itself linked to but different from those among whom it has settled; eventually, it also comes to see itself as powerfully linked to, but in some ways different from, the people in the homeland as well....When possible, diasporic communities seek integration and citizenship without assimilation. They do this by policing their own communal boundaries and encouraging endogamy and bilingualism, strict adherence to tradition, and displays of loyalty to old and new identities, however hybridized. (“The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies” 650)

The sense of adventure and difference that Zohrap cannot seem to locate in Los Angeles, he finds in Zaat’ar, where the opportunity for infidelity is presented shortly after his wife and children leave the country.¹³⁴ The text introduces the character of Nakhshi immediately after recounting Zohrap’s affair with Nilli. Nakhshi,¹³⁵ Zohrap’s neighbor,

¹³⁴ Although reluctant to move to Zaat’ar Alice is initially supportive of her husband’s efforts; however, after realizing that Zohrap does virtually nothing related to his post, she questions their presence in the country. The last straw comes when she and her children are infected with lice. Both she and her children have shaved their heads. She packs their bags and confronts Zohrap. Zohrap decides to remain behind while his family leaves the country.

¹³⁵ Nakhshi spelled backwards is Ishkhan, which means prince in Armenian and is a common Armenian name. All of the names given to Zaat’ar’s citizens are Armenian names or last names spelled backwards. Other than the name “Nairebeb,” the significance of the other reversed names are not clear, as their unaltered forms are

becomes the opportunity Zohrap has lost with Nili. Her husband has left Zaat'ar to work in Egypt and she makes herself available to Zohrap both emotionally and sexually. Her house is unkept, the smell of her cooking disgusts Zohrap, she does not enjoy reading—she is the opposite of Nili and Alice.

Nakhshi and Zohrap's initial meeting revolves around the Armenian flag, which hangs in front of the consulate building and is the main symbol distinguishing the building from the others. The consulate also serves as Zohrap's place of residence. We learn that Zohrap's wife had proudly and with "great detail" sewn this particular flag. The colors on the flag begin to fade and Zohrap has to find someone else to make a new flag. Nakhshi agrees to make a new flag at no expense and they subsequently become involved in a sexual affair.

Nakhshi replaces Zohrap's Armenian wife on both a personal and functional level. Zohrap maintains his "Armenianness" by serving as the consul and retaining the symbol of the Armenian flag on his doorstep; however, the creation of the Armenian flag now comes from a neutral, non-Armenian body capable of functioning culturally and personally. Zohrap's Armenian wife Alice and his neighbor Nakhshi essentially perform the same function, on a sexual and practical level, hence questioning both the authenticity of Alice's Armenianness and the concept of authenticity as whole.

The family unit, the microcosm of the Armenian nation, breaks down, initially with the departure of Alice and the children, and is further devaluated with the emergence of Nakhshi. The tri-colored Armenian flag, an emblem of Armenian nationhood, is essentially produced by a non-Armenian. The difference that Zohrap was searching for in order to

common.

solidify his own identity, is finally found. This difference, represented by Nakhshi, literally recreates his sense of identity, but ironically goes against the more traditional nationalist conception of selfhood in that it breaks down the idea of authenticity. Moreover, the text takes this breakdown of identity formation to the level of perversion by re-appropriating the visible symbol of national identity to delineate its failure. After a spontaneous sexual episode, Nakhshi inadvertently take the flag, which she has sewn and which Zohrap had carelessly thrown on the bed, and attempts to wipe the semen off Zohrap's body. Zohrap immediately snatches the flag away and throws it on the couch. The following day Zohrap lowers the old flag in order to raise the newly sewn one when he is approached by Nakhshi's daughter, Iruhi: "I held the ladder and Iruhi, wearing black shorts with white stains, climbed up and hung the new flag"(37).¹³⁶ Zohrap's concession of the flag to Nakhshi and their subsequent sexual encounter symbolizes an unconscious resignation of his duties as nation builder. As Nakhshi replaces Alice, Iruhi replaces Zohrap's children, Shahan and Nina. The stains on her clothes, mirroring Nakhshi's unkept house taints the idyllic purity of the Armenian family unit that Zohrap has essentially abandoned for the sake of nation. While the portrayal of Zohrap's "adopted" family may seem like a critique of this abandonment, the alternative, exemplified by the model diasporic family and life, seems damaging on a more personal level.

Eventually, Zohrap replaces *himself* with a non-Armenian further negating the concept of a finite ethnic authenticity and cultural purpose. After the political climate in Zaat'ar becomes too dangerous for foreigners to remain, Zohrap initiates his assistant

¹³⁶ [«Աստիճանը կը բռնեն ու Իրուհիը, վրան չորցած, սպիտակ բիծերով սեւ, կարն տաբատ մը հագած, վեր կը բարձրանայ ու նոր դրօշակը կը կախէ:»]

Naelgatut as caretaker of the Armenian Consulate in Zaat'ar, making the symbol of the flag the only thing "Armenian" left at the site. The arbitrariness of culture and representation and Zohrap's relatively nonchalant secession to Naelgatut raises questions about Berberian's approach to nationalism and nation building.

Naelgatut's and Nakhshi's new roles as ambassadors for Armenia echo Jean Baudrillard's theories on simulation and simulacra. In *Simulation and Simulacra*, Baudrillard aims to define and "theorize" contemporary culture, mostly centering his theory on commercialism and mass production; however, his reflections on the disappearance of the signifier and the defining power of the signified expand the application of his theory, allowing it to be used in culturally specific contexts as well. According to Baudrillard, the "precession of simulacra," is omnipresent in the post-modern era. It occurs when the model of a product or place come *before* the actual product or place, providing an accessible and easy way to reproduce in any desired amount. Modern forms of creation and production are not based on new and "natural" ideas, rather pre-existing models and forms. After a certain amount is created from one particular model, the original is either forgotten or can no longer be distinguished from its copies. Hence, when applied in a cultural context these reproducible symbols and "models" become important and accessible indicators of culture identity. (Baudrillard)

The lack of difference in Zohrap's world becomes an essential concept throughout *Letters from Zaat'ar*, as we see its eroding effect on the individual's perception of culture, ethnic identity, the concept of individuality and its subsequent affects on the human psyche. Stressing the importance of using binary opposites as a means of defining and distinguishing the real from the unreal, Baudrillard asserts that an individual defines himself according to

what he sees in *or* as the other. When the effects of simulation take place, he can no longer distinguish between himself and the other because he is “always already on the other side (Baudrillard 29).” He is both himself and the other as simulation takes the place of both the real and the copy. The question is not whether Naelgatut, Nakhshi or even Nilli are “real” or merely “copies” of the Armenian subject, but whether there is a difference between these two concepts at all. Zohrap was sent to Zaat’ar to serve specifically as an Armenian consul, however, the futile and the easily replaceable nature of his post suggests the lack of meaning and purpose in the individual and the essential similarity between the Naelgatut and Zohrap. Similarly, Nakshi’s ability to replicate the flag and Zohrap’s willingness to let her do so further negate Alice’s role in preserving/creating the nation.

Ironically, the similarities that Zohrap sees between his coworker Nilli and Alice are replicated in Zaat’ar, the space where he initially finds the difference he is looking for. Zaat’ar’s existence, as imaginary, further reiterates the inability to escape the lack of difference as Zohrap is incapable of escaping “sameness,” even in his imagination.

Berberian’s narrative suggests that anyone can perform any given function, thus eroding specific forms of cultural production as identity forming acts; however, the attempt to locate new means of production do not stop. Despite its cynical and oftentimes somber tone, the text allocates room for the search for identity; this search in essence becomes the core of the identity. Zohrap’s mental breakdown and his lackluster recovery at the end of the novel neither propose a resolution to his problems nor a defeatist attitude towards it. At the end of the novel, Zohrap is back at work. Passing a bulletin board he sees an announcement that reads: “Newly formed company, with hopes of expansion, looking for architects to work

in the Republic of Gardenia, South America. Please call if interested (242).”¹³⁷ The novel ends with Zohrap removing the announcement from the board and placing it in his pocket. The protagonist’s presumed decision to apply for the job, and leave Los Angeles again signals yet another attempt at escape and self-discovery.

The Case of Language, the Space of Language

As the novel rules out most forms of national identification as unreliable and fleeting, language becomes the only concrete factor when determining difference and identity. During his stay in Zaat’ar, Zohrap is working on a novel in Armenian. He candidly acknowledges his use of language as a fixed means of identifying as an Armenian and simultaneously hints at the shortcomings in doing so. In a conversation with Madame Veronica, a French national living in Zaat’ar, we see a direct exchange about writing and choice of language. Madame Veronica inquires as to which language Zohrap has decided to write his novel. Zohrap responds that he is writing in Armenian. The conversation ensues:

‘Do you have a large audience?’

‘Usually, a thousand copies get published, from which 200 will be sold, another 200 will go to relatives and friends, and the rest will be put into boxes in the garage and gather dust.’

‘Why don’t you write in English?’

‘The moment I begin writing in English, I think I’ll feel defeated, and convinced that the Armenian language will cease to exist, will have no use in

¹³⁷ [«Նորակազմ, ընդարձակուելու մեծ յույսեր ունեցող ընկերություն մը, հարտարապետներ կը փնտռէ Հարաւային Ամերիկեան Կարտինիա Հանրապետութեան մէջ աշխատելու համար: Հետաքրքրուողներէն կը խնդրուի հեռաձայնել...»]

the diaspora. I still can't come to terms with that idea.'

'It seems like writing in Armenian is like opening a consulate in Zaat'ar'.

There wasn't a hint of irony in Madam Veronica's tone. (68-69)¹³⁸

Zohrap makes a conscious decision to write in Armenian, and his conversation with Madame Veronica assumes that he does have the ability to write in English, but chooses not to. His concern over being "defeated" is significant in its suggestion of a struggle taking place in the diaspora and the assumption that he has yet to be defeated. Writing in English for Zohrap becomes one step in further erasing the cultural markers that both burden him and are of great importance. Here, again, we see a shift away from a completely fatalist vision of culture and identity. While not completely optimistic, the novel grasps at some sense of identity, however limited. Language becomes the difference that Zohrap is looking for, the erasure of which slows down because of Zohrap's connection with the Armenian language, which becomes, the only concrete marker of Armenianness.

Madam Veronica equates his usage of the Armenian language with his decision to become the Armenian representative in Zaat'ar, a job that really serves no productive purpose and is a means of Zohrap dealing with his Armenian identity and his sense of obligation to his culture and people. This parallel devalues Zohrap's attempts at identification and self-fulfillment but reaffirms his act of identifying through his search for identity. The process of identification, in this case, writing in Armenian, becomes his identity.

¹³⁸

[«Բաւական ընթերցող ունի՞ս:»

«Հազար տպաճանակ, որուն 200ը հաւանաբար պիտի ծախուի, ուրիշ 200 մըն ալ նուէր պիտի երթայ բարեկամներու եւ ծանոթներու, իսկ մնացեալը տուփերու մէջ, կարածը պիտի հավաքէ:»

«Անգլերէն ինչու՞ չես գրեր:»

«Այն վայրկեանին, որ անգլերէն գրելու սկսիմ, կարծեմ այլեւս պէտք է ինքզինքս պարտուած համարեմ եւ համոզուած ըլլամ, որ հայերէն լեզուն այլեւս վերջացած է, անգործածելի դարձած է սփիւռքի մէջ: Տակաւին չեմ կրցած ատոր հաշտուիլ:»

«Կ'երեւի հայերէն գրելը Չաաթարի մէջ հայկական հիւպատոսարան բանալու պէս բան մըն է:» Մատան Վերոնիքին ձայնին մէջ հեզմանք չկայ:]

Furthermore, Zohrap's assertion that only about four hundred people will actually read his novel, admits to the fact that his endeavors, both as a writer and an Armenian, are limited, almost obsolete. Language here becomes a carrier of identity, of responsibility. It is both a weight and simultaneously a relief, in that it limits readership, hence, possible recognition yet provides a means of sustaining or creating culture for a respectively smaller community of people. Identification in this case becomes concretely linked to accountability and responsibility. Writing in Armenian becomes a failed attempt at being accountable to multiple locations simultaneously, yet an attempt nonetheless.

The attempt at writing a novel in Armenian is not without its own limitations. In a series of unanswered letters to Hakob, a friend in Los Angeles, Zohrap writes: "I am not going to write any more letters until I receive one from you. I'm sure that not writing letters will allow me to finally work on my novel" (103).¹³⁹ The process of writing becomes a difficult, even burdensome feat that, although necessary according to Zohrap, for his own well being, like many of his other attempts at self-expression and identification, proves challenging. He continues:

Hakob, I feel that every artist should take the role of a soldier in order for the work to have a soul. You need to get to a point where you'll explode if you don't get out what you need to say. You need to say it, even if you know that the queen can have you killed for it...Every artist has a ton of secrets hidden in his soul and can at any time play with death. The important part is

¹³⁹ [«Այլևս նամակ պիտի չգրեմ, առնուազն մինչև որ նամակ մը ստանամ: Վստահ եմ, որ նամակ չգրելուս սովոր կը ստեղծե, որ վերջապէս վէպիս վրայ աշխատիմ:»]

unloading it. (103-104)¹⁴⁰

The text's link between writer and soldier suggests a struggle inherent in the writing process and a larger cause for which the writer is fighting. Based on the core themes in *Letters from Zaat' ar*, with the heavy emphasis on the sudden emergence of an independent Armenian Republic, the text posits the Armenian writer as soldier—not necessarily of the Armenian state, but for the well being of the nation it represents. Zohrap's difficulty with regards to writing his novel, signals according to his own views on the role of the intellectual, a failure to contribute to the welfare of his nation.

Conclusion

In *Letters from Zaat' ar*, the burdens of nation(s), history, family and social expectations, and the ambiguous nature of one's relationship to these facets of life generate a constant pursuit for clarity and emotional well-being. In another letter to Hakob, Zohrap relays his overall frustrations along with his reasons for staying in Zaat' ar. He writes:

Hakob, it seems that you are still not convinced that my staying here in these conditions is the right decision. It is also apparent in your letter that nothing much has changed on the other side of the ocean, that the same pointless running around is taking place. Of course, the constant hustle exists here too, but people here don't live that same lie, that by running around they're

¹⁴⁰ [«Յուր, կարծեմ ամէն արուեստագէտ պէտք է այդ զինուորին վիճակին մէջ մտնէ, որպէսզի իր արուեստը հոգի ունենայ: Պէտք է տեղ մը հասնի, որ այլևս պիտի ճարխու եթէ ըսելիքդ մէջդ պահես: Պիտի ըսես, նոյնիսկ եթէ գիտնաս, որ թագուհին կրնայ սպաննելու տալ քեզի: . . . Ամէն արուեստագէտ թո՛ղ զազտնիք ունի պահած իր հոգիին խորքը եւ որեւէ ատեն կրնայ մահուան հետ խաղալ: Կարեւորը սխալեմը պարպելն է:»]

actually going to get somewhere. (182)¹⁴¹

The issue of space is raised once again as Zohrap makes a claim for Zaat'ar and directly compares it to Los Angeles, where his friends and family want him to return. Zohrap is attaching his lack of success, his inability to find peace, and essentially his inability to fulfill his obligation to his "nation," Armenia, to Los Angeles, specifically. Los Angeles in this case, does not deliver on its promise of success, at least to Zohrap. He becomes the antithesis of the American dream-- the failed actor, the architect unable to create a homeland outside of the homeland. The lie Zohrap refers to is essentially the myth of success and prosperity in the United States. What becomes important here is the broadness of the essential elements of the myth. Success and prosperity, often defined in economic terms, have become a reality for both Zohrap and a majority of the Armenian diaspora in the United States. In these terms, Zohrap and his family have created an ideal life in the United States. Zohrap is an employed architect, his wife, a teacher at an Armenian private school. They have two children, a house, and a supportive network of family and friends. Zohrap's continued dissatisfaction, despite his established success, points to core matter of the diasporic question. Standard accepted notions of success in the host country do not lead to personal gratification and diasporic ideas of successful. Cultural integration, financial well-being, and a stable family, while very important, do not complete the diasporan's idea of the ideal exilic existence.

The text begins with Zohrap accepting the position of Armenian consul in Zaat'ar. Zaat'ar becomes the focus of the book, the center to a certain extent and the space from which Zohrap confronts and negotiates with different elements of his national and personal

¹⁴¹ [Յովոր, այնպէս կ'երեւի, որ տակաւին համոզուած չես, որ իմ հոս մնալը այս պայմաններու տակ լաւագոյն ընտրութիւնն է: Նամակէդ յայտնի է նաեւ, որ ովկիանոսին միւս կողմը շատ բան չէ փոխուած ու նոյն աննպատակ վազվզուքը կը շարունակուի: Անշուշտ հոս ալ վազվզուք կա, բայց հոս մարդիկ առնուազն այդ խաբկանքը չեն ապրիր, որ վազելով տեղ մը պիտի կարենան հասնիլ:]

identity. Because Zaat'ar's existence is a fictitious one, its position as the center for negotiation substantiates the actual lack of a "center" in Armenian diasporic consciousness. Zaat'ar thus becomes the allegorical territory for the nation as a whole, functioning at times as the diaspora, at times as Armenia proper, and always as a center of negotiation.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the relationship between geographic and imagined spaces and diasporic identity through the literary texts of three prominent Armenian diaspora writers, Hakob Karapents, Vahé Oshagan, and Vahe Berberian. The introduction to the dissertation provides an overview of the contemporary debates surrounding the now broad use of the term “diaspora,” which has increasingly been used to classify a wide range of dispersed populations living outside their places of origin. One of the key features being debated is the degree to which the dispersed community’s relationship to the homeland should play a role in its classification as diasporic, and whether the homeland as physical space, as opposed to an imagined community, should be considered central to the defining of diasporas.

My readings of the fictional works of Armenian diaspora writers alongside various critical examinations of the links between physical space and the formation of identity have attempted to elaborate and add to the discourse of diaspora theory in several ways. The Armenian diaspora, falls under the “traditional” or “classic” category of diasporas and as such its relationship to the homeland, by definition, should be rather straightforward. My readings of the texts by Karapents, Oshagan, and Berberian, confirm the strong connection between the Armenian diaspora and the homeland, while at the same time complicating that connection by revealing subsequent layers of physical spaces that demand attention and allegiance from the diasporan. This dissertation has examined the complexities that arise when allegiance to one space as homeland become multiplied through the realities of numerous relocations, both forced and voluntary.

In Chapter One, my reading of Hakob Karapents' novel, *Adam's Book* exhibited the power of national narratives in shaping an individual's connection with culturally significant locations. Examining the impact of Raffi's novel *The Madman* on Karapents' protagonist, Adam Nurian, this chapter foregrounded the ways in which physical lands can obtain mystical and powerful significance through narrative. The pull of homeland becomes amplified, when narrative, experience, and political realities create multiple sites of belonging. The chapter argued that diasporic identity, as reflected in *Adam's Book*, become embedded within the character's personal mediations related to those spaces.

Chapter Two proposed an expanded view on the term exile through readings of Vahe Oshagan's poem "Alarm," and novella, "The Unction." Using Edward Said's more conceptual definition of exile, which positions the intellectual "at odds" with his society as "exiled," I argued that Oshagan, while writing forms of exile throughout his works, also becomes exiled from his own diasporic community. The chapter examined Oshagan's attempt at reterritorializing and redefining the role of the Armenian Church via his characters' attacks in the church itself and through the language with which Oshagan writes that attack. The homeland, represented here by the structure of the church, becomes attacked, questioned, and placed in an ideological realm.

Focusing on Vahe Berberian's novel *Letters from Zaat'ar*, Chapter Three explored the impact of the independence of the Republic of Armenia on diasporic consciousness. The independence of the former Soviet Armenia added a physical space internationally recognized as the State of Armenia and its independence allowed for a return to a space which designated itself as the homeland of all Armenians. In Berberian's text, this

authorization is met with hesitation and a form of compromise on behalf of the novel's protagonist, Zohrab Anmahuni. The chapter argued that the desire to return to the homeland, while theoretically ingrained within the psyche of the diasporan is thwarted by the realities within new geographic spaces. The engrained desire, however hypothetical, along with the constant efforts to appease that desire, remain the oppressing markers of diasporic identity.

This dissertation introduces an important group of Armenian writers from the diaspora, not hitherto studied, into the sphere of diaspora studies. Karapents, Oshagan, and Berberian provide valuable insights into the diasporic experience as their texts outline in depth the historical and psychological complexities of diasporic peoples. The fictional works discussed in the dissertation allow for a nuanced examination of the possible ways in which diasporic communities view, construct, and interact with the idea of homeland. The literary realm enables further interpretations of space, identity, and belonging that transcend the literal and expand our view of diasporic realities.

Appendix – Table 1

TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM

The transliteration system for Armenian used in *JSAS* is a scheme adapted for desk-top publishing from the Library of Congress's *Cataloging Service, Bulletin* 121, Spring 1977. It is based on the phonetic values of Classical and Eastern Armenian.¹

Ա	ա	A	a	Ն	ն	N	n
Բ	բ	B	b [P p] ¹	Շ	շ	Sh	sh ⁴
Գ	գ	G	g [K k] ¹	Ո	ո	O	o
Դ	դ	D	d [T t] ¹	Չ	չ	Ch ⁴	ch ⁴
Ե	ե	E	e	Պ	պ	P	p [B b] ¹
		Y	y ³	Ջ	ջ	J	j [Ch ch] ¹
Զ	զ	Z	z	Ռ	ր	Ř	ř ⁶
Է	է	Ē	ē	Ս	ս	S	s
Ը	ը	Ě	ě	Վ	վ	V	v
Թ	թ	T ⁴	t ⁴	Տ	տ	T	t [D d] ¹
Ժ	ժ	Zh	zh ⁴	Ր	ր	R	r
Ի	ի	I	i	Յ	յ	Ts ⁴	ts ⁴
Լ	լ	L	l	Ի	ի	W	w
Խ	խ	Kh	kh ⁴	ՈՒ	ու	U	u
Մ	մ	Ts	ts ⁴ [Dz dz] ^{1,4}	Փ	փ	P ⁴	p ⁴
Կ	կ	K	k [G g] ^{1,4}	Թ	թ	K ⁴	k ⁴
Հ	հ	H	h	ԵՎ	և	Ew	ew
				Լ	և		in Classical orthography
Ջ	ճ	Dz	dz ⁴ [Ts ts] ^{1,4}	ԵՎ	և	Ev	ev
Ղ	ղ	Gh	gh ⁴	Լ	և		in Reformed orthography
Շ	ժ	Ch	ch [J j] ¹				
Մ	մ	M	m	Օ	օ	Ö	ö
Յ	յ	Y	y ⁵	Ֆ	ֆ	F	f
		H	h				

1) The variant phonetic values of Western Armenian are included in brackets but are intended solely for use in preparing references from Western Armenian forms of names when this may be desirable.

2) Armenian names ending in *աւո* (in Classical orthography) or *աւ* (in Reformed orthography) may be romanized -ian, save for Armenians in Armenia and the other successor states of the Soviet Union. In that case, those names may be romanized -yan, save for common conventions such as Ter Petrossian.

3) This value is only used when the letter is in the initial position of a name and followed by a vowel in Classical orthography.

4) The acute accent is placed between the letters representing two different sounds when the combination might otherwise be read as a diagraph (e.g. *Դ՛զնունի* D'znuni).

5) This value is used when the letter is in the initial position of a word or of a stem in a compound in Classical orthography.

6) This derivation from the Library of Congress scheme was necessitated by the needs of desktop publishing.

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