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LIFELINES: MATRILINEAL NARRATIVES, MEMORY AND IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This inquiry explores matrilineal autobiographical narratives in the contexts of family stories and memories. This self-study traces the stories of a collective of five women of a common Armenian heritage, who represent various generational, homeland and diasporic portraits and experiences. Carrying the burden of being descendants of genocide survivors, the memories we reconstruct and interpret deal with issues of inherited exile, dispossession, loss, trauma, survival and healing. In exploring these narratives, I engage in self-reflexivity as we construct, re-construct, re-present our narratives and their impact on our constructions and negotiations of self and identity.

I use the family album metaphor as a foundation for my narrative framework and weave together the participants' and my autobiographical reconstructions through the intertwined stories of memory, trauma and displacement. The self-reflexive nature of our multilayered autobiographical narratives reconnects our selves with our pasts. Within a diasporic frame, I use the narratives as interpretive tools to explore the effects of multigenerational diasporic experiences on constructions of identity and agency.

The relationships we develop using face-to-face group conversations, virtual discussions through a Web forum and emails, personal reflexive journals, photo props and collaged images, highlight a dialogic process of imagined possibilities for the transformative power of storying. The autobiographical inquiry bridges voice to self and self to voice. This authoring process is an essential medium to writing ourselves as women. The process also allows us to reclaim our vulnerabilities as sources of inner strength and to embrace this understanding as the locus of writing.
RÉSUMÉ

Cette enquête explore des narrations autobiographiques matri-linéales dans les contextes d'histoires familiales et de mémoires. Cette étude de soi trace les histoires d'un collectif de cinq femmes d'un héritage arménien commun, représentant des portraits et expériences différents sur le plan générationnel, tout comme au niveau des pays d'origine et diasporiques. Portant le fardeau d'être des descendants de survivants de génocide, les mémoires que nous reconstruisons et interprétons traitent de questions d'exilé hérité, de dépouillement, de perte, de traumatisme, de survie et de guérison. En explorant ces narrations, je m'engage dans un processus d'autoréflexivité pendant que nous construisons, re-construisons, re-présentons nos narrations et leur impact sur nos constructions et négociations de soi et d'identité.

J'utilise la métaphore de l'album familial comme fondation pour mon cadre narratif et tisse ensemble mes reconstructions autobiographiques et celles de mes participantes à travers des histoires entremêlées de mémoire, de traumatisme et de déplacement. La nature autoréflexive de nos narrations autobiographiques à multiples couches, nous permet de nous raccorder avec nos passés. À l'intérieur d'un cadre diasporique, j'utilise les narrations comme outils d'interprétation pour explorer les effets des expériences diasporiques multi-générationnelles sur les constructions d'identité et d'agentivité.

Les relations que nous développons à travers nos conversations collectives face à face, nos discussions virtuelles sur forum Web ou courriels, nos journaux réflexifs personnels, nos supports photos et collages, soulignent le processus dialogique de possibilités imaginées pour le pouvoir transformatif de la création d'histoires. L'enquête autobiographique crée un rapprochement entre la voix et le soi, entre le soi et la voix. Ce processus d'auteur est un medium essentiel pour notre écriture de soi en tant que femmes. Le processus nous permet également le réclamer nos vulnérabilités comme sources de force intérieur et d'embrasser cette compréhension comme zone de création d'écrits.
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Finally, a heartfelt thanks to my partner Tigran for patiently witnessing this long journey — Մերցի շում, դու եմ տեսնում եմ. Մեր երգավորությունները... 

This work is dedicated to Arsenouhi, Tefarig, Isgouhi, Anoush, Zohra, Lousya, Azniv, Pergrouhi, Maria, Azad, Nouritza, Sarah, Elisabeth, Anahid, Azniv, Payloun, Laura, Francesca, Michella, Sofia, Zabel, Siranoush, Karine, Anahit, Hasmik, Victoria — my mother and all the mothers, grandmothers, great grandmothers, aunts and great aunts whose voices reverberate through these pages. It is their stories and memories that have shaped this work.
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LIFELINES:
MATRILINEAL NARRATIVES,
MEMORY AND
IDENTITY
"The mark of a good woman," used to say my grandmother Zohra, "is how she hangs her laundry."

I was ten when my paternal grandmother Zohra came to live with us. She was a petite, headstrong woman, hardened and somewhat embittered from her lot in life. When she moved in with us, she was quick in establishing her authority as supreme matriarch over what she deemed as the two most important realms in our house – the kitchen and the laundry room. A smart woman, before long she realized she had to share her command in the kitchen with my mother. However, under no circumstances would she relinquish her role as woman-in-chief of the laundry room.

Doing laundry and managing the weekly wash of clothes and linens was quite the elaborate ordeal in my childhood days. Laundry rooms almost always doubled as bathrooms in Beirut houses. We were lucky to have two in our house, so that one could be consecrated completely to this most important of household tasks. In one corner stood a tall metal cauldron-like structure, the quintessential linen boiler, every self-respecting Beirut household had to own. Ours worked on propane gas. I can still see the bubbles of the boiling water, my grandmother Zohra picking the piles of bed linens from a wash basin with wooden boiler tongs and gently setting them in the boiler, the smell of soap bubbles and steam rushing through my nostrils, and I longing so much to be given the privilege of stirring the wash in the boiler with those oversized pincers, with the full force of my tiny arms. "Step away, step away," my grandmother's voice
would alert me, as she picked up the dripping hot linens from the boiler with the tongs and in a sweeping circular motion dropped them into the washer in the other corner of the room. Almost always sizzling hot droplets of water would singe my bare feet, but I would still not budge from my spot in the doorway of the bathroom. There was too much fun to be had in standing barefooted in soapy water all around, steam enveloping the body, watching clothes spinning furiously first left then right, with water gushing out of the washing machine with every feverish wring of the spinning wheel. When the cycle died down as abruptly as it had started, my grandmother lifted the soaking clothes into the spinner, where they would spin spin spin frantically, until all water was squeezed out. Then in would go my grandmother’s hand again, against the porous walls of the spinner to uncling the clothes that had stuck on its walls with full force. She would place them neatly in piles in the wash tub, ready to go to the balcony to be hung in equally neat rows. This is where my real lesson in life would start.

Almost all apartments in Beirut were wrapped with balconies on all sides. The laundry lines, which were metal or plastic wires, hung from two parallel metal rods and were adjusted usually to the balcony railings on the kitchen side of the house. Thus, the laundry would be hung away from prying eyes on the street, usually facing other kitchen side balconies of neighbouring buildings. My grandmother seemed to have a silent pact with the weather, especially during the rainy days of winter, when there would be strategic sunshine breaks during the day, to enable her to pace the various cycles of boiling, washing and spinning with hanging the laundry to dry in a timely fashion. And so, the wash tub arrived on the balcony, with me in tow, eager to discover the secret of those hanging lines. “No one is to see from outside what goes on inside your house,”
expounded grandma Zohra, as she passed a damp cloth on the laundry rails with one skillful stroke. This is the equivalent of how not to hang your dirty linen in public for all to see, I am to understand later, as I revisit these laundry hanging episodes in my memory.

“First you hang the bed linen on the line furthest away from you. Make sure to hang like colours with each other. Whites with whites, coloured ones, progressively in their shades. Never, never mix colours and whites. And use the laundry pegs economically. Three pegs for two pieces, so that each laundry piece is attached to the other. It would look so much better and neater from the outside. Make sure that when you take out the piece from the tub, you first unfold it right outside the rails, then flap it, stretch it, stretch it, stretch it, then flap it again. That way you even out the creases and it will be less work when ironing. See, how I’m doing it? Now you fasten the pegs. Hand me that next bed sheet.”

I watched with eyes open as the sheets stretched out under her puny arms, one neatly next to the other. Her all-white sheets, then my colourful and flowery quilt covers. I loved how the wind waved my green and yellow flowers in the sun.

“Once you have created this linen wall with the sheets, you can now hang the rest of your wash with ease of mind. You know no one will be able to see the rest of your laundry. Now hand me the pillow cases and towels,” her voice commanded.

I can see, no one will be able to see our shirts and pants and dresses and socks and stockings and underwear. No one will be able to penetrate the innermost secrets of our family.
"Now it is the turn of the pants. Hang them inside out, so the pockets can dry easily. The shirts, you have to flap and stretch them out well, then hang them bottom up. Don’t forget, three pegs for each two shirts. Same as the sheets. And don’t forget not to mix the colours here as well. First the white shirts, then the coloured ones, in progression of shades. Now we’re ready for those undershirts. Have you flapped them well? You can hang those either from the shoulder straps or right under the arms, or even bottom up from the waist. If you hang them bottom up, you can use three pegs instead of four. And they will make yet another steady cover wall for what’s to come next. Yes, now you can finally hang the underwear, almost on your last laundry line, together with the socks and stockings. Make sure you hang the sock pairs together, right next to each other. We don’t want to go looking for pairs when we’re folding them."

I watched silently, making frantic notes in my head. As I rarely did other chores in the house, I came to enjoy this new learned task. It became one of my early lessons in aesthetics – watching out for matching colours and shapes, striving for that perfect line. On days when there was a particularly big wash, all three generations of women in our family, my grandmother, my mother and myself, would be on the kitchen balcony, hanging the laundry together, chatting and laughing, my mother and grandmother complementing me on a neatly hung piece of clothing, or showing me the tricks of the trade in flapping, stretching and hanging. Reaching out to the furthest lines for the sheets were always the most difficult for me. My mother would take care of those and leave me the closer lines. My grandmother on the other hand, eager never to lose a teaching opportunity, would comment on the rights and wrongs of wash and laundry, pointing out live examples of each in the neighbours’ laundry lines. It was thus that I learned to gaze at clotheslines closely, watching
them transform into lifelines, trying to guess and imagine personality types, likes, dislikes, even inklings of family stories or "secrets", especially if they were left dancing out in the wind, without the protective barricade of sheets and quilt covers.

My grandmother's favorite example of the epitome of laundryhood was in our adjacent building. She often wondered how the young housewife with two young children, managed to have impeccable laundry lines in an almost daily frequency, the wash hanging in perfectly symmetrical straight lines, shining brilliantly white under the sun. Those were during the difficult days of the war years in Beirut, with daily electricity and water shortages. Surely, this young housewife would have to be the best womanhood could offer, if her laundry was a gateway to her self. Yet, tragedy reigned in that household in the form of a gambling and alcoholic husband and signs of ongoing domestic violence. The laundry line had become her only control, her only hold on life. That is how I came to understand that clotheslines can also hide as much as tell the stories of our lives.

Laundry lines also bore witness to survival and defiance. My maternal grandparents lived in close proximity, in the apartment below us. My maternal grandmother Tefarig hung her laundry on their verandah, on clotheslines that were stretched higher up, from wall to wall, instead of the usual rods on the balcony railing. Hanging the wash there meant a strenuous exercise for your neck and arm muscles. One calm sunny afternoon, while my grandmother Tefarig was busy fastening the laundry pegs on a wet nightdress, three shells landed in instant succession in the courtyard across the street. My grandmother's arms stayed frozen upright as her ears were filled with a stinging noise. A few minutes after the
clamour in the street had died down, we were all hovering over my shocked grandmother. She kept looking at us bewildered.

"What are you saying? I can't understand you. I can't hear you. Why are you talking in muted voices? There is a din in my ears. I can't hear you. My head feels hot. I left the wash on the balcony. It's all wet. I was hanging my nightdress. Girl, go and put the laundry pegs. Bring the tub in. It was very hot outside. I could feel it in my hair."

She brushed her thick grayed hair with one sweep still giving us a confused look. And all we wanted to do was hug and cuddle her. My mom went out on the verandah to do as her mother asked and came back in almost immediately, laughing, my grandmother's nightdress in her hands. It had a big gaping hole right above where my grandmother's head must have reached while hanging it. Grandmother Tefarig was surely born under a lucky star for not being taller, or else the shell shrapnel piercing her nightgown would have lodged in her forehead, instead of brushing her hair and hitting the wall behind. The laughter rang out louder in the sitting room. My grandmother was alive; the only victim on that hot day on our street was her nightgown.

In those same war years, my mother perfected the act of laundry hanging and took it to new heights. Every time the sound of shells would fill the hours of the day without warning, she would resort to unexpected washing bouts, even though it would not be the designated laundry day of the week. My grandmother Zohra would look forgivingly at those transgressions. She understood the deep urge that led to them. Just as calmly and serenely my mother would then walk out onto the balcony and hang the clothes, without haste, with precision and a sharp eye to
colours and straight lines. Her defiant act of normalcy was her guardian shield against the madness of destruction around us.

My mother's and grandmothers' laundry lines flutter in my memory now, stretching out as a lifeline across generations, carrying the seeds of stories in the wind.
Chapter One

FIVE FOR THE ROAD:
ONCE THERE WAS AND THERE WAS NOT

DRAWING A ROADMAP

*In the slow practice of writing, I have fought with my
demons and obsessions, I have explored the corners of
memory. (Allende, 2003, p. 197)*

This dissertation looks at matrilineal autobiographical narratives as they
appear in the contexts of family stories and memories. The term
matrilineal is taken in a broader sense, not a strict biological one, to
denote the stories of great grandmothers, grandmothers, mothers,
daughters, and granddaughters. In looking at these narratives, a few
major issues arise, mostly centering on memory: How do we re-construct
and interpret our memories? How much of what we remember,
especially of childhood memories and stories heard at an early age, are
also partly imagined? What impact do the generational stories heard in
childhood and remembered have on our constructions and negotiations
of identity? These questions will accompany the journey of readers
throughout these pages.
I keep an old black and white photograph of our family on my desk. Beirut, summer, on a beach. A jubilant mom and dad (I did a small experiment recently. I took out old photos at random. In each and everyone my parents are there, they both have big radiant smiles. There is so much happiness in them, between them.) My brother maybe seven or eight years old, holding a beach ball; and myself in my favorite place, in dad's arms, barely two, in the swimming suit my paternal grandma Zohra has sown for me. I look at the photo from a 43-year aperture. I gaze at myself. I am the child. The child with the wide eyes, with the wet blonde hair, next to the sea, staring at the camera, staring at me looking at her forty-three years later. My hand over dad's arm, nestling in between his knee and arm, looking a bit bewildered, half smiling, inheritor of oh so many of my dad's stories. Where is my birth? Where is the inheritor of my and our stories, the child with the bewildered eyes?
Thinking back, I have always attempted to understand the anatomy of pain. As a child I used to walk and bump into walls all the time. I still do. And I had so many bruises everywhere. I would always be told, "What is this? Have you just come back from Vietnam?" It was an ironic twist, of course, one I did not comprehend at the time. I never knew or understood what Vietnam was then. Needless to say, I got my own taste of a warzone not much later afterwards. I remember that the child I was, was mesmerized by the bluish-yellow marks. I would press my little fingers closely on the bruise trying to understand the pain. When you push your fingers hard on a bruise, the yellow-blue marks disappear, the skin becomes kind of white, because the blood stops flowing and at a certain threshold the pain also disappears. My theory was that instead of waiting for days for the bruise to become yellow, then blue, then purple, and have prolonged pain, I would induce all the pain I could, even if it was unbearable, for a short time but then it would disappear. I would confront the pain on my terms. And I would control it... This attitude has stayed with me over the years. The only difference is that it has travelled from the physical to the emotional plane. That is how it was as well in my experiences with recording survivor stories. I had to confront the loss and the pain early on. I had to try to understand it. So it would not overwhelm me. Through it, I would also try to understand all the other personal losses, my grandparents', my father's, and also confront my decisions in life. Who I am, where I am going, why I have chosen this path. And then of course there is the inevitable question of lifelines. I am after all stopping a biological line at a point in time. Am I really halting it? Am I fine with that decision? There will be no relationship of a bloodline coming after me. Am I comfortable with it? What about all these memories and stories? Where will the lifeline end? And who will come to visit me in my old age? Who will I tell my stories to?
This dissertation is also about the exploration of pain. Charting the narratives of my participants and myself, inevitably meant dealing with stories of inherited exile, dispossession, loss, trauma and survival. Of Armenian heritage, we all carry the burden of being descendants of genocide survivors. The 1915 genocide of Armenians has left deep scars we still collectively and individually struggle to reconcile with. The reconstruction and re-telling of our generational matrilineal autobiographical narratives is also an attempt at healing and coming to terms with the often indescribable experiences of our grandparents' or great grandparents' generation.

Over the course of roughly two years between very late 2003-early 2004 and mid 2006, a small collective of four women and myself met around my dining room table to tell our stories and engage in prolonged discussions. In between our meetings, we carried the circle of our conversations on to the digital space, through emails and an online forum. In listening to one another and narrating our lives we inevitably ended up creating the story of our unique circle, our own Collective. These textual pages tell the many layers of our intertwined stories. Within the text, all face-to-face discussions are referred to as "Collective discussions", the virtual forum postings as "Web posts", the email exchanges as "Collective logs" and the individual participant journals as "reflexive logs."

Reflecting on the role of the authenticity of the researcher became a catalyst in helping me choose narrative inquiry to provide a fluid structure to the multilayered stories unfolding in this text. I came to realize that I had to explore my own researcher situatedness in order to better comprehend my embeddedness in my research interests and the root causes of my personal stance on issues of literacy and identity accompanying me from an earlier educational research trajectory. Doing
so became key to understand myself and my subjectivity. I found that I was best able to do this through narrative inquiry. Researcher subjectivity and positionality "lie at the heart of narrative research" (Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou, p. 12). Self-reflexivity, a rigorous peeling away of the layers of the self and constant questioning of perceptions, is a key tool to explore researcher subjectivity. At the same time, engaging in narrative inquiry necessitates a tolerance of ambiguity, for there are "no automatic starting or finishing points" in narrative research (Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou, 2008, p. 1). It is a process of meaning-making that is focused on an understanding of a dynamic, transformative "becoming" rather than a static "being."

Understanding my story by actually retelling it made sense for me. The act of narrating, telling and re-telling the stories of our life experiences carries a deep interpretative stance. I believe that we consciously refine and redefine our identities through storying ourselves, since it is an essential way of understanding ourselves, our actions and reactions within a historical and social context. Taking Clandinin and Connelly's perspective that "narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it" (2000, p. 18), I see the stories the Collective members and I narrate and retell in this text as "ways of expressing and building personal identity and agency" (Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou, 2008, p. 6). I choose to let the stories talk and voice identities in these pages. This is a conscious methodological and epistemological decision in the design of both the form and the content of this text. I delve deep into the narratives to use them as reflexive and interpretive tools to explore the historicity of the self and its actions, and to reflect on constructions of identity and agency. At the same time, "the text is the method by which the methodology is revealed....Theory is brought to life and life is brought to theory" (Kamanos Gamelin, 2001, p. 12).
CHARTING THE TERRITORY

Giving the narratives center stage in this text and making them part of an organic whole ran hand in hand with the overall design of the narrative writing form. This choice was influenced by a decision to immerse readers as much as possible in the actual process of the research. Thus, a set of framed narratives weave in and out of dialogic exchanges between the members of our small Collective. These narratives are sometimes interspersed with collaged images, fusing textual, aural, oral and visual aspects of storying.

Divulging personal stories in the intimate circle of the Collective that sometimes contained "family secrets" never revealed before, probing and taming dragons and demons that popped up their heads in family narratives and memories, contributed to a sense of fragility and rawness that was always palpable during the fieldwork process. These emotions and the deep responsibility I felt towards my participants to honour their trust and do justice to their stories have also shaped my writing.

"Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 19). My hope is that navigating through the text, the reader will authentically experience the fieldwork process, will live, feel and be transformed by it in as close a proximity as the members of our small Collective did.

**on visuals and framed narratives**

I weave visual and framed narratives throughout the text. I regard my collage visuals as integral parts of the narratives they accompany. Old family photographs, documents, artifacts constitute "an archaeology of memory and meaning" in narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 114). I use them in my thematic compositions to create not only visual
but also spatial dimensions of memory that propel the reader beyond the frames of the narrative. These collage visuals also are my attempt at creating a family album, a concept that also functions as a metaphorical framework for the textual narratives. It is precisely for this reason that I have chosen to visually frame the narratives, which appear in gray borders throughout the text. I view these frames as thresholds that can transport readers into the worlds of storying and memory. They offer glimpses of transformative possibilities, since meaning in narratives "is always a becoming" (Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou, p. 14).

Throughout the text all the visual images are labelled as figures with explanatory captions underneath. There are distinctions however within them. Apart from my own photography collages, the Collective members use family photographs, artifacts, paintings, and drawings in their reflexive journals as memory prompts.

The main autobiographical thread of my life story and family narratives provides the backdrop canvas of the dissertation. The narratives of my research participants emerge as we start to collectively articulate our perceptions of family albums. Even though there is no strict chronological order in the narratives, there is however a thematic progression and an attempt to portray the process of becoming gradually through the text, with each chapter adding a new layer. To give a visual analogy, I purposefully start with a blurred image at the very beginning, with minimal sketches, that becomes more and more focused as readers move forward.

I have chosen to write some narratives wholly or partly in Armenian. In some cases, this renders the particular narrative text bilingual, where the actual words of characters in the story appear in Armenian alongside my reflections in English. My rationale for these decisions is two-fold. On one level, I have a deep concern to honour the words of the characters as they spoke it. On
another, this is how I live the duality of my languages — living the experiences in Armenian and theorizing and articulating them in English.

Chapter two offers a methodological and epistemological framework for my inquiry, with a detailed descriptive overview. This chapter also explains the concept of the family album metaphor as a visual and textual narrative framework. Chapter three explores the historical and cultural landscapes of identity issues within the specific Armenian context. Chapter four introduces the participants' interpretations of the family album framework. Chapter five unfolds the many-layered stories of the mothers, daughters and granddaughters that lie at the heart of this text. Chapter six delves deeper into the realm of memory, exploring experiences of loss and healing through storying and imagination. Chapter seven revisits methodology through a reflective and interpretive lens. It also tells the story the Collective has weaved together through the process of the fieldwork and concludes with the self-portrayals of each participant.

a note on transliteration

Armenian has two major dialects, Eastern and Western, that have slightly varying degrees of pronunciation in the triliteral consonant ranges of the alphabet. Appendix 2 shows a detailed transliteration table that contains Eastern and Western Armenian pronunciation variants in addition to the phonetic one. For the purposes of this text, I have opted for a phonetic transliteration in English of all proper and place names that appear in Armenian. There are some exceptions however. Since this dissertation is about storying, remembering, retelling and reconstructing family narratives, how the language is remembered and passed on through these generational narratives is equally important for me. There is an emotional dimension couched in the language of names and places that I feel bound to respect and preserve. Thus, to honour generationally
transmitted and lived memories, within the narratives I have opted for a transliteration based on the dialectal pronunciations and preferences of the research participants in this inquiry.

ON THE NATURE OF THE COLLECTIVE

Squire speaks of engaging in "active narrative interviewing, an interaction that stretches to something like conversation, or co-research" in narrative research (2008, p. 49). Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I viewed my participants as co-researchers who were actively engaged in the co-construction of the narratives, both in the early phases of the retellings and in the later interpretive stages of layered analyses. This active process of constant negotiation and meaning-making defined the spirit of our Collective.

I knew each of my participants intimately prior to my fieldwork. Even though not all of them knew one another beforehand, there were however deep bonds of friendship already in place between each of them and myself. Although this prior knowledge was crucial to set the tone of a basic trust and creation of a safe space within the Collective where so many intimate stories were revealed, it also presented a set of unique challenges for me both as a researcher and a participant. I learned early on to be vigilant, to tread very carefully along possible "fault lines" of too much self-revelation sometimes on the part of the other participants which naturally made them feel vulnerable. At the very beginning of the process, faced with questions of "tell us what you want us to tell you" from my participants, I felt the pressure of expectations and self-doubt about whether the loosely structured discussion mode I had opted for was the right choice. I was able to navigate through these challenges only through the openness of the Collective members, the growing internal bonds among us, and the deep-held respect and trust we had for each other. This
led us to collectively tolerate ambiguity and trust the process itself. The dialogic relationships within the Collective not only made knowledge emerge through the weaving of narratives, but also created a certain frame of mind that influenced much of the individual writing.

In the circle of the Collective the conversations flowed effortlessly, one thread leading to another in each discussion session with the least of prompts. We took each other's cues, transitioned, developed, went around, came back, flowed in and out of our stories. When we told our family narratives, we all instinctively adopted a storytelling voice which was relaxed and confident. There was much code-switching between Eastern and Western Armenian, English and French in these dialogues. However, Armenian was an instinctive choice we each made when we retold the most intimate of the stories.

Throughout the process of the fieldwork, the Collective continued to act as a supportive sounding board offering insights, staying open to ideas, and actively participating in the development of the research design where each phase was dictated by the flow of the stories retold.

PORTRAIT SKETCHES

I use Lawrence-Lightfoot's concept of the portrait, which creates a narrative that is at once complex, provocative and inviting, that attempts to be holistic, revealing the dynamic interaction of values, personality, structure, and history. And the narrative documents human behavior and experience in context. In fact, the portraitist insists that the only way to interpret people's actions, perspective and talk is to see them in context. (1997, p. 11)

The portrait sketches in this section are meant to introduce the reader to each of the members of our small Collective, including myself. Much like basic identity documents these portrait sketches are meant to give only
"vital stats" of each person. This is a deliberately skeletal first encounter that gives a minimal background on each participant. Their images gradually attain more flesh and blood with every new narrative as the writing progresses. By the concluding pages of this text, the participants' own self-portraits actualize the picture of their emerged characters.

Each portrait sketch is preceded by a visual representation of how I picture each of the participants. I have sketched these visuals towards the end of our fieldwork, when the Collective members chose their own pseudonyms. Using the pseudonyms calligraphically as my starting point in these images, I wanted to express visually what I felt the journey of each of my participants had been. I view these visuals as composite images of my participants' explorations of self and identity.

Figure 2: Yeraz

Name: Yeraz

Place of birth: Beirut, Lebanon
Displacement trajectory: Lebanon (Beirut) to Cyprus (Nicosia) to Lebanon (Beirut) to Montreal, Canada

Place of birth of parents: mother – village of Ain-ebl, South Lebanon; father – Mersin, Turkey

Parents’ displacement trajectory: mother – Ain-ebl to Beirut to Los Angeles to Montreal to Los Angeles to Beirut to Los Angeles; father – Mersin to Tyre to Beirut

Place of birth of grandparents: maternal grandmother – on board a ship headed for the port city of Tyre in South Lebanon, during 2\textsuperscript{nd} wave of deportation circa 1923; maternal grandfather – Ain-ebl, Lebanon; paternal grandmother – Tomarza, Turkey; paternal grandfather – Tomarza, Turkey

Grandparents’ displacement trajectory: maternal grandmother – Tyre to Ain-ebl; paternal grandparents – Tomarza to Aleppo to Tomarza to Mersin to Tyre (on board a French ship carrying refugees) to Beirut

Age: early 40s

Educational institutions attended: primary – Beirut, Lebanon; secondary – Nicosia, Cyprus; undergraduate – Beirut, Lebanon; graduate – Montreal, Canada

Mother tongue: western Armenian

Relation to researcher: friend of over 40 years

First encounter with researcher: Kindergarten – Beirut, Lebanon
Name: Nané

Place of birth: Montreal, Canada

Displacement trajectory: none

Place of birth of parents: mother – Istanbul, Turkey; father – Unye, Turkey

Parents' displacement trajectory: mother – Istanbul to Paris to Montreal; father – Unye to Ordu to Ankara to Istanbul to Montreal

Place of birth of grandparents: maternal grandmother – Ordu, Turkey; maternal grandfather – Ordu, Turkey; paternal grandmother – Fatsa, Turkey; paternal grandfather – Unye, Turkey

Grandparents' displacement trajectory: maternal grandmother – Ordu to vicinity of Der Zor to Ordu to Istanbul to Marseille to Istanbul to Montreal; maternal grandfather – Ordu to vicinity of Der Zor to Ordu to Istanbul to Cairo to Ordu to Istanbul to Montreal; paternal grandmother
Age: late 20s - early 30s

**Educational institutions attended:** primary - Montreal, Canada; secondary - Montreal, Canada; undergraduate - Montreal, Canada; graduate - Montreal, Canada

**Mother tongue:** western Armenian

**Relation to researcher:** friend of over 16 years

**First encounter with researcher:** Armenian Saturday school - Montreal

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**Name:** Anais

**Place of birth:** Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Displacement trajectory: Ethiopia (Addis Ababa) to Montreal, Canada

Place of birth of parents: mother — Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; father — Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Parents' displacement trajectory: Addis Ababa to Montreal

Place of birth of grandparents: maternal grandmother — Nice, France; maternal grandfather — Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; paternal grandmother — Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; paternal grandfather — Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Grandparents' displacement trajectory: maternal grandmother — Nice to Rome to Trieste to Rome to Genoa to Rome to Athens to Rome to Athens to Rome to Addis Ababa to Montreal; maternal grandfather — Addis Ababa to Venice to Rome to Addis Ababa to Montreal; paternal grandparents — Addis Ababa to Montreal

Age: late 20s - early 30s

Educational institutions attended: primary — Montreal, Canada; secondary — Montreal, Canada; undergraduate — Montreal, Canada; graduate — Montreal, Canada

Mother tongue: western Armenian

Relation to researcher: friend of over 13 years

First encounter with researcher: Youth NGO — Armenia
Name: Mara

Place of birth: Tbilisi, Georgia (former Soviet Union)

Displacement trajectory: Georgia (Tbilisi) to Russia (St. Petersburg) to Armenia (Yerevan) to Montreal, Canada

Place of birth of parents: mother — Yerevan, Armenia; father — Armenia

Parents' displacement trajectory: mother — Yerevan to St. Petersburg to Montreal; father — Yerevan to St. Petersburg

Place of birth of grandparents: maternal grandmother — Sebastia, Turkey, maternal grandfather — Tbilisi, Georgia; paternal grandmother — Armenia; paternal grandfather — Armenia

Grandparents' displacement trajectory: maternal grandmother — Sebastia to Istanbul to Yerevan; maternal grandfather — Tbilisi to
| Name: Hourig                                                                 |
| Place of birth: Beirut, Lebanon                                              |
| Displacement trajectory: Lebanon (Beirut) to Armenia (Yerevan) to Lebanon (Beirut) to Montreal, Canada |
| Place of birth of parents: mother – Mosul, Iraq; father – Dikranagerd (Diyarbakir), Turkey |
| Parents' displacement trajectory: mother – Mosul to Beirut to Montreal to London to Montreal; father – Dikranagerd to Aleppo to Beirut |
| Place of birth of grandparents: maternal grandmother – Khasgal, Turkey; maternal grandfather – Khasgal, Turkey; paternal grandmother – Dikranagerd (Diyarbakir), Turkey; paternal grandfather – Yozgat, Turkey |
Grandparents' displacement trajectory: maternal grandmother –
Khasgal to Smyrna (Izmir) to Salonika to Beirut to Mosul to Beirut to
London to Montreal to London; maternal grandfather – Khasgal to
Kerkuk to Khasgal to Kerkuk to Mosul to Salonika to Beirut to Mosul to
Beirut to London to Montreal to London; paternal grandmother –
Dikranagerd to Aleppo to Dikranagerd to Aleppo to Beirut; paternal
grandfather – Yozgat to Ankara to Dikranagerd to Aleppo to Beirut

Age: early 40s

Educational institutions attended: primary – Beirut, Lebanon;
secondary – Beirut, Lebanon; undergraduate – Beirut, Lebanon;
graduate – Yerevan, Armenia and Montreal, Canada

Mother tongue: western Armenian

Relation to researcher: self

First encounter with researcher: when born

The ensuing pages reflect my attempt to seek answers about the impact
of generationally transmitted memories through reconstructed family
narratives. Before delving into the actual stories, I first sketch the
methodological and epistemological landscapes.
Chapter Two

RE-DRAWING FRAMES:
A LIFELINE OF WOMEN’S NARRATIVES

WHERE TO BEGIN? HOW TO MAP? WHAT TO FRAME?

[My quest for knowledge] is powered by a desire not just to understand my own past and come to terms with the divided and alienated consciousness that comes from it; but also to put together, in a sort of bricolage of a fragmented consciousness, a body of knowledge and a way of knowing that spring not from something imposed from outside but from what is rooted within. (Kuhn, 2002, p. 119-120)

In this chapter I explore some of my encounters with feminist methodologies in studying and representing women’s lives. “Feminist perspectives have shown us how the flesh of story embraces, disturbs, and connects more strongly than disembodied, neutralized text” writes Lorrie Nielsen (1998, p. 10). My starting point is my own journey. My questions revolve around the self as researcher and a legitimate form of study. I write from what has informed my position, my questionings, my narratives realizing that it may lead to more questions on ways to go forward, to deconstruct, reconstruct and essentially connect.

The journey that unfolds in these pages starts with my epistemological and methodological terrain. In the first two sections, I look closely at the concepts of autobiography and life history, feminist engagements and researcher situatedness. In the next two sections, I examine different aspects of memory work — those mediated by visual artifacts, especially family photographs, and those hampered by trauma. In the last section, I describe the research study and the specific tools of inquiry involved.
Beginning with my earliest encounters with feminist methodologies, the concept of the knower being an intimate part of the known (Belenky et al., 1986) has always struck a deep chord. Lorraine Code writes, "knowledge is a construct that bears the marks of its constructors" (1991, p. 55). Knowledge is contextual. It is the specificity of the context that shapes both the knower and her knowledge of the known. It is from this standpoint then, that the researcher with her multiple subjectivities is also implicated in the processes and analyses of the research. Harding reminds us that

the best feminist analysis...insists that the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of research...the researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests. (1987, p.9)

In this paradigm, Harding argues, the context of the researcher — that "subjective element" of beliefs and behaviours, and how they impact both the set up and the analysis of a particular research study — helps increase "the objectivity of the research and decrease the 'objectivism' which hides this kind of evidence from the public" (p.9). Similarly, Dorothy Smith argues that a socially constructed world can never be understood from the outside, that the only legitimate way of knowing it, is from within (1987, p. 92).

This is where I begin my journey as a researcher. This is where I anchor my need to bring in my narrative, my autobiography as my initial stepping stone into my research study. In doing so, I am also aware of the constant need to keep the balance between detachment and involvement, of what Geertz labels "experience near" and "experience distant" (1983). I realize that the self-narrative I weave, while providing the necessary involvement in the research subject, can also act as a distancing tool only if accompanied by reflexivity. Graham talks about
the fact that "writing one's autobiography or writing autobiographically engages a conception of knowledge as a function of reflective self-consciousness and of the active construction and reconstruction of personal experience" (1991, p.8-9). Could it not be then that going through each of these layers, reflective self-consciousness, active construction, and reconstruction of personal experience, is what affords the distancing and the detachment necessary in doing autobiographical research? The emerging metaphor is that of a spiral. In the hub, revolves the axis of involvement, and with each layer of reflection superimposed, the spiral moves outward and above, providing the distance needed in the interpretive phases.

Self-narrative is a powerful tool for a researcher. Britton argues that in order to "fully possess the experience" we feel an urge to weave our lives into a narrative (as cited in Graham, 1991, p. 12). Callaway, on the other hand, talks about how "reflexivity becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness" (1992, p. 33) and about the need to be aware of our "changing subjectivity" (p. 36). It is this self analysis of changing subjectivities that I see at the root of my own autobiographical approach. The dual notion of detachment and involvement is ever present again. The self analysis provides the detaching principle, while the awareness of the multiple layers of subjectivities in constant flux is the underlying involvement. Callaway quotes Okely who writes, "I deliberately confront the notion of objectivity in research by starting with the subjective, working from the self outwards. The self – the past self – becomes a thing, and object" (p.43). For me, this is a prime example of reconciling an insider/outsider schism through autobiography. This "temporal split" that a retrospective self-narrative affords, offers a new lens in constructing such a detached/involved model.
The autobiographical act is also essentially one of memory reconstructions. I talk about the visual and verbal resonances of memory separately. However, I emphasize here again the self-reflexive nature of autobiographical narratives, and how by reconnecting our selves with our pasts, we literally re-construct layers of our lives. Chandler points out that "narrating a life story can...be seen as an essentially dialectical process," which inevitably paves the way to reevaluation and new questionings (1990, p. 25). The re/membering carries with it not only a sense of recreating the past but also, consciously and unconsciously, creating a new past in the present. I do not refer here to the phenomenon of false memory, which I will not deal with in this dissertation, but to the borderland between memory and imagination in our recounting of events. The uniqueness of autobiography, hooks argues, is not so much in the retelling of the events "as they have happened but as we remember and invent [italics added] them" (1989, p. 157). The act of re/membering itself then, is seeped in interpretation we constantly engage in through a temporal lens. This is the essential core of self-reflexivity we undertake, through the autobiographical act, which in turn also has an impact on how we perceive and shape the present. In many ways, it certainly carries the seeds of a healing quest in its folds. hooks' words echo again:

Writing the autobiographical narrative enabled me to look at my past from a different perspective and to use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change in a practical way...Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, "the bits and pieces of my heart" that the narrative made whole again. (p.159)

This is the starting point of my positioning, both as a researcher and a participant in my research study.

My personal trajectory is one of displacements, my life journey a map of crisscrossings around the globe. "For more and more people...the world is
coming to resemble a diaspora," writes Pico Iyer in his book *The Global Soul* (2000, p. 10). I have finally started making sense of it all; trying to find a language for my longings and my sense of feeling lost, of constantly feeling the need to be in search of something. My writing has become a deep soul-searching experience. It has given me a sense of stability I have hardly had in my life; it has become the only constant I could trust. Making the decision to come back to writing is not a whimsical choice, rather one driven from a deeper need to explore the roots of my not belonging. I have finally discovered a much sought after anchoring. We live in complicated times - so many layers of our self we need to be in touch with.

I am the granddaughter of genocide survivors, an eye witness to and a survivor of a brutal civil war, an immigrant woman living in a multicultural and multilingual society, doing research on autobiographical narratives of women that are at the intersection of survival, memory and identity. I am interested in looking at what is constructed, re-constructed, and re-presented, through these narratives, and the impact they have on negotiations of self and identity. In many ways, I have found that I have come full circle. In recent years, in my attempts to come to terms with the painful memories of my adolescence in a war-torn country, I have sought answers in the harrowing tales of my survivor grandparents. Their compelling narratives have been a source of inspiration. The more I have listened to them, the more I have been able to untangle the hidden knots that make up my life story. My life experiences shape my outlook and bridge the gap between my life and my work. As women, we are always faced with the personal vs. public dichotomy and the efforts to reconcile the two. From very early on, I discovered that the personal is political. The choices we make are political whether we are aware of them or not. We carry the potential of history-making through our own little lives, our personal narratives, our
life stories, no matter how inconsequential they may appear to others. How do we weave a coherent narrative of our lives? How do we frame our narratives in the process of creating our "self-portraits"? What gets lost and what is captured in the frame? What do we choose to frame in and through our narratives, both individually and collectively? Where do we map the self in our frames? These are some of the questions that interest me. In the course of my work with women, of studying their lives and my own, I have also discovered that the act of weaving and giving voice to those narratives comes close to resembling a lifeline extended from them, the participants, to me, the researcher, and vice versa. It is a lifeline that nourishes, sustains, and nurtures.

translated selves

I have discovered that one of the pervasive metaphors in this self-reflexive process is that of translation. Apart from the literal juggling between languages that is a reality in many of our lives, I also in essence mean here finding a language to describe our experiences without any fragmentation. Eva Hoffman writes

it’s only when I retell my whole story, back to the beginning onward, in one language, that I can reconcile the voices within me with each other; it is only then that the person who judges the voices and tells the stories begins to emerge. (1990, p. 272).

How many times have we found ourselves lost in translation, I wonder? I know how I have lived/continue to live in translation often as a woman, as an immigrant woman, as an Armenian immigrant woman, as an Armenian immigrant diasporan woman, as an Armenian immigrant diasporan unmarried woman who aspires to change, create, learn, teach. In so many instances, the language we speak is a foreign "other," even in our own community circles when it does not coincide with the collective discourse.
As a diasporan Armenian growing up in a Mediterranean Middle Eastern landscape, I also learned from a very early age all the realities of constantly navigating a life in actual translation. My home/mother/first tongue was not the outside/mainstream/dominant one. In school and daily life I always had to know how to function in a language other than my own. Sometimes there was a sharp dichotomy in the languages I lived; at other times a semblance of a co-existence. This in turn was sometimes a harmonious one and sometimes it just diverged into totally separate existences cohabiting the same space. Inevitably, I learned to translate and separate between languages in my head, assigning them different roles. Armenian — my most intimate language; my friend; my confidante; my memories — even though very much a functional language in my daily life, took on a "lyrical" role. English became the language of theorizing, naming and voicing. Arabic became relegated to the realm of nostalgia and longings, especially after my departure from Lebanon. The most unexpected twist in my translated selves however, came in my early twenties when I traveled to and lived in Armenia for three years — a place that until then was my imagined homeland and which finally attained flesh and blood with that sojourn. I learned then that I had to live in translation in my most intimate language as well, this time living the dichotomy between the Eastern and Western dialects of Armenian.

In all these "translated" realities I inhabited, whether of the metaphorical or physical realms, I have learned that the challenge is to transform yet again the sharp dichotomies in the positionings of the self into pockets of co-habitation through our "translated selves." With the passing of years, I for one have learned slowly to reconcile all my translated selves and even at times enjoy that I inhabit the different possibilities they create for me. In this sense, I identify only too well with the dialectical duality of (dis)empowerment Ifekwunigwe describes.
She depicts how I feel about my self, its many fragilities, and positionings in my life journey, when she writes,

"Where are you from?"

On an empowered day, I describe myself as a diasporas daughter with multiple migratory and ancestral reference points in Nigeria, Ireland, England, Guyana, and the United States. On a disempowered day, I am a nationless nomad who wanders from destination to destination in search of a singular site to name as home. (2003, p. 196)

This is familiar territory — a dichotomy I often live, trying to find, define, explore the bridge/border of the selves I oscillate between.

**CONTEXT AND TEXT: THE POWER OF STORYING**

*When we work with life history, the autobiographical act is not complete until the writer of the story becomes its reader and the temporal fissure that has opened between the writing and the reading invites negation as well as affirmation. (Grumet, 1991, p. 73)*

My interest in women's generational narratives and life writing was anchored with my encounter of Edith Sizoo's edited book, *Women's lifeworlds: Women's narratives on shaping their realities* (1997). The book involved a cross-cultural perspective on how women saw their realities being shaped. Fifteen women from various cultural, religious, linguistic, social, geographical backgrounds were asked to write their matrilineal generational narratives stretching from their grandmothers to their daughters, with a special emphasis on factors, opportunities and constraints that have had a determining influence on their lives. The participants were later asked to add a reflective section to their writing, this time moving "from the descriptive to the analytical, from the personal to the collective" (Sizoo, 1997, p. 10). The aim was to provide a deeper historical and social context, as well as a more profound understanding of the choices the women faced. Sizoo writes that
the book is concerned with women’s own - subjective - perceptions of their environment and the forces which drive them in shaping their lives the way they do....The expectation was that these narratives would provide rich material for enhancing the understanding of similarities and differences in women’s lives over time and across space. (p. 6)

This fascinating collection of women’s life narratives reinforces a number of key issues we are faced with in feminist engagements, ranging from holistic approaches to integrate the public and private domains in our lives, to the fluidity of identity(ies) with a constant flow in and out of different subjectivities. On speaking about researcher situatedness in the process of working on these narratives, Shanti George in her afterword to the same book talks about the essential "bridge between context and text" that materializes with such an experience. This approach is also what gives authenticity to the work and provides an opportunity to integrate the many dimensions, layers, selves women inhabit within their personal and professional lives (p. 247-249).

George’s experience echoes what resonates loudly in Lorri Neilsen’s words when she asserts, "we are learning that we are no longer mere creators of text, we are texts ourselves [italics added]" (1998, p. 10). In other words, our research engagements, the stories we choose to tell, our positionings, our multilayered selves are all part of the process that validate as well as lead to deeper interrogations of the text, I believe. It is Neilsen who reminds us again that "research is the process of learning through the words, actions and revisionings of our daily life. Inquiry is praxis that cannot be boxed up and delivered; it is a story with no ending" (p. 8-9).

It is important to tell our stories from inside out and to find meaningful ways to do so. As a research methodology, life history addresses feminist concerns to present lives in context, while "acknowledging the
intersubjective process of meaning making" (Munro, 1995, p. 141). The collaborative aspect of the research process, the essential self-reflexivity the researcher engages in, the commitment to make the research a vehicle for transformation and empowerment are all important cornerstones in life history research. In addition, as pointed out by the Personal Narratives Group, certain aspects of gender relations can specially be clarified through such a methodology. More specifically, "the construction of the gendered self-identity...the relationship between the individual and society in the creation and perpetuation of gender norms,...and the dynamics of power relations between men and women" (as cited in Munro, 1995, p. 141).

In their explorations of life history research, Cole and Knowles (2001) emphasize that apart from the larger context personal narratives are placed in, life history as a discipline also offers a unique way to examine the generalities through the many folds of the particular. Through life history research, a subtle mosaic of individual life experiences come together to give us a broader understanding of a wider context. They write,

In as much as it is humanly possible, life history inquiry is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans...It is about understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place. (2001, p. 11)

Moreover, Cole and Knowles shed light on the complex dialogical relationship between the researcher, the researched and the research topic. In this equation, the lines are blurred between researcher and participant, placing an emphasis not only on collaborative constructions of research processes, but also on the necessity of self-reflexivity. "The researcher self is visible in the research text and the researcher is every
bit as vulnerable, as present, as those who participate in the research” argue Cole and Knowles (2001, p. 14).

In her article on research dilemmas of representing life stories, Erin Mills (2002) argues that two competing narratives coexist and become intertwined in the “research encounter” — biography of the researched and autobiography of the researcher. This is true whether the researcher is explicitly aware of the autobiographical process or not. "The research project becomes our 'story,' our narrative, and it is naïve to assume that it should be any more unified or coherent than that of our research subjects," asserts Mills (p. 122). In order for the two narratives to complement one another rather than create dissonance, the researcher needs to engage in a critical process of self-reflection. This reflexivity is no easy task. It demands a high level of accountability as well as a degree of collaboration with the research participants in all phases of the research, from the very early stages of constructing the research framework to the later stages of analysis and interpretation. The researcher needs to address and questions the essential issue of power dynamics that exists between herself and the researched. As researchers we are equally accountable to the voices of our participants and must be very careful not to impose our voice, our narrative over that of our participants. What we interpret, how we negotiate increases in complexity as we acknowledge the collaborative nature of our research, since the voices of the participants attain an active interpretive role, within such a paradigm. The issue here revolves around acknowledging those multiple voices as well as their possible points of intersection, collusion, convergence.

Thus, it is imperative to construct a methodological framework that is sensitive to the dialectical perspectives of the researcher and narrator. By setting up a collaborative structure, by giving up our "powers" as
researchers, by inviting our participants to have a more active role, we can help equalize the researcher-researched relation. Instead of competing narratives, we can then hope to be able to unravel a web of narratives where the voices of the narrators clearly resonate alongside that of the researcher. The self-reflexivity we engage in then as researchers may add another, vital dimension of exploring our choices, examining our selves as legitimate foci of study.

A collaborative model also implies giving equal emphasis to the process and product phases of the research study, which in turn legitimizes the voices of the participants as well as stresses the transformative aspect of the research. All this of course brings to the fore the many dilemmas a researcher must face, in navigating the difficult waters of interpretation and analysis, while staying faithful to the voice of the participants. Munro suggests that one of the ways to do this, is to keep in mind three interlinked elements of the construction of a collaborative text which include the researcher’s self-reflexive account, “the intersubjective creation of the story, and the actual stories of the life historians” (1995, p. 141). It is also essential to involve the participants/life historians in the interpretation phase, by inviting them to contribute and comment on discussion transcripts, on emerging analytical themes, on the researcher’s interpretations of particular narratives and so forth. Naturally, these undertakings can be taxing for both the researcher and the participants and may also prove to be unpredictable in unforeseen ways. The relationships established within the research group network therefore, are extremely important in terms of the support and nurturing they can offer.

Trust is an underlying and essential leitmotiv. A careful, long-term, open-ended cultivation of relationships, both on an individual and (depending on the type of a particular research set up) collective level
are an imperative. Asking a participant to trust you enough to recount her life story, also predicates an essential accountability to her – to do justice to the story told, the life unfolded, the narrative woven.

**THE ROAD DOWN MEMORY LANE**

> My memory will retain what is worthwhile. My memory knows more about me than I do; it doesn't lose what deserves to be saved. (Galeano, 2000, p. 20)

> All photographs are memento mori. (Sontag, 1990, p. 15)

"Memory is living history, the remembered past that exists in the present," explains Frisch (1990, p. xxiii). Witherell points out that the self is developed as we look for and construct meaningful connections between self and other, "individual and culture" (1991, p. 90). Narrative and dialogue provide the springboard through which this can be done. Narrative thus becomes the ground on which history—both personal and collective—culture, and language converge. Personal identity is carved out of this tapestry of a narrative. In this narration, how does storying recreate the past? Do we create a new past in the present, in the process? In this section I briefly like to look at acts of memory and imagination mediated by language and visual artifacts, especially photographs.

"Narratives make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us" argues Sontag (2003, p. 89). Photographs, family albums, handed down through generations, have a strong memory evoking power invested in them. Most often, these photographs are an only link to an intangible, lost, sometimes mythologized past. Trying to read or narrate them, becomes an exercise in (re)constructing personal and/or collective memories. When that past is also wrought with a collective
memory of suffering and trauma, the readings and reconstructions become especially poignant, and attain a sense of urgency.

Barthes explains:

...The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations, which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant, the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed things to my gaze; light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed. (As cited in Hirsch, 1997, p. 4-5)

In his analysis, there is a tangible, "carnal" connection between the looker (at the photograph) and the looked. It is a complicated way of rendering the subject object through the "umbilical chord" of the gaze, through the emanation of an ancient light if you like, from the photograph itself, which becomes an ultimate link between the past and the present. How we interpret the gaze, how we narrate the story behind it, how we construct and re-construct memories especially when we use family photographs as prompts, has many complex layers. Hirsch’s explanation of this process verges very close to the process of self-reflexivity involved in the autobiographical act, with a constant play between detachment and involvement, as discussed in the first section of this chapter. She argues:

The familial look...is not the look of a subject looking at an object, but a mutual look of a subject looking at an object who is a subject looking (back) at an object. Within the family, as I look I am always looked at, seen, scrutinized, surveyed, monitored. Familial subjectivity is constructed relationally, and in these relations I am always both self and other(ed), both speaking and looking subject and spoken and looked at object. I am subjected and objectified. (1997, p. 9)
sites of remembrance

Echoing Sontag's concept that photographs highlight absence (1990, p. 16), Shirinian, speaking of photographs in genocide survivor narratives, argues that they are constant reminders of loss (1999, p. 33). This notion of loss resonates in Hirsch who devotes a whole section in her book on reading family photographs of Holocaust survivors (1997). In speaking of the visual and verbal dimensions of memory, she locates these photographs, as "sites of remembrance," at the border of memory and postmemory, while providing a very important definition of postmemory.

Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection...Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (1997, p. 22)

Thus, these photos not only preserve but help create and recreate memory. They also help the inheritor of the memory(ies) and its legacy, the looker, the gazer burdened by postmemory, to go through a unique process of mourning. On the other hand, the definition of postmemory is an essential concept that highlights the complexity of re/membered narratives I deal with in my research with my participants. A constant question I face in the construction of my narratives is that of doing justice to the lived experiences of survivors. Art Spiegelman echoes similar sentiments on the act of bearing witness plagued by postmemory in his famous *Maus* graphic novel series about his parents' Holocaust memories. Using the visual aspect of the graphic novel as a medium to its maximum effect, Spiegelman deftly intertwines the visual and verbal aspects of reconstructing memory in his work. He writes, "I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my
darkest dreams...There's so much I'll never be able to understand or visualize" (1991, p.16).

There is a deep connection between personal and collective memory, and social history. Kuhn makes an analogy between memory work and the careful inquiry involved in archaeology, where each digging, sifting through layers of dust and debris, unearths a new clue; and where fragments of clues need to be carefully patched with intricate care to create a holistic picture of the past (2002, p. 4). At the same time, memory work offers the opportunity to examine the connections between public and personal history, marginalized lives and silences. The past becomes real, with temporal, spatial, geographical, historical, political and most important of all, experiential referents. Thus, "memory work offers a route to a critical consciousness that embraces the heart as well as the intellect; one that resonates, in feeling and thinking ways, across the individual and the collective, the personal and the political" (Kuhn, p. 9). In this framework, family photographs become essential interpretive tools for the present. These "narrative snapshots" (Hirsch, 1997, p. 15) become a veritable bridge between the past and the present to help make sense of our lives, our experiences. Memory work then, is a tool of introspection and self-reflexivity. "Our sense of our life is embedded in what we make and remake of what happens to us," reminds Witherell (1991, P. 89). Even though the actual images in a photograph are anchored in the past and are a link to it, the process of the connection with that past, the interpretation and constant negotiation of the meanings and memories they evoke, are a function of the present. By questioning why images from a past sometimes even preceding us, feel so familiar Kuhn suggests that there are deeply rooted points of convergence between personal and collective memories (2002, p. 127). Thus, studying family photographs and using them for close readings or as prompts to weave autobiographical narratives in life history research, the
temporal qualities of images, the tangible references they create to a
time and a place, add immense richness to the storying process.

If re/membering is “an activity that takes place for, as much as in the
present” (Kuhn, 2002, p. 128) it is an indispensable tool to understand
our lives and our selves, in the here and now from where we direct our
gaze towards the past. In the words of one master story teller, “life is
not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it
in order to recount it” (Marquez, 2003, p. vi).

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS – WHO IS STARING
BACK?

Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment
in the making of our selves. To the extent that memory
provides their raw material, such narratives of identity
are shaped as much by what is left out of the account -
whether forgotten or repressed - as by what is actually
told. Secrets haunt our memory-stories, giving them
pattern and shape. (Kuhn, 2002, p. 2)

CREATING MEMORY – THE STORY OF ANOU什

April 24,1 2003. I decide to listen to the last recording I made of my
grandparents’ stories. I feel a bit ambivalent. I know listening to their
voices ring out so real when they are not among us anymore, telling
stories about their past - a past that was painfully erased from their lives
but one they insisted on making part of their present and mine as well –
will be difficult to deal with. The intensity a bodiless voice can trigger,
the memories it embodies, will inhabit the world of my mind and
become more real than the one I live in daily. Nevertheless I insert the
tape in the recorder and press the play button. I watch painfully as the

1 April 24 is Armenian genocide commemoration day.
tape rolls. I hear my voice announce the date. 1992. There is a questioning in my grandfather's voice as I ask him to state his full name. I explain it is for the sake of formality and for the family archives. My grandmother clears her throat in the background. My grandfather plays along with me and speaks out his full name with an actor's flair. A few minutes later I ask the same question of my grandmother. "Why do you ask? Don’t you know it?" she retorts in her genuinely surpised voice. I laugh out loud. So typical of medzmama, my grandmother, I think instantly. After a few minutes they both go on to enumerate the names of their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings. My grandparents were second cousins and shared a close-knit family circle. I check my notes as I listen to the tape and scribble down the names. A sudden thought hits me. I stop the tape. I count the names I've jotted down — Varteni, Hampartsoum, Haroutioun, Marinos, Pilig, Hovhannes, Hagop, Khatchig, Arsenouhi... All perished during the death march or in its aftermath, yet my grandparents and their surviving siblings make sure their memories live on by naming their children after them. All that is, except Anoush.² Her name does not appear again. It is wrapped in veils of secrecy in the family memories.

Anoush was/is my grandfather's younger sister. I first heard her story from my mother when I was in my teens. I even remember that I was the one who asked medzhayrig, my grandfather, to tell me the real story about her. It struck me that in a family history full of so many old photographs, I had never come across hers. I realized that she once existed in my grandfather's painful memories and continues to live on in my mother's faint recollections of a passing, vague face.

It all started in 1915. In all the stories medzhayrig, my grandfather, told us, until then he led an idyllic carefree childhood in his native village of

² A common female name, Anoush means sweet in Armenian.
I Khasgal, a short distance from Istanbul. Then one day, the order for deportation came. He was only twelve and remembered how his parents and grandmother entrusted the family papers and the house key to their closest Turkish neighbours. They were like family, he always said, his own grandmother like a mother to them. It was the first of many painful separations and unending tears. Thus started the beginning of the end of his family as he knew it — his grandmother Varteni, his father Hovhannes, his mother Marinos, his elder brother Mihran, his elder sister Srpouhi, his younger sister Anoush, and his younger brother Hampartsoum.

There were inevitably gaps in the story. How many days and months did it take them to traverse the country in a forced death march, to pass through the living hell of the Der Zor desert, to finally reach a caravanserai in Kerkuk, I will never know. I will never know what courage my then 12-year-old grandfather must have mustered to survive. I know though, that everytime I trace the enormous distance on a modern map with my fingers, between the one dot that signifies Istanbul and the other that shows Kerkuk, I shudder. On that invisible line I trace from one city to the other, I know he lost his mother, his younger brother, his grandmother and finally his father. In that fateful karvansarai in Kerkuk, his father's last thought was to save his young daughter Anoush at all costs, from the grim destiny that awaited them all. During the day he had seen some bedouins from the region come in

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3 Meaning “fertile land” in Armenian, the village is located in the region of Atap'azar, a short distance from Istanbul. My grandfather told of how the village was famous for its orchards and especially mulberry trees, which played an important part in the budding local silk industry. In 1962, when he visited his native village a last time after being driven out of it forty years earlier, he was shocked to find the area completely barren, with no trace of its once very fertile agricultural lands.

4 Desert area in northern Syria, then part of the Ottoman Empire, where most of the death marches led to. It has now become the site of annual pilgrimages.

5 City in northern Iraq, then part of the Ottoman Empire.
to ask if there were any young children to give away. He decided Anoush must live. She was not yet ten. Although grown very skinny and weak from their ordeal, she was still very beautiful and so young. The tears streaked down Anoush's delicate face as she pleaded with her father to stay with them. Surely no life would be worth living without whatever remained of her dismembered family. My grandfather's voice breaks as he retells the story. Anoush is given away the next morning, while her father perishes, unable to bear the anguish. The rest is the story of my grandfather's orphanage days. Out of a family of eight, three only had survived the horror.

Years pass. The 12-year-old orphan transforms into a young man. He finds and marries his second cousin who also has survived. She had reached the shores of Greece. Together they settle in Mosul and have five children. He then decides to move his family to Beirut. The year is 1952.

On his return to settle the family affairs after a few months, his neighbours tell him of a mysterious Arab woman who often appeared on the corner of the street and gazed through the courtyard to where my grandparents used to live. After a few days she approached the neighbours and asked where the family of five children had gone. Her eyes had a clouded look and her lips trembled. The neighbours were curious. Why did she want to know? "They moved to Beirut," one of them blurted out. A loud wail cut the neighbour's words short. The Arab woman crumbled to the floor. The women of the courtyard scurried around her.

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6 In a last-minute effort to save their lives, many parents during the deportations and subsequent death marches resorted to virtually giving their young children away to the Arab Bedouin tribes in the region.
7 City in northern Iraq.
8 The capital city of Lebanon. In the period from the 1920s to the 1960s, there were internal demographic movements within the diasporan Armenian communities in the Middle East, which led to an important concentration of Armenians in Lebanon, especially its capital city of Beirut, making the community there the “backbone of the Armenian diaspora” as it became to be known. In the years preceding the Lebanese civil war, the community numbered around 250,000 strong, with a vibrant infrastructure of numerous day schools, daily newspapers, and cultural centres.
"I lost them. I lost them twice," the Arab woman mumbled. Then under the caring gaze of the women, she revealed her story. My grandfather is incredulous. He stopped believing in miracles in 1915, the year of the desert sands. And yet 37 years later, he is now to come face to face with one.

I will never know how it feels to meet a sister you have lost for 37 years. I will never know what words you say to a brother you find 37 years later. I want to know though how the eyes caress and the hands embrace to repel the memory of the loss.

She has tried, always tried to find them. She has never forgotten. She has family and children of her own. Her sons are already married. They never understood who she looked for. Surely this family she talked of, the father, brothers and sister, they had all died back then. She herself said they were doomed to die. So why this insane search now? Why forsake what she has for something that is not? In time their questionings turned into a deep frustration and a sense of betrayal. Persuasion techniques gave way to subtle threats. In it all though, she never wavered once. Especially after she finally traced her brother’s family to Mosul. So many times she came and stood at the corner of the street, watched the family of five children discreetly, saw the kids - her nephews and nieces, her own flesh and blood - play joyfully in the courtyard. She never dared come nearer, for fear the subtle threats in her family would become real. Until now, when the compounded feeling of a second loss made all else irrelevant.

I try to imagine how Anoush would have felt and cannot. How can a woman, her life torn asunder in layer after layer after layer, have found courage to live on, to birth, to nurture, to hope, I wonder.
Surely a reunion with her brother's family would have meant yet another lesion in her life - this time with her husband and sons. Unable to find any way to reconcile her two worlds, Anoush makes the difficult decision to stay with her brother. She agrees to meet him secretly a few days later to go into hiding, while my grandfather secures legal backing for their case. At the appointed time and place however, she is not there. For many agonizing months to follow, my grandfather searches for her in vain. All his influential friends, all his efforts, all his wanderings come to naught. The rest is shrouded in silence in the family narratives.

Over the years, in endless recounts of his survivor stories, medzhayrig kept a stubborn silence over this episode. Even to the end of his days, when the memory of his younger brother's killing would still bring tears to...
his eyes, he could never reconcile himself to talk of Anoush. Was it because the loss of his other family members was more defined through their death I wondered, yet with Anoush he was never sure? On my part, I try to reconstruct/(re)-imagine Anoush's face through my mother's faint memories of a strange veiled woman on a street corner, intently gazing at them. I sometimes think of her as only a face - a disembodied face. It appears in a hazy background. I shudder to think that even in my imagination I cannot find a body for her. What does that say about her story and about her place in our family memories? How can I remember someone I have never seen, I ask myself? How can I mourn her three-fold loss? Yet I feel I know Anoush; I have felt her pain; I have lived her loss; I live her absence. My attempt at sketching her narrative is my tribute to finally give body to her voice. Isn't this what the afterlife of memory is meant to be?

"Not only do life history researchers create histories of lives, but they also reference those lives to history" argue Cole and Knowles (2001, p. 80). The inclusion of my previous framed narrative serves a similar purpose. In outlining my methodological framework for my study, I explain how I as a researcher, am also involved in the research as a participant, how my context, my narratives, shape and influence both my participation and my interpretation. My act of creating memory in this case, speaks not only of my understanding of how we re/member and choose to construct our life stories, but also in this particular instance sheds light on a very important, sensitive and difficult issue in my research. What I ask my participants to remember will inevitably lead to stories of genocide survival that have trickled down through generations. Whether an individual participant does or does not have family members (mostly grand or great grandparents) who are/were survivors themselves, there is also a complex web of a collective memory of survival that has been transmitted generationally. The layers
of complexity increase as intergenerational transmission of trauma, attempts at healing (whether individually or collectively), denial and recognition (of the act of genocide) come into play. The legacy and burden of genocide are carried intergenerationally, since in the face of continual denial

what is remembered of the genocide depends on how it is remembered, and this in turn is dependent to a large degree on the textual or verbal form of remembering. Historical knowledge, therefore, rests on the way we understand it. (Shirinian, 1999, p. 6-7)

Verbalizing memory inevitably implies fragmentation, unavoidable gaps in the narration, silences, which become multilayered and complex when fraught with the trauma lived by survivors. Language feels inadequate to either express the horrors of suffering or do justice to those unspeakable lived experiences. Finding and negotiating ways to verbalize these memories however, even through the prism of successive generations, is an important act of public truth telling and testimony. An indepth exploration of these issues do not fall into the scope of this chapter. However, I attempt to sketch in these pages as best I can, the links between genocide narratives, memory, trauma and healing.

The first step is to define the trauma and the traumatic. It is important to note that there is no quantifiable measurement for suffering, especially in the case of survivors of unspeakable atrocities as with Armenian genocide survivors (Miller & Miller, 1993; Shirinian, 1999). "Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless," writes Herman (1992, p. 33). It is a known fact that denial of the atrocities has a crippling effect and complicates the trauma. (Avakian, 2000; Bamberger, 2000; Danieli, 1988; Herman, 1992; Karakashian, 2000; Keshgegian, 1995, 2000; Miller & Miller 1991, 1993; Shirinian, 1999; Topalian, 2000). The Armenian example is no exception; although it is also noted that denial ironically promotes a sense of group cohesiveness. It is as if a
unity is created on an internal front against a common enemy (Miller & Miller 1993, 161). On the other hand, "the genuine impossibility of mourning" (Danieli, 1988, p. 284), with its infinite number of deaths, retards the process of healing. Therapists agree that liberation and recovery start by integration, not "exorcism" (Danieli, 1988; Herman, 1992, p. 181). To do so, means essentially verbalizing and then coming to terms with the memory. I often think that by carrying the burden of our (my) grandparents' pain through their stories, we (I) also act as their purgers. We (I) have the power to cleanse them and us of the anguish which has possessed our souls. Keeping the memory of their stories alive is an imperative, for it is only by exposing, accepting and understanding the trauma they lived through, that we can hope to embark on a healing quest.

There are three main phases in trauma that also are intimately linked with issues of memory and healing: Intrusion, constriction and recovery.

**Intrusion**

Intrusion, or imposed memories (of the traumatic incident), is what the dictionary defines as violation of one's privacy. Herman mentions that the reason why people relive the incident is because trauma disrupts the normal flow of time and forces the survivor to experience the event(s) as if it is happening in the present (1992, p. 37). The intrusive thoughts almost always dominate all conversations among survivors. The "grotesqueness surrounding the death imprint" (Lifton 1967, p. 480) is the prime factor in causing the intrusion. One way of dealing with the horror is by recounting the stories incessantly, even obsessively. The questions which inevitably follow are, to whom are the stories told? What purpose does their telling serve? What effect do they have on the listener? When the memory is shared by narrator and listener, or across
generations, it acts not only as a repository of communal meanings but also cements the bonds stretched from across a common past towards a meaningful future. The story of Anoush I retold is one such example. "Induced" flashbacks contain the seeds of recovery, even if they come into existence at a late intergenerational stage. Our experiences may not coexist within the same time-frame, but accepting the memories of a generation on the brink of extinction could finally bring them/us a step closer to the peace the survivors sought.

**constriction**

Not every survivor chooses to tell her story. A deliberate effort to forget what has happened is a common device to try to overcome the insurmountable suffering. Lifton calls this a "psychic mutation" which sometimes becomes imperative for survival (1967, p. 487). This intentional numbing in its severest form "consists of the mind being severed from its own psychic forms" (Lifton 1979, p. 174). Lifton explains it as a form of symbolic death which helps the survivor overcome physical and psychic death (1979, p. 173). Miller & Miller (1991, 1993) cite examples of survivors who acknowledge that they had never told their stories even to their children. Danieli (1988) refers to a similar incidence in the case of Nazi Holocaust survivors. For these people, avoidance and repression become an invaluable defense mechanism. Commenting on her experience with recording oral narratives of Holocaust survivors, Rosenthal points out that the difficulty to speak up about their experiences, leads to inevitable narration gaps (1991). Constriction, then, hampers the verbalization of the traumatic event, which is a necessary step on the road to recovery. Herman sees constriction as the escape of a helpless person, who deliberately alters her consciousness to produce a forceful detachment from the troubling reality (1992, p. 42).
However, the numbing effect constriction produces is a double-edged sword, because the "forgetting" is inextricably linked with "remembering." Refusing to talk about the event does not put a lid on the intrusive thoughts and dreams (Herman, 1992, p. 47-50; Miller & Miller 1993, p. 164; Rosenthal, 1991, p. 40). The memories do not simply fade away. In fact, the more persistent the numbing, the more intrusive do the flashbacks become, creating a constantly replenished vicious circle. Herman points out, "the dialectic of trauma is therefore potentially self-perpetuating" (1992, p. 47).

recovery

Understanding and reclaiming the past are important steps in recovery from trauma, since

Atrocities refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Murder will out. Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims. (Herman, 1992, p. 1)

Liberation from the terror of the trauma is based mostly on a need to redefine life. It is important to realize that the consequences of trauma are not solely bound to the realm of the individual. The disconnection and disempowerment they cause also undermine the communal system, since the loss of trust harms the existing bonds between the individual and the community (Herman, 1992, p. 55; p. 135). Thus, reclaiming the past could lead to reclaiming selfhood and ultimately to a sense of connection and empowerment.

My self and my interest in my inquiry are situated at this cornerstone. As altruistic as my motives are, they also tell the story of my/our healing. In tune with the concept of integration as opposed to exorcism, Herman
wisely reminds us that "resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete. The impact of a traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor's lifecycle" (Herman, 1992, p. 211). When atrocities are repeatedly committed, with no instance of political retribution historically, then the reverberation resonates not only through the individual survivor's lifecycle, but also through the lifecycle of the coming generations, thus paving way for the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Grumet argues that recounting our stories is a way to order our chaotic experiences and finding our own voice in the process (as cited in Cooper, 1991, p. 97). I believe her argument takes on a special poignancy with survivor testimony, whether it is done by the survivors themselves or carried out through successive generations. The story telling and the framing of the narrative in this instance are attempts to make one whole, to heal. Re/membering then is imbued with the urgency of a "survivor mission" and a necessary step in the recovery process.

SETTING UP THE SCENE

Our stories are the masks through which we can be seen, and with every telling we stop the flood and swirl of thought so someone can get a glimpse of us, and maybe catch us if they can...We are at least partially, constituted by the stories we tell to others and to ourselves about experience. (Grumet, 1991, p. 69)

My small group of participants — a collective of five women of a common Armenian heritage, including myself — represents various generational, homeland and diasporic profiles and experiences. In agreement with Cole and Knowles' approach to life history research as essentially having an aesthetic component both in the process of researching and in the forms of representation (2001), I have used the metaphor of a family album in my research design. This metaphor provides a foundation for a
narrative framework in weaving together the autobiographical reconstructions of my participants, through the intertwined narratives of memory, trauma and displacement. While giving the participants some freedom in exploring various ways of self-expression, I believe that this approach best encapsulates the varied texture of the stories, through a fusion of the verbal, visual, oral and aural aspects of memory and storytelling. Group discussions, both face-to-face and through the medium of an online forum, were the main phase that set the stage for the participants to work on their narrative "self-portraits." These discussions were also punctuated by individual encounters between me and each of the participants. The research had three main data collection phases which although distinct were also clearly interlinked and overlapped –

A. group discussions that were both audio and videotaped
B. threaded discussions in an online forum
C. personal reflective journals each participant was asked to keep

The group discussions and online forum offered the safe space both physical and virtual for the participants to meet and share their ideas.

The family album as a metaphor acted as the main narrative framework. In thinking of this framework, there were two overlapping images in my mind that completed the metaphor. The first was that of an old family album with age-old photographs, some of which are peeled off leaving only the little edges of the photograph holders in place, glued to the black surface of the page. Those empty frames however, sometimes can be equally revealing and evoke memories. The concept of what is lost and what is captured in a frame, what we see and what is hidden, what is real and what is imagined, becomes important. The second was that of
a "reverse action" family album — one that is put together in the present, to evoke a sense of the past. Since "to frame is to exclude" (Sontag, 2003, p. 46), what is selected or is deliberately left out of a frame in this case, is what defines the narrative. By using this constructed metaphor as a backdrop, I asked my participants to create a self-portrait of themselves, drawing on visual, verbal, aural, oral artifacts and sources as memory props. I use self-portraits in an autobiographical sense here and find Howarth’s artist analogy very apt:

The artist model must alternately pose and paint...work[ing] from memory as well as sight, in two levels of time, on two planes of space, while reaching for those other dimensions, depth and the future. The process is alternately reductive and expansive; it imparts to a single picture the force of universal implications. (As cited in Cole and Knowles, 2001, p. 15)

To help structure the metaphorical framework and give it tangible form, I proposed that the participants look at it in terms of a series of concrete frames. Together with the participants we agreed that they would each create five frames. Each of the frames then acted as an episode in the overall narrative of the self-portrait, culminating with a concluding frame that reflected on their lives in the present time, the here and now. Since as Cole and Knowles argue, the aesthetic and creative aspects are equally important in life history research, and "the form, itself, has the power to inform" (2001, p. 122) the participants were free to choose their representational forms in weaving their narratives. In Galeano's words, "as a means of revealing collective identity, art should be considered an article of prime necessity, not a luxury" (2000, p. 171). In this case, the parallel stretches to the personal as well.

Hélène Cixous's words encapsulate so well the emotions family albums evoke as sites of memory. I hope what I aspired to do with my metaphorical framework of the family album can come close to the poetics of memory this quote evokes.
Old tattered album. Respect the tatteredness. The tatteredness is the secret: portrait of the family memory. Album, memory, cemetery, abandoned...Respect the abandonment. To the question how have these frail objects survived, how have they resisted, will they resist the teeth of time? not to respond.

And each time in thirty, forty, fifty years, when one comes to the album of dust, each rare time of attention, there is a slight trembling of the flicker of fear that the photo which holds only by a worn torn gold corner, by a spot of old old glue, should fall. Should have fallen, inside. Photos of people fallen one after the other, crumbling of years, time has slowed so brutally, a city falls into another, a grandmother of a mother meets an unknown cousin by a stroke of memory without law.

Album in ruins to be respected. It is memory itself. (Cixous, 1997, p. 180)

**lifelines**

I have written previously that in my work with my participants, discussing and studying their lives and my own, I have discovered that an invisible yet nurturing lifeline is established between researcher and participant. "Only by taking the trouble to know other people well, in their circumstances, sensitive to what their circumstances mean to them, can people participate responsibly in each other's lives," observes Lorraine Code (1991, p. 312), arguing for a transformative and empowering research paradigm within feminist engagements. In designing my research project I have tried to keep in perspective both the concept of a lifeline and the engagement Code argues for. My main goal has been to design a project that hopefully served as a tool of self-discovery and introspection for the Collective of my participants, both on a personal and collective level. My previous knowledge of my participants, my varying degrees of professional and personal associations with them had helped create an initial trusting atmosphere I believe, that is essential in the sensitive work we undertook together. I
view the circle of the Collective also as my personal trajectory along
temporal, spatial, geographical, political landscapes that is encapsulated
through my life encounters with each of my participants. In many ways, I
see myself, my different lifeworlds reflected and coming together
through the prism of my relationships with them. At the same time, I
realize that there are hidden depths and multiple layers to be unraveled
behind the word "Lifeline," which has become a concept, a context, a
symbol, and a safe space. The lines of our lives move around endlessly in
curves, in swirls, they cross, they separate, they refract and reflect,
they intertwine and intersect. And the circle, that most symbolic line of
endless time full of so many beginnings and renewals, keeps us together.
What we unravel for one another; the mirrors we hold to capture each
other's inward gazes; what we let out and hold in; is crucial and has an
impact on how and what we continue to unfold with our lifelines
stretching forth from the here and now.

This invisible yet tangible lifeline is held in place through a series of
group discussions. I opted for the group discussion mode rather than
personal interviews, because I believed there was an essential collective
exploration that was crucial to my research study. The fact that the
participants represent various generational, homeland and diasporic
profiles and experiences, enriches this collective exploration and
provides new perspectives for the participants themselves in their
journey of self-discovery. "It is our inward journey that leads us through
time-forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling
[italics added]. Each of us is moving, changing with respect to others. As
we discover, we remember, remembering, we discover; and most
intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge,"
writes Eudora Welty (as cited in Witherell, 1991, p. 83). I also viewed
the group discussions as a necessary stage of our collective meaning-
making in the collaborative set up of the research design. I too, am a
member of the research collective, a participant as much as my other participants. By the same token, I consider my participants my co-researchers, who actively participate both in the decision making process during the data collection phase, and at a later stage during the interpretive phase. The fact that the participants knew one another and felt at ease with each other contributed to the overall trusting atmosphere within the Collective.

In order to provide a reflective space and overcome certain distance hurdles, the group discussions also had a virtual component. To complement the actual face-to-face discussions, an online discussion group was set up. Interestingly, after using the specially created online forum for approximately five months, the participants abandoned the forum as a communicating medium and resorted to using group email. They explained that the forum felt contrived and put the subtle pressure to “participate” on them. In one of the last web posts, one of them wrote that she sometimes felt exposed writing on the forum (Anais, web post, June 22, 2004), a sentiment that was echoed by the others. However, there was no such concern with the emails that kept flowing in abundance during and even much after all our face-to-face discussions had officially concluded. The members of the Collective certainly had a lot to say and share with one another.

The virtual component added an interesting temporal and spatial dimension to the group discussions. It certainly gave the participants an opportunity to detach and reflect at a distance on some of the issues raised during the actual discussions. This distance, coupled with the reflexive solitude of the act of writing, also afforded a certain level of intimacy. This intimate reflexivity, within the confines of the virtual Collective, also prepared the participants for their more individual journeys of self-discovery in the process of creating their self-portraits.
The Collective then, both as a virtual and actual community, acted as an essential support group for the participants and me. For the specific purpose of creating the self-portraits, I asked the participants to keep a reflexive journal. I also gave each participant an individually crafted journal/scrapbook I had prepared for them, resembling an old black-paged photo album. The participants were free to use these individually handmade journals or choose to make or find one of their own. The journal could include both textual and visual artifacts, especially photographs. The artifacts were to be used as prompts to enhance the memory work or be integral parts of their narratives. Towards the end of the fieldwork, each participant chose and crafted her own medium of expression in fact, ranging from paintings and photo collages to narratives and images brought together in digital format.

tapestry of webs

There was a conscious choice of course in designing the set up within this collaborative framework of group discussions and individual writing. I saw it as an organic whole, one leading towards the other; the former providing the safe space for the artistic and creative engagements to blossom both collectively and individually. Even though I perceived the set up of the research design and the collaborative factor as an advantage, I was also aware that there were a number of challenges ranging from the temporal/spatial issues involved especially in the virtual discussion domain, to the intricacies in the necessary introspective journeys, to the collaborative factor itself. They all mainly pointed to ethical dilemmas I was faced with. In trying to address these issues as best I could, I was acutely aware how much a research study became a "lived dilemma rather than simply the neat achievement presented in [a] published report" (Yates as cited in Weinberg, 2002, p. 79). There is an ethical "gray zone" (Snyder, 2002, p. 77) we enter as
qualitative researchers that can best be addressed by arguing for contextual awareness and a situated ethics (Kirsch, 1999; Snyder, 2002; Thompson, 2002; Weinberg, 2002). In claiming that we need to set realistic goals for ourselves and our participants in designing collaborative frameworks, Kirsch maintains that as researchers we also have to be open for reciprocal learning by allowing for critical feedback from our participants (1999, p. 38).

As a researcher who had made a commitment towards a collaborative research design, I was conscious that I was constantly faced with the multiple perspectives of my participants, and that I had to be accountable to them. I have argued that by addressing the power dynamics between researcher and researched, by giving up our "powers" as researchers, by inviting our participants to have a more active role in the research, we can hope to weave a tapestry of narrative webs together instead of creating the competing narratives of the researcher and the researched Mills cautions against (2002). By including myself in the research collective, I hoped to take that equalizing factor a step further. Being a narrator alongside my participants, contributed to a more tangible form of researcher situatedness, while at the same time the rigorous reflexivity self study entails helped me understand the perspective of the participants in a different light.

THE STORY WITH NO ENDING

We construct who we are by understanding how we negotiate our self and identity. Life history research within a broader paradigm of feminist inquiry and with "its reciprocal nature involving mutual storytelling" (Munro, 1995, p. 144) offers a portal to more engaged, empowering ways of knowing, being and becoming. In this process it is essential to remember that "the integration of knowledge, if not attached to
women's everyday experience, objectifies women, their experience and the cultures in which they are born" (Kamanos Gamelin, 2001, p. 22).

And so, where do I go from here? Some questions arise: In exploring where I come from and who I am, is it possible for me to create a pocket of hybridity through my self? Is it possible for the body/the self to act as the locus of the fluid third space Homi Bhabha talks about (1990), to enable less rigid understandings of culture and identity to emerge? Urging us to think of identity in constant process, Hall writes, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (2003, p. 236). How do I position my self-narrative with the narratives of the past that continue to haunt and guide me at the same time? Where and how will the collective narratives converge with my own in reconstructing that past? What role will collective and personal memories play? How treacherous and perilous will these memories be? In attempting to understand my diasporic existence and reality; the many layered waves of displacement that continue to fuel it; the deep-seated yearning for creating home; the politics of an "imaginative geography and history" that informs a diasporic community and often gets confounded with a false sense of tribal belonging trapped in rigid definitions of culture and identity; how will my ensuing positioning enable me to cross boundaries and weave a narrative of possibilities and transformation?

At the crossing of this threshold all I have are more questions. I welcome the journey.
While situating myself within the topic I explore in these pages, I examine the construction of diasporic frames from personal and theoretical perspectives in the first two sections of this chapter. The following section looks at issues of cultural identity and language, while the last one deals with the multilayered role of memory within diasporic constructs.

**BORDER CROSSINGS**

*What constitutes the originary earth, the native country of my writing is a vast expanse of time and lands, where my long, my double childhood unfolds. (Cixous, 1997, p. 181)*

Like Cixous, "I was born so far from my beginnings" (p. 179). My family trajectory embraces more countries than I care to count, three continents, a few seas and an ocean. I am a daughter of diasporas. And of exile. An exile that was not my own, but that of my grandparents. They were deprived of their ancestral home/land(s) and lived to instill the dream of a return in their children and grandchildren. Growing up with their stories of pain and suffering, of robbed childhoods and torn lives, I learned first hand what the power of memory can signify; how it can inhabit our dreams and inhibit our realities.
My maternal grandparents, Israel-Vahan and Tefarig, were born in the small village of Khasgal, literally meaning “fertile land”, on the outskirts of the town of Armash, in the district of Atap’azar, a close distance from today’s Istanbul. My paternal grandfather Hovsep was born in the town of Yozgat, a short distance from modern day Ankara, where his family moved early on to escape massacre waves. My paternal grandmother Zohra was born in the southern city of Dikranagerd, or what is known today as Diyarbekir.
No birth certificates or early identity documents have survived, or come into my possession, that in any way can create a tangible link for me with their past that was wrenched from them so brutally. I have filled the gaps, recreated that past through a conscious act of re-memberings. In all subsequent official documents, identity cards of various middle eastern countries they lived in, their places of birth were subsumed under the all-encompassing word – Turkey. This was a geographical location that was as vast as it was indefinite, as shifty as it was inaccurate; for when my grandparents were born at the beginning of the past century, the geopolitical entity known as Turkey today did not exist. The genocidal legacy of its predecessor state though, of which my grandparents among many were victims, continues to fuel its inheritance through an active official denial mechanism. Nor did my grandparents ever carry the nationality of their country of “origin” designated to them.
I always wonder how one whimsical stroke of a pen can wipe the stories of their once vibrant hometowns clean; how it can banish them into non-existence; how it can condemn them to silence. Recently, I was lucky to discover an identity document given to my great grandparents in Iraq. Their black and white faces stare into a blankness, while the document proclaims:

Kingdom of Iraq - Certificate of Naturalization [given to Hagop Hovhannes Der Arsenian, my great grandfather in December 1954. Oath of allegiance taken in January 1955. Below, on the document my maternal grandfather's handwriting in Armenian explains, "my father-in-law's Iraqi ID." I have kept the exact same wording of the translation of the form as it appears on the document.]
Name: Hagop Hovhannes Der Arsenian

Place of birth: Bir-Ahmad, Izmit, Turkey [the same shifty designation, this time compounded with the presence of a Turkish name of their native village which bore the Armenian name of Khasgal]

Date of birth: 1867

Name of father: Hovhannes Der Arsenian

Place of birth of father: Bir-Ahmad, Izmit, Turkey [the same story all over...]

Date of birth of father: 1847

Name of mother: Srpouhi

Place of birth of mother: Bir-Ahmad, Izmit, Turkey [and again...]

Date of birth of mother: 1850

Nationality: Ottoman (formerly) [the word in brackets is added in handwriting. It is apparently written to specify the original nationality my great grandfather had had. This is the only place where the distinction between Turkey and the Ottoman Empire is made on the document. The word "formerly" also hints that before the period he was given this certificate, he must have had no legal status, except probably as a refugee in the different countries he resided in, after the displacements due to the genocide, since the Ottoman Empire ceased to exist after WWI. One little word, encapsulating so many hidden layers of my family history.]

Nationality of Father: Ottoman
Nationality of mother (before marriage): Ottoman

Religion: Christian Armenian

Occupation or profession: None [my great grandfather was the church chancellor in his hometown as well as a well-known healer and bone-setter both in his native village before the genocide, and in the different cities he lived in after the deportations. In Mosul, where this document was given to him, he continued to practice his profession, although he did not accept any financial renumeration for it. There are many family stories of villagers and peasants thanking him for his generosity by sending gifts of food and dairy produce.]

Usual place of residence: Mosul

Married, single, or widower: Married

Present Address: Mosul, Sheikh Omar Place

The text of the Oath of Allegiance follows, with my great grandfather's signature at the end, which I can distinctly read - Hagop Hovhannes.

[At the bottom of the page, almost as an appendage, it reads:]

Particulars of the wife and children, under 18 years of age

Name: Isgouhi Hampartsoum Pilikian [my great grandmother]

Place of birth: Turkey [the ubiquitous place...]

Age: 1875
This tattered document is the only concrete, solid, touchable link to a past defined in our family memories by exile and loss, and by which I can define the mental and emotional exile of my parents' generation and of mine.

My mother Arsenouhie was born in Mosul, Iraq - ancient Ninveh as she often likes to say. My maternal grandfather chose to settle there, after having reached the nearby city of Kerkuk in their initial wave of deportation. My father, Alphonse, was born in Dikranagerd-Diyarbekir, where my paternal grandparents met after the first wave of genocidal killings, in an attempt at a return, at a rebuilding of shattered lives.
A few months into his infancy, a new tide of deportations swept his family a second time. Subsequent displacements brought them first to Syria and later on to Lebanon. All my father's identity documents, however, including his death certificate, proclaim him to have been born in Beirut, the capital city of Lebanon. My parents' marriage certificate is the only official document deviating from that norm — it states Dikranagerd to be his birthplace. Then again, the certificate was given by the Armenian Catholic Church where my parents were married. Even though the church as a religious institution enjoyed certain privileges, its authority in Lebanese government circles was primarily accepted within
the framework of the civil status of its members: births, marriages, divorces, certain issues of inheritance, but not more. The only document then, that truly proclaims my father's place of birth has no official value at all.

The mystery of his double birthplace is safeguarded in family memories. Before making the final move from Syria to Lebanon in the early 1940s, my paternal grandfather, who worked as a functionary in the French colonial civil authorities, took the precaution of changing all his sons' birthplaces to Beirut, in their official documents. This "far-sightedness"
on his part then, also helped them procure Lebanese nationality early on, something that was coveted in those times.

My parents' paths converged in Beirut, Lebanon, where both their families had moved within a decade of one another. Lebanon then was hailed as the "Paris of the Middle East," a relatively "safe" haven for many diasporan Armenians, and was soon to be known as "the backbone of the Armenian diaspora." Never mind that there were already signs of political unrest, of a few brushes with civil war in the late 1950s. Lebanon was still fairly "stable" compared to the neighboring countries where unending coup d'etats were the order of the day.

And so I was born in Beirut, of diasporan parents who had already relocated twice, and of exiled grandparents who were displaced many times over. You can say that displacement was in my genes, just as my memory of loss was prenatal. My happy childhood was punctuated with the stories of my grandparents and their unreal dreams of a return to a place that was lost irretrievably. Little did I know then that return in its many manifestations would become a leitmotiv in my life. Like many of my grandparents' generation and also of my parents', those dreams of a return to a lost homeland were transposed onto a possible "return" to the surviving segment of the homeland in the tiny republic of Soviet Armenia.¹ Even though in reality the actual "homeland" of then Soviet

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¹ The republic of Armenia today is one tenth of the historical homeland, which covered what is now eastern Turkey. After centuries of foreign rule, a tiny territory in the eastern part of the traditional Armenian homeland declared a short-lived independence in May 1918. In November 1920, it became a Soviet republic and regained its independence in September 1991. The 1915 genocide planned and perpetrated by the Ottoman government, affected the Armenian citizens of the Ottoman Empire in historical Western Armenia. In Soviet times, different waves of immigration, popularly known as "repatriation," were organized to Soviet Armenia (starting right after WWII until sporadically the mid-sixties) from various diasporan communities and at the behest of the Soviet Armenian government. A huge number of Armenians heeded the call, mostly survivors of the genocide and their progeny. There were various "immigration committees" set up in diasporan communities to organize the task. My maternal grandfather was on one such committee in Mosul in the late 1940s. He longed to take his family to Armenia as well, but was told by the organizers to wait for the next wave, which never materialized.
Armenia, was very different from the homeland now lost and become virtual, those dreams of a "return" (how can one return to a place one has never been to?) were not only real, but were also infused with a lot of nostalgia, with a longing for home, for belonging, and also with a pride for having survived and become a republic (albeit a Soviet one).

My memories of my idyllic childhood end abruptly, almost overnight, with the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon in April 1975. The year before, I had finally had my first identity card with a photograph. This was the first step towards adulthood. ID cards for children under twelve in Lebanon then, had no photographs. My initial ID had a mistake in my name. Armenian names being very different in pronunciation from local Arab ones, were sometimes transcribed with errors in Arabic in the official documents. My name, Hourig, was transcribed as Hourbg in Arabic. It was literally a mistake of a stroke. The letter signifying "i" in Arabic had two dots, while the letter "b" was distinguished in shape from "i" by only one dot. In order to procure my new photograph ID, it was decided to correct the mistake. At home, there were endless jokes and teasings, mostly initiated by my father and my brother, about my "ID name." I remember how amused my father was telling me I would have to go to court and swear under oath my name was actually Hourig, not Hourbg, in case the family ID files would not corroborate the fact. I, on the other hand, could not understand why I needed to prove what my name was. It felt the most absurd and surreal of things one could/would do. In addition, my name was such an integral part of myself, of who I was, that I could not fathom how one could begin to prove it or why...

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2 On April 13, 1975 in Beirut, the right-wing Phalange party militiamen shot at a bus full of Palestinian women and children which was passing through the Beirut suburb of Ain el Remmaneh. 27 people were killed as a result. An incident intended to provoke armed conflict, it is seen by many as the trigger to the fifteen-year-long civil war in Lebanon (Fisk, 1992, p. 78).

3 The Lebanese government also issued family ID files that were used for passport applications. These listed the complete record of all family members, with corresponding places of birth and registration districts.
Luckily, I was saved the ordeal. Those family files proved beyond a doubt that the scribe with the missing dot was at fault, and that I was who I was, with a vowel lodged so strategically in the second syllable of my name. That path towards adulthood felt so smooth all of a sudden. I remember posing happily for the black and white photo, told to smile somewhere into the blank air, with my unruly curls brushed to a deceptive calm, flat-chested, and in my new pink dress with its upper part covered in the then totally "in fashion" elastic band waves.

Figure 13: My adolescent self in my identity document
That same ID I had so longed for, became a hated object very soon. With the onset of the civil war, identity cards became deadly weapons. At checkpoints they determined who was to live and who was to die. A name, a religious denomination, an ethnic belonging, all were laid bare on a small sheet of paper yielding enormous, other-worldly power. Those few pen strokes defined your "identity," who you were, what was to become of you. In many cases, that piece of paper was worth more than the person it was assumed to represent. I started hating my ID as much as I hated the checkpoints. I didn't want to be an adult anymore. At least not in the world around me. Borders sprung everywhere in the city, unpredictably, whimsically, on street corners, growing like mushrooms, manned by hooded militia waving guns. In popular lingo "flying checkpoints" were mobile borders, set up by a handful of gunmen with a few sandbags, on the spur of a moment, bent on random kidnappings. And then there was the "green line," the imaginary yet extremely present border line that stretched like a gaping wound in the heart of the ancient city of Beirut, dividing it into East and West, the two main warring factions. What constituted a warring faction changed definitions many times over in the long years of the civil war, and many other internal borders and checkpoints were drawn, redrawn, dismantled, remantled and drawn yet again on both sides - yet the "green line" kept an ominous existence.

Until then, growing up as a diasporan Armenian, in the hostland landscape of Lebanon, I had learned to internalize daily border crossings of a linguistic and cultural nature. My mother tongue and first language was Armenian. The official language of the country was Arabic. A French colonial influence was still palpable in the small post-colonial independent republic of Lebanon on many levels, whether linguistic, cultural or political. At the same time, with the prominence of the United States in cold war politics, the influence of English was also on
the rise. The world I grew up in had a multilingual and multicultural reality infused in it in many ways; yet at the same time, there were always invisible borders around each of these realities you learned to navigate. As a diasporan Armenian, I also "naturally" had a hyphenated identity. I was Lebanese-Armenian, and like many other hyphenated Armenians all around the globe, wherever I went, I had to carry the burden of a hyphen. There was also the homeland, dreamed of and mostly imagined. The most potent symbol of it, mount Ararat inscribed on the psyche of any Armenian, lay outside that homeland, behind impenetrable borders. And so, on all counts, I had mastered the art of all those emotional and internal border crossings. However, I was not ready for the reality of the new physical borders that populated our lives overnight; borders that changed constantly and capriciously, decimating people’s lives sometimes so ruthlessly.

In times of blind shelling, which characterized many phases of the civil war over the years, abodes of the dead became virtual hellholes as much as the abodes of the living. Two out of the three Armenian cemeteries lay across the "green line” in Beirut. They were among the hardest hit. In retrospect, it is easy to depict in those episodes now, the heavy symbolism of border crossings, physical and metaphorical. At the time however, it was all part of the surreal landscape of our lives, something we tried hard to make meaning of and to understand, in order to name the spiraling violence around us. My father had instilled a family ritual of visiting the graves of not only family members, but also of friends, acquaintances, prominent intellectuals of the community, at least twice a year, during the customary merelots (memorial) days. It seems to me

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4 Mount Ararat is now located within the territory of Turkey, on the border with the present-day republic of Armenia.
5 Following each of its major feasts, the Armenian church has Merelots or Memorial Days. These are consecrated to pay respect to the dead. Usually, gravesites are visited by family members and upon request the parish priest may also offer a prayer on the site. The two most important memorial days are the day after Armenian Christmas (January 6) and Easter Monday.
now, the more absurd the war became (and in the end, all wars are absurd), the more brutal and senseless the violence, the more he insisted on keeping this ritual intact. He made a point of visiting known and unknown graves, surveying the damage, lighting a candle, murmuring a prayer, standing there in silence. We talked often of abandoned graves, of the compounded sense of loss they create, and of families who remain scattered and dispersed even beyond the ultimate border a grave signifies. Displacements, relocations, whether forced or by choice, often imply graves left behind, with no one to tend to them. Somewhere behind those discussions, probably also lurked the powerful image of Der Zor as a symbol-imprint of that loss and dispersion on a massive scale. The inevitable happened with my father's passing in the late stages of the civil war. We buried him during an ominous lull in a fighting round, in the family grave, in one of those cemeteries along the "green line." I left the country shortly afterwards and never returned. In all my years living in Canada, I have given up my father's family ritual. Instead, I visit old cemeteries in my travels and keep a photograph of the final resting place of my maternal grandparents, who in their old age went through yet another displacement, when they had to move to England. The inscription designed on black obsidian stone reads Hayk', Armenia in Armenian, hovering on an image of mount Ararat — Elusive/illusive borders to the end.

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6 Desert area in northern Syria, synonymous with death marches.
7 Obsidian is formed when volcanic magma flows onto the Earth's surface and solidifies into a glassy solid. Armenia is rich with the black variety of obsidian, which among other things is popularly used as a headstone in cemeteries.
In tangible border crossings outside my birthplace meanwhile, I got accustomed to feel unwelcome, to have a suspect identity, because of the passport I bore. In these instances, the hyphenated part of my self I carried, the many-dimensional internal shifts I was familiar with, the multiple languages and selves I could juggle, the hybridity I felt comfortable in, never mattered. I was judged by who my passport declared me to be — the national of a country wrought by violence and lawlessness, hence by association an endangering element. My disdain for identity documents grew exponentially with each humiliating wait for endless hours in front of foreign embassies to get a visa stamped, with
each questioning I encountered with immigration officers at airport terminals, flipping through the worn out and stained pages of my passport and gazing at me intently. In the end, I grew tired and sought to shed this unwanted skin at any cost. That is the end of the Lebanese hyphen and the beginning of the Canadian one in my life - A new story, a new chapter, a new diasporic frame. I have found though, that there is no escape. Inevitably, my birthplace on the Canadian passport, still raises eyebrows, especially on certain borders. If in the past though, there was a slight chance that my name could give away my ethnic belonging, now it is just a “foreign,” maybe at best "exotic" name, one of many others encountered daily in a country full of immigrants.

Figure 15: A kaleidoscope of my identity documents

All the different places of birth and death of my family members, signifying different temporal and spatial dimensions and hybrid diasporic
frames they inhabited, are bound together through my memory, through my conscious acts of re-membering. I am sometimes acutely aware of the role that memory plays in my constant constructions of my identity. Hall writes:

Identity is a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation....We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context,' positioned. (2003, p. 234)

My ensuing exploration of the diasporic experience must be seen from my particular positioning, and the understanding my embedded and situated self affords me in the topic.

AN ATTEMPT TO FRAME THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE

In order to think truly, one must understand the nature of the subject, that is its definition. Definitions are intrinsically linked to the process of understanding. They clarify the essence of a subject. (Davit' Anhaght' [David the Invincible] in Brutian, 1980, p. 41)

As with etymologies of all words, looking at the roots of the word "diaspora" reveals a wealth of history. Deriving from the Greek diaspeirein which contains dia meaning across and speirein signifying a scattering of seeds (Suny, 1993; Töloöyan, 1996; Butler, 2001; Braziel & Mannur, 2003) the term has deeper roots than its Greek origin. It has initially derived from the proto-Indo-European root per- meaning to scatter, to spread, to sow. The phër- or phër-s forms are the emphatic forms of the same root. Both the Armenian  uğğunγ [spiurk'] and the Greek speirein are later derivations of the proto-Indo-European root

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8 Davit' Anhaght' or David the Invincible is a V-VI century AD Armenian neoplatonian philosopher.
There is a great leap, of course, from the formation of a word and its etymology to its appearance in our consciousness in its present significance. Tölołyyan traces the trajectory of the word from its first appearance in Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*, to describe the dispersion and exile of the population of the city of Aegina upon its destruction; to the more often quoted usage in the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Torah circa third century BCE, referring to the exile of the Jerusalemite elite to Babylon in the sixth century BCE (1996, p. 10-11). In doing so he carefully details how the concept of "scattering" has changed its meaning in subsequent usage, from the sowing of seeds to the more violent rupture due to uprooting and exile.

Diaspora scholars agree that diaspora theory and conceptualization has undergone major changes in the last two decades because of the effects of transnationalism and globalization. Braziel and Mannur define diaspora as historically referring to "displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration or exile" (2003, p. 1). According to Suny, diaspora can be "a simple demographic declarative" referring to anyone living outside their homeland as well as can be narrowed down to refer to those communities only that maintain a relationship with the homeland, whether real or imagined (1993, p. 213). He does make an important distinction, though, in the inner workings of the diasporic dialectic, which is both centripetal and centrifugal at the same time, thus revealing the complexities of what define diasporas. In particular,

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9 Hrachya Adjarian is considered the foremost linguist of the Armenian language. Among his major accomplishments are the seminal 4-volume Armenian Etymological Dictionary and the multivolume Dictionary of Armenian Names. (The latter is also etymologically oriented). In exploring the etymology of the Armenian term for diaspora, *spiurk*, apart from Adjarian, I also consulted various other sources, including both popular and scholarly dictionaries, principal among them the famous 19th c. *New Dictionary of the Armenian Language*, considered widely to be the first Armenian etymological dictionary. For details see Appendix 3, Endnote 1.
the reference here is to the "pull in two directions: return and merger with the homeland, on the one hand; self-definition and distance, on the other" (1993, p. 214). For Töloöyan on the other hand, diasporas are "exemplary communities of the transnational moment in history" (in Suny, p. 214).

From the etymology of the word to the definition of its concept, it is important then to look at the defining characteristics of what constitutes a diaspora. This is what Töloöyan sketches in his exhaustive explanation. According to him, the earliest examples of usage of the term in both Thucydides and the Septuagint already encompassed an "ambiguity." While in the former the violent scattering referred to a traumatic uprooting of a population from its homeland, in the case of the latter, there is neither "uprooting of an entire population" nor "destruction of the homeland." It is only much later with the destruction of Judea by the Romans, that the word diaspora, within the Jewish consciousness, is permeated with the suffering associated with the lost homeland (Töloöyan, 1996, p. 11). In the classical sense of the word, defining factors of a diaspora are:

1. ... A coercion that leads to the uprooting and resettlement outside the boundaries of the homeland of large numbers of people, often of entire communities...

2. ... The departure of a group that already has a clearly delimited identity in its homeland...

[In addition,]

3. Diasporan communities actively maintain a collective memory that is a foundational element of their distinct identity.

4. ... Diasporas patrol their communal boundaries.

5. Diasporan communities care about maintaining communication with each other...

6. Diasporan communities maintain contact with the homeland when it persists in identifiable form. Lacking
that, they exhibit a communal will to loyalty, keeping faith with a mythicized idea of the homeland....the desire to return to the homeland is considered a necessary part of the definition of “diaspora”....[The return can also be] rather a re-turn, a repeated turning to the concept and/or the reality of the homeland and other diasporan kin through memory, written and visual texts, travel...The orientation towards the homeland center can be symbolic, ritual, religious. (Tö lölyan, 1996, p. 12-15)

These echo William Safron's criteria for defining diasporas which include:

1. dispersal to two or more locations
2. collective mythology of homeland
3. alienation from hostland
4. idealization of return to homeland

According to Butler (2001), most diasporan scholars agree on three basic features of diaspora to which he adds an important fourth. First, in keeping with the idea of "scattering" and "spreading," it is essential that there be a minimum of two locations after the initial dispersion or displacement. This secondary dispersal is important for the later creation of links and networks among the various diasporic communities. Second, there must be some form of relationship, whether symbolic, virtual or actual, with the real or imagined homeland. Third, "there must be self-awareness of the group's identity." This awareness not only connects the group to the homeland, but also creates cohesion within the group itself. This form of identity construction becomes crucial in the survival of the group as a cultural unit as well in the long run, especially when the multigenerational aspect factors in. This brings us to the fourth feature, "involving the temporal-historical dimension," predating the existence of the diasporic group over more than two
generations (Butler, 2001, p. 192). "Diasporas are multigenerational," explains Butler, "they combine the individual migration experience with the collective history of group dispersal and regenesis of communities abroad" (p. 192). I return to the concept of identity construction and the role it plays in the survival of the group as a cultural unit, in the following section, since I believe this is an important aspect in understanding the Armenian case especially with the impact of the genocide, and the lived experience of mental/emotional exile of subsequent generations. First, though, I return to both Töloöyan and Butler for the insights they offer in the shifting understandings of the concept of diaspora.

Sökefeld and Schwalgin talk of the diasporic experience as an "inbetweenness" described by Clifford, which was also a "lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (Clifford in Sökefeld & Schwalgin, 2000, p. 2). However, as both Butler and Töloöyan point out, there are more complexities to the diasporic consciousness than this. In talking about the contribution of diasporas to hybridity and multiplicity in belonging, Töloöyan clarifies that diasporas do not exist either in opposition or submission to the nationalism emanating from the homeland. They need to be apologetic neither for the hybridity of identities, nor for "an alleged lack of authenticity" that seems to characterize them. Rather, "the stateless power of diasporas lies in their heightened awareness of both the perils and rewards of multiple belonging, and in their sometimes exemplary grappling with the paradoxes of such belonging" (Töloöyan, 1996, p. 7-8). Having said that however, it is noteworthy that there is a vital element of responsibility, accountability and loyalty in a diasporan membership, that distinguishes it from other groups (Töloöyan, p. 15). In the shifting understandings of the diasporan constructs, both Butler and Töloöyan mark the move to
broader understandings of the definition of diaspora, as opposed to the more restrictive traditional paradigm. Töloöyan marks this as the "discursive and representational practices" that focus on how the community and/or the individuals within it see and represent themselves (1996, p. 16). Butler argues that the modern usage of the term diaspora is more inclusive and empowering, with a perceptible shift away from a sense of powerlessness and displacement that was more characteristic of the traditional understanding of the diasporan construct (2001, p. 190).

Apart from the inherent discursive issues, which are important to clarify, this conceptual shift is a very important one. Moreover, such a conceptual shift casts the diasporic experience under a totally different light, bringing it forth from a passive to a more proactive role, together with its impact on construction and negotiation of identity (both on the individual and collective levels) within diasporic frameworks.

This is also where the distinction between an ethnic and diasporic existence is nestled. While the latter is conditioned by an active relationship and a connection to the homeland on a collective level, the former is at best engaged in this type of a relationship on an individual level only, if any (Töloöyan, 1996, p. 15-19). Töloöyan thus distinguishes between the ethnic membership — that of a symbolic "being," and the diasporic membership that demands involvement, engagement, responsibility, accountability. In this paradigm identity is both a marker and an agent, I argue. The engagement and involvement can then take different forms in active participatory roles in the politics and culture of the hostland-homeland continuum (Butler, 2001, p. 191). In recognizing the flux and process in construction of identities, it also becomes important then, Butler argues, to address and include the reality of multiple identities and various phases of diasporization in all conceptualizations of diaspora (p. 193).
Reflecting on all these different aspects of diaspora theory, I situate my work and my understandings within this larger theoretical framework of the diasporic experience. Tölöyan speaks of the "humanist intervention" as understood in the "diasporic and transnational cultural productions" (1996, p. 28), revealing the complexity of the diasporic identity with its many subjectivities. I would like to think of my research inquiry as an "experiment" that is at the crossroads of such an "intervention," an attempt at yet another border crossing if you like, that combines the "representational" with the "discursive" Tölöyan speaks of (p. 16). My goals are to reveal the many layers of our subjectivities, to see how it affects our lives, both within the domain of the individual experience, and the wider collective one; both at the level of the diasporic collectivity and the broader societal one.

In proposing a methodological template to study diasporas, Butler suggests five dimensions, which include "reasons for, and conditions of, dispersal; relationship with the homeland; relationship with the hostlands; interrelationships within communities of the diaspora; and comparative studies of different diasporas" (2001, p. 195). I strongly believe that studying individuals and their diasporic constructions of identity is an equally important category, since it will shed light on how identity is negotiated, hybridized, retained, reinvented within the membership of the diasporic group. In that sense, I believe my inquiry is situated at a cornerstone that can highlight the impact of multigenerational diasporic experiences and narratives on constructions of identity. Tölöyan argues "the diasporist project...is to enhance the articulation between the past and the present, homeland and hostland segments of the transnation" (1996, p. 30). This is a very proactive image of a diasporic existence, one that is based on praxis, on flux and on the need to constantly understand and reinvent itself, both on a personal and collective level. It is also where I ultimately situate myself.
the armenian context

In Armenian, the concept of ուժեղում [spiurk']-diaspora is accompanied by the concept of գահուղ [gaghout'] (colony) referring to the worldwide Armenian diasporan communities, echoing the Jewish term գալուտ signifying communal exile (Suny, 1993, p. 214; Tö löyan, 1996, p. 9; Butler, 2001, p. 191). Recently in a discussion, an acquaintance pointed out to me that the usage of the word գահուղ in Armenian is closely linked to how we regard issues of Armenian identity. According to him it is mainly associated in our minds with the concept of հայապահպանում [hayapahpanoum] — the preservation and maintenance of Armenianness; whereas it is becoming more and more imperative to focus on the other, positive and active aspects of identity construction. To do so, he suggested a shift in terms from գահուղ with all its painful associations of exile, loss and dissociation, to համայնք [hamaynk'] signifying community. This positive shift in terminology would then focus on actual community building, and lead to the more essential phase of հայակերտում [hayakertoum] — that of creating, constructing and reinventing Armenianness as identity. Needless to say, his argument is fascinating. Hayapahpanoum is a complex noun, made up of the words hay signifying Armenian and pahpanoum, meaning preservation or protection. Hayakertoum contains the words hay signifying Armenian and kertoum meaning construction. Hayapahpanoum is a term heard often in Armenian diasporic circles, from school classrooms to public podiums, as a mechanism of survival in the struggle against assimilation.

As in other established traditional diasporas, the relationship with the homeland has been central in the case of the Armenian diaspora; a relationship that is at times ambiguous, sometimes fraught with tension, and never monolithic. To give a very brief historical sketch, as the last
Armenian kingdom in historic Armenia collapsed in the eleventh century, a large Armenian diaspora began to form. Colonies emerged from Eastern Europe to the Mediterranean coast, where also a short-lived "diaproran" kingdom was established until the mid-fourteenth century.

After the collapse of that kingdom, Armenia regained its independence only in the early twentieth century, in 1918, to become a Soviet republic in 1920 and to regain independent statehood in 1991. Another fissure that emerged by the nineteenth century has deeply affected the Armenian consciousness. Russian and Ottoman imperial divisions running along the territory of historic Armenia, created an eastern/western duality that became apparent in the emerging related yet divergent cultural, linguistic, political configurations. In the early twentieth century, with the 1915 genocide perpetrated by the Young Turk regime against the Armenian citizens of the Ottoman Empire, a new phase commenced in the formation of Armenian diasporic communities. These geographically dispersed communities based on various waves of internal diasporic migrations, are also culturally and linguistically diverse (Panossian, 2003a, p. 141; 2003b, p. 1-5). Far from being a homogenous entity, the established Armenian diaspora today, mainly formed of descendants of the genocide survivors who trace their ancestry to historical western Armenia, is now also best characterized by its hybridity. I borrow the term "established diaspora" here from Panossian. He makes a distinction between "established" and "new" or "post-soviet" Armenian diasporas (2003a, p. 142). The first refers to the communities in the Middle East, North and South America, Western Europe and Australia or what also used to be termed as "external" diaspora. The second is what was known as "internal" diaspora, referring to the communities in the other former Soviet republics (even though some of those communities are historically much older than the formation of the Soviet Union.) In addition, there are also communities that used to be
vibrant historically (as in South Asia and Eastern Europe) but have almost disappeared now. To add more complexity, new waves of migrations, due to economic hardships in the homeland are reviving some historic communities in Eastern Europe, forming new ones in Eastern and Western Europe, as well as changing the internal dynamics in established ones. The recent migratory waves from the republic of Armenia for example, especially within the North American continent, have changed the internal dynamics considerably and pose new challenges to the established diasporic infrastructures. Nor is the relationship with either the hostlands or the homeland in any way confined to a simplistic equation. Panossian explains,

...for a hybrid diaspora Armenian, the homeland can alternatively refer to, or simultaneously be, the host-land (the country in which he or she lives), the home-land (the ancestral village), the homeland (the current independent republic), or the diaspora condition itself as home-land (the idea of cosmopolitan living). For such a diasporan, national identity does not emanate from a specific "kin" state (i.e. Armenia), or from ancestral territories; and it is not entirely rooted in the host country. It is, rather, suspended in between these points, embodying the tension and duality of identity characteristic of diasporan existence [italics added]. (2003b, p. 6)

This type of diasporan consciousness with its complex layers and ambiguous, more fluid allegiances, is also more engaged in a symbolic, metaphoric, "virtual" return to the homeland, than the real one. Or as Tölölyan asserts, a "re-turn" (1996), where the symbolic gesture of the gaze towards the homeland is as important as the physical act itself.

With all the fluidity and multiplicity involved however, one of the most unifying and cohesive elements of the Armenian diasporic identity is the imprint of genocide. As collective memory is a fundamental element of a distinct diasporic identity (Tölölyan, 1996, p. 13), in the Armenian case, the legacy of genocide with its continuing denial by the perpetrators, lack of recognition by the international community, internal dynamics of
intergenerational transmission of trauma, is at the heart of the diasporic Armenian identity. Hirsch speaks of the Jewish identity built "through the shared traumatic memory and postmemory of the Shoah" (1997, p. 244). Butler emphasizes the "seminal dispersal," since it defines the collective attitudes within the diasporic group, towards the homeland and the hostlands, and also towards issues of identity. The genocide for the Armenians has become a defining moment for identity, one that is also deeply embedded in attitudes towards cultural and linguistic survival. From this standpoint, the dialogical concepts of hayapahpanoum — preserving Armenianness and hayakertoum — constructing Armenianness, attain a central role in ensuing conceptualizations of the diasporic construct.

AWAKENINGS

The continuum that stretches from the concept of hayapahpanoum to hayakertoum has two important stepping stones that align to reinforce the process of identity construction. The first is rooted in the "self-awareness of the [diasporic] group's identity" and more specifically, how it becomes focal in the survival of the group as a cultural unit (Butler, 2001, p. 193). The second is the role of collective memory that acts as a "foundational element of [the diasporic group's] distinct identity" (Töölöyan, 1996, p. 13). I explore here the dual notions of language and culture in identity and how they encapsulate both the survival of the group and its collective memory.

10 Translation by Hermig Yogurtian.
11 Yeghishe Charents (1897-1937) is known as the foremost poet of modern Armenian literature. Born in the city of Kars in the eastern provinces of historic Armenia, he lived in Yerevan (the capital city of the republic of Armenia), where he later fell victim to the Stalinist purges, was arrested, imprisoned and died in prison under unknown circumstances. To this date, his grave is unknown. He wrote in Eastern Armenian.
but a tattoo can be seen, even deep under the wrinkles. One of my
we howl. And there are times when we want to wipe off their traces.
ilike signatures. Other times we just show them off. When alone, we hurt,
made them go deep. We've made them go deep. Sometimes they feel
azy's tattoos. They have penetrated deep under our skins. Others have
about her. You'll read it one day. Our identities, my identity, are like
the Bedouins, they are tattoos. My Grandmother's cousin had them.
a tattoo. I like this one too. You know, the blue marks on the faces of
How can I explain it in English? Let me choose another word. To mark as
Our identity has branded us. I like that word. To brand. To be branded.

EXCERPT FROM AN UNSENT LETTER

where countless Armenians perished during the Armenian genocide of 1915.
favorite Armenian authors, Shahnour\(^\text{13}\) says, "You Armenian lad, cannot even survive one day without sorrow." Is that true? Why cannot we be rid of this pain?

**A FAMILY FABLE**

He had only one box of matches.

My grandfather was an orphaned boy who had witnessed his younger brother lashed. He had watched his mother's eyes wither, her lips parched with thirst. He had looked in horror as they sold his sister to save her life. He had seen his father crumple into a lifeless heap, unable to bear the pain. He had held his grandmother's gaze, as she desperately held on to her last breath.

He had walked in the desert sands. He had stared death in the eyes and searched for its soul. He had sought hope and defied life. He had walked in the desert sands and survived.

The orphanage was his haven now. A roof, a cot, a bowl of food, a dry piece of bread, and a box of matches. Those were the gifts an orphan had.

"You were given only one box. We used them to learn the alphabet. We had no pencils, no notebooks. Just matches. Every morning we took them out of the box. Counted them. Then learned to line them in different shapes. Ayp — 5 matches. Pen — 5 matches. Kim — 6 matches.\(^\text{14}\) There were never enough matches to learn all 38 letters in a row. How we guarded our match boxes. It was all we had."

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\(^{13}\) Shahan Shahnour was a well known Armenian writer. His novel *Retreat without song* is set in Paris and portrays life in the Armenian diaspora in the 1920s and 30s.

\(^{14}\) Ayp, Pen and Kim [ayb, ben, gim] are the first three letters of the Armenian alphabet.
I watch my grandfather's hands trace the shapes of the letters with invisible matches in the air. His voice stumbles. I listen to his silence.

His only possession was a box of matches.

Language is the most important marker of identity. Personally, it is a subject that simultaneously evokes much pain as well as contains the seeds of hopeful change. From this perspective, my grandfather's story is not unique. Armenian genocide survivor narratives invariably refer to mythicized stories of mothers teaching the alphabet to their children by tracing the letters in the desert sands. That is the archetypal story of survival. The legacy it carries across generations sometimes feels like a burden, at other times a driving force. My, as well as countless other diasporans' concern for the preservation, transmission, and promotion of Armenian language and literacy are no doubt coloured by the resonance of these stories. However, it is naïve to look at language issues solely from this mythicized angle, without attempting to look at the different dimensions of language functionality and language loss.

Diaspora scholars agree that identity maintenance is at the core of diasporic experience (Tölöyan, 1996; Butler, 2001; Braziel & Mannur, 2003; Hall, 2003; Radhakrishnan 2003; Sökefeld & Schwalgin, 2000). In an established diaspora as the Armenian one, there are a myriad of formal and informal infrastructures ranging from internal political parties, to cultural organizations, to schools, that are engaged in the "politics" of identity maintenance. It falls beyond the scope of this chapter to go into a thick description of these infrastructures, however the Armenian diaspora has an extensive network of day schools, in addition to one-day or Saturday ones that are a feature of many of its communities. Nor do I attempt a detailed explanation of the heritage language phenomenon or literacy issues, which is a separate topic.
What I engage in here is an etching of my positioning on language as identity marker.

Personally, my belonging is comfortably and strongly rooted in my mother tongue, Armenian. I have written earlier how translation has become a pervasive metaphor in my life and how I have learned to navigate through it and with it. I have also explained that of all languages, I have a most intimate relationship with Armenian. I cannot picture myself without reading it, without writing it, without feeling it. I am always conscious of the sum of all efforts, individual and collective, that have made me learn and unravel the beauty of the Armenian language. The very private moments I pass reading poetry in Armenian, discovering and rediscovering not only its gems but a whole wealth of emotions it unleashes inside me, are also when I know that the language is anchored deep in my guts; it defines who I am. My identity is my language. Even though my first tangible experience with homeland (when I had the initial opportunity to travel and live there for three years) brought with it the reality of a duality I had to live in my own language, due to the Eastern-Western dialects of Armenian, the experience left me however, with a more intimate understanding and appreciation of that duality. What I had previously lived only in my head in Eastern Armenian through years of readings in literature, became a practical reality through my sojourn in the country. In my daily interactions, Eastern Armenian attained a new functionality. In the same token, I realize, that my meanderings in both Eastern and Western Armenian have gone through many stages of metamorphoses that are intricately linked to my trajectory on both literal and metaphorical levels.

There is a veritable phenomenon in Armenian poetry I find incredibly fascinating, of poem after poem eulogizing the Armenian language which
in reality read like intricate yet graceful love poems of the most lyrical nature. They are an attempt to capture the beauty of a language in its most translucent form, to make the ethereal tangible, to populate a collective imagination and memory with an indelible imprint of a lasting love. Together with this joyful celebration a language is, there is also a deep-seated anguish over the possibility of loss that is certainly acutely felt by many Armenians, myself among them. It is as if there is almost an in-built genetic warning system I feel, associated with survival, maintenance and creativity in the language. This outlook also highlights my personal framework in language fluency, where I find the main criteria to be functionality, relevance and creativity in any given language (Attarian, 2004; 2005; 2007).

In a diasporic existence issues of language loss and survival obviously come with the territory. Even though the Armenian case is no exception in that sense, language erosion as well as finding ways to battle it, are central issues in defining that existence, in constructing a diasporic identity. The ethnic vs. diasporic distinction Tölöyan talks about (1996, p. 16) also colours attitudes on general cultural and linguistic maintenance issues. Whereas in the former it is a choice left to the individual, in the latter, issues such as linguistic maintenance gain an urgency through generationally transmitted concepts of coherence, survival, collective memory and ties with the homeland. Having said all this, admittedly I oftentimes find it very painful to see how the language recedes little by little. When no avenues are found to make a language functional, relevant as well as a source of creativity for its users, any language is bound to be lost, and with it a cultural wealth that will remain untapped. Panossian writes,

15 For an example, see Appendix 3, Endnote 2.
'Objective' characteristics such as language, religion, knowledge of history are giving way to 'symbolic Armenianness' based on hybrid identities, a sense of history, and new ways of identifying with the collective. (2003b, p. 19)

I argue however, that the challenge facing diasporic experiences today should concentrate on how to make those "objective" characteristics "subjective" and relevant, so that as identity is redefined and reshaped, language keeps on playing a central role. In this context, the hybridity should most certainly be a catalyst opening ways for new possibilities and new creativity, and not a hindrance. It is important to analyze to be able to construct a way forward. Praxis should inform our actions. Personally, I am far from being an impartial observer on this issue. As someone who has researched alternative frameworks of promoting Armenian literacy, of maintaining and creating in the language itself, I am an active participant who looks at ways of bridging the gap between language and loss, language and self, language and identity. How we position ourselves in and around issues of language choice and usage, has a major impact on how we construct and re-construct our identities in a diasporic flux.

Cultural identity is the other cementing factor of identity construction in a diasporic experience, together with language. If language erosion and maintenance are more clear cut categories, defining cultural identity poses a challenge. There are and will always be those who define it in purist terms, adhering to strict and essentialized allegiances. Such a static view of identity feeds on many a political and nationalist agenda. The diasporan and transnational lived realities however, remind us that as Hall stresses, identities are never complete, and always in process (2003, p. 234). Even though the "common historical experiences and shared cultural codes" are important reference points, especially within a diasporic experience, however it is important to acknowledge the transformative aspect of identity construction. As Hall argues, "cultural
identity... is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being" (p. 236). This type of a paradigm empowers both the collective and the individual I believe, to be proactive. It propels forward, in the continuum I described earlier that stretches from the concept of hayapahpanoum [preserving Armenianness] to hayakertoum [constructing Armenianness].

In explaining that cultural identities are essentially a positioning constructed through narrative and memory that cannot lie unchanged outside of history and culture, Hall describes them as "unstable points of identification or suture" (p. 237). Of all his images, that of suture best illustrates the coming together of the many strands of diversity and difference that characterize and influence a diasporic experience. Whereas an essentialized and purist notion of a cultural identity would at best ghettoize a community in the name of "preservation," a recognition of heterogeneity and diversity may impel it to understand how diasporic identities become transformative agents, and are shaped and reshaped.

Radhakrishnan sees diasporas as a catalyst for change or shift in identities. They are also the locations to understand different histories (2003). Similar to Tölöyan's ethnic vs. diasporic distinction, he differentiates between having knowledge of the homeland component and an actual emotional investment in it, in the process of identity construction. Not surprisingly, this is an aspect that factors in generationally (p. 125). On the other hand, Butler argues that "it is the homeland that anchors diasporan identity" (2001, p. 204) and that "diasporan representations of the homeland are part of the project of constructing diasporan identity" (p. 205). I argue that the challenge of a diasporic existence then, is the imperative to acknowledge these shifts as well as the more pronounced difference and hybridity that come into play generationally, and to embrace these in ways that also become transformative for the collectivity at large. The important question in
this challenge is to look at how we practice our identities in actuality as Radhakrishnan also points out (2003). In Bhabha’s definition of hybridity as the “third space’ which enables other positions to emerge” (1990, p. 211), it is essentially important to understand the contexts through which the emergence of the multiplicity is made possible. Our cultural contexts condition our personal stories as Freeman reminds us, since “the self and narratives about the self, are culturally and discursively ’situated’” (2001, p. 287). What is being represented by the hyphens we inhabit in a diasporic identity? How reciprocal are the relations and the influence between the two parts of the hyphen? Is it possible for the two parts to be equal? What is the role of the individual self on each part of the hyphen? These are some of the questions that can begin to formulate the response to the challenge faced.

RE-TURNING AND RE-LOCATING THE GAZE

Nostalgia is the ache to return, to come home. (Aciman, 2000, p. 7)

[The] Greek nostos [in nostalgia] is connected to the Indo-European root nes, meaning return to light and life. (Boym, 2001, p. 7)

In this section, I look at the role of memory in the diasporic construct. Undoubtedly on an individual level, memory as part of the self-reflective act has a role to play in identity construction. Moreover, as is evident from research on the diasporic subject, memory has a central role in providing cohesiveness to the diasporic collective and in shaping its distinct identity. In the Armenian case, with the powerful imprint and lasting legacy of genocide, the centrality of memory in identity construction becomes even more compelling. In speaking about exile, postmemory and mourning Hirsch writes, “in perpetual exile, this/my generation’s practice of mourning is as determinative as it is
interminable and ultimately impossible. The aesthetics of postmemory, I suggest, is a diasporic aesthetics of temporal and spatial exile that needs simultaneously to (re)build and to mourn" (1997, p. 245).

The temporal and spatial exile Hirsch speaks of reminds me of the mental and emotional exile I feel characterizes the diasporic descendents of the Armenian genocide survivors, myself and my participants among them. The diaspora(s) are our home, yet there is a legacy and memory of an exile we carry in ourselves. The burden of the postmemory is such, that the only way to understand and come to terms with it is to find ways to heal. In order to heal, it is important to pull back the layers and engage in self-reflexivity. Writing on the same theme, Shirinian asserts that memory in its exilic mode is bound to be fragmented, since "our relationship to our past is one of disconnections" (2004, p. 38). Spatially then the diasporic construct also becomes a location to "discover and retrieve...memories" (p.35).

In her thoughtful book about the inner mechanisms of nostalgia, Boym quotes Kant’s definition of space as a function of our outer experience, and time as the form of inner experience (2001, p. 9). This paradigm made me think how the inner and the outer, the spatial and the temporal; collude and conflate, act on one another and are experienced multigenerationally within a diasporic existence. The act of remembrance itself in this case becomes an imperative as well as a healing mechanism. "From memory come the narratives, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves to ourselves and to others. Memory is identity, and how memory is remembered will affect the identity one claims," explains Shirinian (2004, p. 35).

Diasporic memory as previously mentioned is also deeply associated with the concept of return – to home and homeland, imagined, real,
mythicized or virtual. Sometimes, as in the Armenian case, the blurring of the boundaries between the real and imagined homeland(s) is complex, since for many diasporans who are descendants of genocide survivors the home-land is irretrievably lost and can only exist in the virtual. And for many, the return is more powerful as a symbolic gesture, as a "re-turn, a repeated turning to the concept and/or the reality of the homeland" in Töölöyan's words (1996, p. 14). This is where memory and nostalgia merge, to give way to what Boym refers to as "reflective nostalgia" which she explains "dwell in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance" (2001, p. 41). She clarifies that the reflective aspect itself suggests a flux, "a mediation on history and passage of time" (p. 49). In reflective nostalgia, the sense of yearning is combined with a critical stance, to look closely at individual and cultural memory, to see how and where they weave in with collective memories. For Boym, "reflective nostalgia is a form of deep mourning that performs a labour of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future" (p. 55). My interest lies in utilizing reflective nostalgia in the narration of memory and identity in the diasporic construct as a deliberate mechanism of re-locating my gaze.
This chapter explores the conceptual framework of mother/tongue and examines the Collective members' understandings of the family album metaphor. Reflecting on the role and meaning of story-keeping, loss and legacy emerge as pivotal issues.

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS AND SHOES, OR HOW VENICE GOT THE BETTER OF ME

I sometimes wonder at how life throws stories in the middle of our paths and how as they unfold, they also completely change the way our paths twist and turn.

I had worked very hard all month on a piece of writing. I decided it was time to reward myself. I deserved it. So I walked into a shoe store — where else? A few days before I had seen a pair of nice sensible black sandals there. Not stiletto mind you, but fashionable nevertheless in an Audrey Hepburn style. As soon as I approached the shelf, a salesperson came along. We all know how annoying they can get. I prepared for the silly salespeople talk with a grim look on my face. I turned around and could not contain my surprise. My old acquaintance Sevag was standing in front of me, equally astonished. What was an artistic person like him, a talented painter with a degree in classics, doing selling shoes I wondered. We hugged, kissed, chitchatted as I turned towards the shoe shelf with a totally different outlook. And lo and behold, all sense of practicality washed out in an instant. Sitting on the shelf was the most
beautiful sandal I had seen. So delicate that I had a hard time imagining it on a foot. I was mesmerized. It certainly looked like it had somehow traversed from Renaissance Venice to here and now—a fashionable Venetian clog that would have looked oh so pretty under those layers and layers of flowing silk, lace and velvet, in a reclining position of course—and I heard my voice asking Sevag for "a six please in that pretty one."

Two whole minutes while Sevag rummaged in the boxes and came back with a kind of apologizing smile. "Sorry Hourig, there is no six in that model." "Six and a half?" I asked still hoping against hope. "The one on the shelf is a seven if you want to try." Yeah, I’ll try. My foot slid in the ever so delicate clog. It was a weird sensation. I had never worn anything in that style; for goddess’ sake, it had little flowers on it! I looked in the mirror and I sighed obviously in pain. It was a bit too big. Sevag examined my foot. "Yeah, it’s big. You do need half a size smaller." I looked longingly, taking my leave of the little dream of Venice that had materialized in front of my eyes. "Wait a minute, that’s a seven and a half you’re wearing. I got it wrong. So you should try the seven. They’re made small." And the chandeliers were ignited in full force again. Seven in my Venetian clogs. The perfect fit. I was in love. I looked and looked and felt the pull. That was it, I had to get them. All sense was out the window of course. What would I wear them with? When would I wear them? Where would I wear them? I realized I was pulling an "Arsine" here with her many pairs of shoes and my dad’s loving warning, Առնե, մեր մի փոքր տութա, եթե անձնի այս անհատական էին կան իմ՝ "Arsig, one more pair of shoes and I will have to move out of the bedroom..."/

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1 Arsine or Arsig is an affectionate form of my mother’s name, Arsenouhi.
Well, I didn’t have anyone in my bedroom who could threaten me that way, but did I need this utter besottedness right now? What about those sensible black sandals? Sevag let me battle my demons while repeating in a low voice, “They are beautiful Hourig, they are really beautiful. And look at that velvet brim.” My heart was molten lava already. “Do men ever have this love affair with shoes or is it something in our genetic coding?” I asked Sevag. “I’m getting there,” he answered. Well, yeah, you’re an artist, my gray cells answered back. I walked to the cash, chucked out the little piece of plastic and looked adoringly at my clogs. We will live happily ever after, I thought. “And I can always put them on my bookshelf if I don’t wear them,” I said aloud. Sevag nodded in agreement. I walked out with the bag. I could not wait to show them to my mother. A little while later I confessed to her proudly that I finally had become her — ah this mother-daughter reunion finally sounded sweet. I took out my little pride and showed them off to her. She gave a very approving look. “They are beautiful,” she affirmed. “And I can always display them with my books if I end up not wearing them,” I blurted out in breathless justification. She disapproved immediately. “You’ve bought them to wear them. Don’t you ever do something madly stupid like that! What do you mean you’re going to put them with your books?” The meeting of two women at the mother-daughter crossroads was gone puff in the air again and I was a little girl nodding in agreement to what my mom said.

A couple of hours later when I had settled in front of the computer reading my emails, my mother barged into my room. She disapproved immediately. "Listen to me, don't you go not wearing them.
They're beautiful and you'll have to put them on. Don't think about this bookshelf nonsense,"/ and we both laughed. In that instant we were two very equal women, fretting over our shoe obsessions. I thought of how I had tried so hard to tell my mother (and myself in the process) for all those years, that I was a grown independent strong woman, I had my own life, I was not part of her womb anymore. Yet it took a pair of Venetian sandals to get me there in one tiny instant. I just wished I could bottle that feeling, so I could let it out in little increments whenever the womb got in between us again...

So now I have the perfect shoes to wear on any day I feel I need to be elsewhere in this world. And all those times I won't be wearing them, they will still go on my bookshelf. I will just charge shoe seeing admission to select friends who are interested in miraculous mother-daughter bonding stories...

Figure 16: Venetian clogs
"Mother/tongue" signifies for me both speaking *with* the tongue of the mother and speaking *to* the tongue of the mother. I have felt that sometimes there is a dichotomy between the two. Certainly, for a long time, I have also faced the dilemma of keeping my loyalty to both, while being careful at the same time not to lose my autobiographical voice in the process. My own mother tongue, Armenian, which is also my first language, lies solidly at the cornerstone of my identity. Yet, I also inhabit a duality of self and voice manifested in the two lived languages in my life, English and Armenian. In an earlier chapter I have written how "translated selves" is a recurrent metaphor I live daily. My *self* that is the sum of my lived experiences in Armenian, is revealed through my *voice* which often theorizes these experiences in English. This convenient duality, while helping me craft my autobiography, often helps create a certain detachment in its process, to name and word the experience. Understanding and navigating through this duality however, does not diminish the dilemma of facing a dichotomous choice of loyalty I mention above. As I thought more about the concept of "mother/tongue" I began playing with the word and its connotations in Armenian. That is to say, for the first time I reversed the process of "self" and "voice", of "living" and "theorizing."

In Armenian, mother tongue is ԱՄԵՐՈՒ [mayreni lezou]; [lezou] is tongue and [mayreni] is an adjectival form of mother, pertaining to the mother and signifying an ancestral, inherited, transmitted aspect. Most often, [lezou] is dropped and we only use ԱՄԵՐՈՒ [mayreni] to signify the whole word, the concept of mother tongue. In reflecting on this notion in my mother tongue, I was happily surprised by my own discovery that the usage of the adjectival form of mother on its own signifies the language itself, the marker of one’s identity. In
addition, even though in Armenian "homeland" is հայրենիք [hayrenik’], literally "fatherland", yet we also use մայրենի երկիր [mayreni yerkir] or մայրենի հող [mayreni hogh], literally "mother country/land" to signify it. In the same vein, the symbol of the homeland, appearing in myriad artistic and literary forms over the centuries, is Mother Armenia/Մայր Հայաստան [Mayr Hayastan]. Interestingly, there is also a subtle differentiation between two forms of adjectives derived from the word mother in Armenian. Մայրական [mayrakan] is maternal, motherly and is used in a wider context to refer to what relates to the mother. Մայրենի [mayreni] on the other hand is used only in a handful of terms, to describe a belonging in identity, whether it is through a linguistic or territorial marker. It is tempting to think that the vestiges of an ancient mother goddess culture have probably infiltrated the linguistic structures and helped shape the creation of an archetypal figure. However, this is another story that will wait for another time to be told. My reflections on the "maternal" on the other hand, apart from making that strong link between the matrilineal narratives of my family and my own maternal-mother/մայրենի tongue of my lived experiences, conceptually led me to another insight on how I voice my self in my autobiography.

In Armenian "autobiography" can be both Հանրական ավտոբիոգրաֆիա [ink’nakensagroutiun] and Մայրկոթում կանանց ավտոբիոգրաֆիա [ink’nakensapatoum]. While the former is "writing [gr-ou-t’iun] the life [ken-s-a] of the self [ink’-n-a]", in a literal translation of the word "autobiography"; the second word translates as "telling the story [patoum] of the life [ken-su-a] of the self [ink’-n-a]". This is a word and a concept I choose to inhabit easily, with its resonance of life history and life story. Years earlier, I had come across the idea that the stem of the word woman-իթ [kin] in Armenian is կյանք [kyank’]-life. Thinking autobiographically in Armenian, I knew this would be an interesting avenue to explore
further. What I found surprised me more. According to Hrachya Adjarian\(^2\) in his *Armenian Etymological Dictionary* (1973), փհու [kin] is a native Armenian word stem that derives from the same proto-Indo-European stem \([g\'en-]\). He cites a number of derivates from that same proto-Indo-European stem in other related languages, including Sanskrit \([gna-]\) meaning "goddess", Farsi \([zan]\), Pahlavi \([zan]\), Kurdish \([zin]\), Old English \([cwēn]\), all meaning "woman." He also mentions that in some 18-19\(^{th}\) century etymological studies in Armenian, it had been thought that փհու [kin]-woman is derived from լըտտուղ [kyank']-life in Armenian. His analysis however does not lend much credence to that explanation (p. 588-590). I was both curious and a bit disappointed, until I stumbled upon another entry in his dictionary – փհու [kin]-woman is also etymologically related to the word stem ըհու [tzin]-birth. Another native Armenian word, this is derived from the proto-Indo-European \([g\ 'en-]\) of the same meaning (p. 457-458).

There it was, my meaning, my insight. Telling the story of the life of my self was giving birth to my voice. My autobiographical inquiry, my փմկումքիքքալումասիքքանք [ink'nakensapatoum], was not only about making my self visible through my voice, it was also essentially about writing myself as a woman. The concept of the mother/tongue, my new found Անդրեանյա [mayreni], thus becomes a holistic approach to look at both perspectives of speaking with and to the tongue of the mother as complimentary positionalities, rather than dichotomous ones. The stories of mothers, daughters and granddaughters of our Collective in this and the following chapters are manifestations of this understanding of mother/tongue.

\(^2\) Hrachya Adjarian (1876-1953) is considered the foremost linguist of the Armenian language.
LEAFING THROUGH OUR FAMILY ALBUMS

Embarking on our family stories in the Collective, first and foremost meant a conscious effort to create our own framework of what a family album meant for each one of us. Anais described it as "my family network represented through images...To me it's my psychological and emotional family...It's not only my blood relatives" (Anais, Collective discussion 15.12.03). For both Nané and Mara creating their own understanding of such a framework was predicated by their first experiences with real-life family albums. Nané reminisced how she secretly peered through her family photos and imagined their stories.

They [were] my mom's [photos] or were in my dad's shoebox, that when we were kids, I would go open and look through, without anyone seeing that I'm going through their stuff. I would look at the pictures and try to imagine what they must have done or who these people might be....At one point in my life I remember that there was this little album, this one album that my mom had put together which is my baby pictures; I had taken that album and made it my own. And then at one point when I was young...I went through my mom's pictures, I actually seem to remember that I "stole" pictures from her [album] (laughs) and put them in my album, created my own continuation of the first album. (Nané, Collective discussion 15.12.03)

As Nané moved out of the family home, her mother kept the albums. She was able a few years later to retrieve some photos from the basement of their family home and keep them. However, even though she recognizes many of the people portrayed in them, she still does not know their stories as well as she would like to.

...I've been going through the very few pictures that I have. I keep thinking, I don't know anything about my family. I have hardly any pictures, I mean I know about them ḥuṣ ṣa ḏu ḫaṣṣa ḏu ḥuṣ ḏu ḫaṣṣa ḏu ḫaṣṣ, ḥuṣ ḏu ḫaṣṣ, what I've lived with them, but apart from that I have no clue whatsoever. The interesting thing is that I have no pictures and then, it's not that there aren't any pictures, there are pictures, I just have
never seen them. I used to I remember as a kid, there was a drawer in the dining room cupboard, I knew the photos were there and these are actually from one of those envelopes, that when I was a kid/ whenever my mom would leave or something, I would open that drawer and look at all the photos/ and then I would replace everything/ so I'm waiting for her to decide when the time has come.../” (Nane, Collective discussion 8.1.04)

Nané’s stories of her photo albums carry a deep personal layer tinged with overlapping folds of loss and memory. The process of reconstructing her stories with and for the Collective, also became for her a subtle act of creating and reclaiming her own family album.

Mara had similar stories of secret glimpses into family albums, yet the mood of her secrecy was shrouded more in mystery than sadness.

when you were telling about how you were [refers to Nané’s stories] climbing into the, when your parents weren’t home, getting into the box...I used to do that. Everytime nobody was home, I would climb up, and pull out those heavy albums and sit and look at all those ancestors that we had. (Mara, Collective discussion 8.1.04)

Through her participation in the Collective Mara had realized that in reality the photographs on the matrilineal side of her family were much...
fewer than the ones from her grandfather’s side. Her relationship with
the few actual photographs and artifacts of her family was an intriguing
one. Since they had literally become the vivid memory of her loved ones,
they had attained an almost sacred aura to the point that she could not
bring herself to take them out of her house. The photographs and
artifacts had become cherished objects, enveloping in them a fragile
vulnerability.

I didn’t bring [the photos] for one reason, because well, two
reasons. I realized that I don’t have that many photos of my
matrilineal side, in terms of my grandmothers. I thought I have
some of my great grandmother, but [in reality] not too many.
It’s mostly my grandfather’s side actually, because he liked to
take pictures and then there are photos of his family because
they were almost nobility...but my great grandmother’s side,
my great aunt has them in Armenia, and she never gave them
to me. There’s one picture that I [have], it was published in
this newspaper and it’s me with my great grandmother and for
me it’s like I cherish it. Then the other point is that I thought
of bringing it in and all of a sudden the thought of taking it out
of the house, just filled me with such an anxiety that I said,
"no, no, I have to make a photocopy and then I’ll take it in. I’ll
take the copies in." (Mara’s voice has changed in tone. It is
subdued now) This whole thing, it’s... I realized how attached I
am to those photos. (Mara, Collective discussion 8.1.04)

On the other hand, there was a marked difference in perspective on
what photo albums signify within her own family. The thick hardbound
volumes she told us about were in fact compiled by her grandfather, a
scientist by profession, with meticulous care and attention. On their
move to Canada, Mara faced the difficult choice of either leaving all the
albums behind or bringing at least a few of the precious mementos with
them. Her decision contrasted starkly with her grandfather’s reaction.

When I was immigrating to Canada I brought the pictures, I
just took them out of the albums because the albums were
heavy and I couldn’t bring the albums... I took them out of
there, because the photos were important for me. So I brought
all these family photos. I pulled them out and brought them
and to my shock my grandfather made this huge scene,
(imitating her grandfather’s voice) “why did you pull them out of the album? The whole thing, the importance was the album, because they were especially arranged and now they’re worth nothing.” And I was like.... (goes silent and makes an astounded face), “But, but how? But isn’t this what’s important? Isn’t this the essence? Having the picture, having the face? What does it matter how it’s arranged in the album? Who cares?” But [for him] it wasn’t worth it... and he even doesn’t look at them much you know, only when we need to ask him who is who and stuff. So that was interesting. For me, it was physically that picture, that’s what’s important. I don’t care where it is. For him, it was the actual family album or the actual arrangement, the thought put into it. He associated it differently I guess and I had no idea. I mean I didn’t even think twice before taking them out of the album. (Mara, Collective discussion 8.1.04)

Mara and her grandfather had very disparate views on the functions of a photo album. For her grandfather it was a precise record of the family history, hence once the particular arrangement was tampered with, it had lost its value. For Mara, the photographs were the essence that breathed life into the albums. They were framed memories of the loving relationships she had had with some of her close family members, and windows into imagined possibilities with others she only met through those frames. In her understanding, the physical albums and the photograph classifications became self-defeating boundaries that did not necessarily enhance the meaning the photographs evoked. Thus for Mara as well, telling and writing her stories in the circle of the Collective gave her the opportunity to draw her own self-defined paradigm of a family album.

In one of our later discussions, after hearing the stories of all the Collective members when I had finally embarked on telling mine, Anais commented that as I recount stories of my family photographs I "re-access" the "comfortable zone" that is my childhood (Anais, Collective discussion 8.1.04). Her comment was an insight on how in reality retelling our stories is an act of reconstruction through an interpretive lens. Specifically, narrating our stories within the circle of the
Collective, certainly gave each of us a new perspective into our own stories. On my part, I realized that I chose to paint my childhood in my stories in luminous colours, in contrast to the stark "darkness" I perceived of my adolescent years. That strategy helped me find and localize an optimistic outlook, a happy focus, to sustain the pain of the darkness emanating from my years of living in utter turmoil through a civil war. In comparison, at the time the Collective was meeting actively, Nané’s parents had just initiated an amicable divorce process. As Nané engaged in the story of her photographs and her memories of photo albums, through her act of recounting for the Collective, she unearthed clues in the black and white family pictures that in another time and context would have probably remained unseen. Photographs that had previously looked innocent and naïve, told her another story now that she was involved in a reflective process and a reevaluation of family relationships. It is then essentially our gaze, how we look and what we read in a picture, that makes the nexus of our story. This interpretive stance alongside memory and imagination creates the story of who we are through the photograph frames. Needless to say, our present-day context influences how we retell and what we look for in our stories, what we perceive as looking back at us when we gaze at our photographs. It is also indisputable that there may be a fair share of idealizing and romanticizing certain memories for a purpose as we evoke them. This is clearly illustrated through my own perspective of creating an internal emotional defense mechanism through the process of remembering.

...I think that we also idealize and romanticize things as we go through. I still continue to do [that] now, very consciously, [I] romanticize my childhood. Until age twelve, for me it's this very idyllic thing in my head. After age twelve the world crushed down on me and everything changed from one minute to the next. It's interesting that when I think about it, it's black and white, although I mean my childhood most probably was not... but for me right now it's totally totally golden and totally
romanticized and I do it very consciously. (Hourig, Collective discussion 8.1.04)

The question here is how and why the boundaries between memory, imagination and reality get blurred when we think of our childhoods. It was Mara at the time who pointed out in our conversation that our childhood experiences looked at through the prism of time attain a mysterious, sometimes unreal quality. "[As if it's] in a bubble and you can never really access it completely" (Mara, Collective discussion 8.1.04), she pointed out. Perception and the context it is embedded in are what direct our gaze and help us peel back the layers of memory in a meaningful way. As our context changes through time, fresh insight through a new retelling will throw more light onto the memory and open up the possibility of yet newer, hitherto unthought-of meanings. The story I told the Collective about my father's childhood memories illustrates this best.

I carry so many memories under my skin. The stories that attended my growing up and became an inseparable part of my childhood followed parallel paths. The first one dealt with the incessant retelling of my grandparents' survivor narratives, through which I most of all learned to read the silences. The second one led to my father's childhood. He was born after the deportations. The stories he told us of his childhood seemed as if etched in watercolours. So delicate. So nostalgic. So alive. The family members he told us about were either dead or were far away in a land called America. Yet I could see them, hear them, smell them. I remember thinking of father as a magician, who with one touch of his stick could fill the sky with rainbows. He believed a man should know how to be a child at heart. His childhood stayed with him until the end.

All these stories came to an abrupt end for me with the civil war in Lebanon. Instead of the eerie ethereal quality they had, suddenly they
attained a nightmarish tinge. Leaving my childhood behind almost overnight, I also came to understand the reality of all the stories told, in a different light. The parallel path continued its course. In one case, I identified with my grandparents' stories and understood first hand what they had been through. In the other, I made stunning discoveries about my father's narratives. I finally saw the stark, bleak reality behind them.

This realization came when I was barely thirteen years old. The war never seemed to end. The schools were closed. My parents worried about our education. We went to neighboring Syria, to relative safety, where arrangements could be made to send my brother to Europe and me to a boarding school in Cyprus. Those were painful times. We had already left all our relatives behind in Beirut and now, as if the shock of the war was not enough, our small family was being shattered too. In the midst of all the hard times though, I also remember our joyful moments. We were visiting friends in the city of Aleppo, where my father had grown up. He decided to take us to the parts of town where he had spent his boyhood. He was the one most excited. He was walking down the same streets and alleys, peering into the courtyards, looking at the balconies and telling tales. Amazingly everything had stayed the same. Only the people were gone. There were no more Armenians living in that quarter. He even knocked on one of the doors. The man who opened it looked at us suspiciously. Father explained he used to live there and could not resist knocking to find out if the place was inhabited. The man smiled kindly and asked us to go in. I never understood why father declined the offer. Maybe he wanted his memories to remain intact. He did not want them to be molested by the reality of the changes.

That day was a memorable one for all four of us. We walked through the narrow cobbled streets and an invisible electrifying sensation passed through us all. It bonded us in unaccountable ways. My father's past
glanced from the dark corners of those endlessly winding and mysterious streets. It was a journey back in time, which unconsciously ended up being a different journey of self discovery for each one of us. What really struck me in the whole experience, was the actual reality of my father’s childhood. It was sad and bleak and poor. Yet all his stories and memories had adorned those bygone days with the distinctly ethereal quality of fairy tales. He had woven his dream of childhood for us. Probably that was also the first time, that on a subconscious level, I thought of an author’s and reader’s perspective of the same events; of how an author changed his stance between a participant and an observer; of how this conscious stance affected narration and interpretation.

Over the years and with each new effort to take hold of my life, while everything seemed to crumble around me in the madness of the civil war, the memory of the stories and narratives I had heard provided a virtual hiding place. Now I know that I was trying to create an “autobiographical consciousness” where “time itself is trivialized; past, present and future merge...and the moment of remembering overshadows the moments remembered” (Chandler, 1990, p. 9). This process itself would ensure me a link to sanity and a world I could identify with. (Attarian, 1998, p. 12-14)

My father chose to suffuse his stories with love, compassion and a certain charm, not dwelling on the obvious hardships and pain that were part of his daily reality. His act of retelling was purposefully selective, not only to transmit a memory, but also a story. At the time of our visit to his childhood city, he also chose not to cross the threshold, even symbolically. We retell, remember, rewrite, reimagine, recreate, reconstruct through our stories, but are unwilling to cross thresholds real or imagined, because doing so would dispel the mystery of the story,
would undo the remembering. In the same vein, I never think of revisiting my childhood landscapes in Lebanon, preferring only the act of remembering and retelling, to keep the image of a framed memory of an idyllic time intact.

As we became aware in our discussions in the Collective on how our narration and interpretation are fused ever so intricately as we embark on our memory quests, our conversations inevitably led to questions of loss and legacy. Reflecting on the meanings memories evoke, Anais made a very emotional realization that a whole world was lost irretrievably with the loss of her paternal grandmother, who when she finally emigrated from Ethiopia to Canada suffered a stroke, was paralyzed and lost her speech.

...When they [the paternal grandparents] finally came, my grandmother was sick, she became paralyzed. For fourteen years she lived out of the wheelchair. She couldn't talk. So all that knowledge I was sporadically in contact with, I had no access to, because she was paralyzed. My grandmother has passed away now, she died last year. I could see the [photo] album and look at them [the photographs], but they are meaningless, because there is no one to convey me the story, I can't tap into that, I never have and I won't (she starts sobbing). (Anais, Collective discussion 8.1.04)

There is a palpable angst in Anais' words. What can we make of a family album and family photographs if we have lost the key to them? Do they become meaningless hollow husks? How can we fill in what is lost in the frames? Losing her grandmother for Anais translated into a broken link in the storytelling chain. The photographs were rendered into mute sentinels guarding over lost memories. Anais' grief was echoed in Mara's words.

I never forgave myself for not writing all the stories my great grandmother used to tell. Just the same thing...every time I think back, I think "how could I not? How could I not?" (Mara, Collective discussion 8.1.04)
Inevitably we come to feel responsible for the legacy of memory passed on to us. The legacy is also a burden fused with guilt over the loss of stories. I told the Collective about the burden I lived, when my maternal grandfather decided that I had become the family story keeper.

The burden of memory becomes too much... Last time I saw my maternal grandfather, I have no idea how and why he had this notion, he told me, "you've become the story keeper." He said these words to me. "You're the story keeper of the family. You have to know these things and you have to tell them." I remember my reaction was, "I'm not sure I can deal with that..." That's something I always think about when I look at these photos and I listen to your stories. I look at what I'm trying to do and I think, "what the hell am I trying to do?" I mean, why am I...? I mean... I don't know. To what extent can you do justice to these memories and to the burden of the memories? I've realized inescapably doing this type of work, that there is this urge I personally feel, "I have to tell these stories, I have to tell, because if I don't then they're going to be lost." I think part of my internal panic is that I'm never content with what I know. I'm always conscious that I just know very superficially, I will never be able to tap into all these things and... I feel guilty about it (pause). (Hourig, Collective discussion 8.1.04)

A quick exchange with Anais that followed my "confession" was particularly revealing.

Anais: But you already know so much... (pause)

Hourig: I never come to terms with that. For me it's

Anais: never enough? (Collective discussion, 8.1.04)

Reading through this exchange much later, I was intrigued to see our differing perspectives; how Anais was baffled by my reaction, since she thought I already knew so much, while I believed my knowledge would never suffice. As I reflect on my reaction, I understand now that my turmoil is inevitably linked to dealing with the avalanche of postmemory, of surviving an anatomy of pain. When do we decide that we know enough of the stories? How do we come to terms with the internal guilt that propels us to retell and to transmit? How do we ensure
that the chain of transmission not be broken? I am not sure I will find any answers to those questions. The best I can do is to continue to tell, to remember, to reconstruct, to story, as this writing bears testimony. Ultimately, I believe, people truly die only when their stories are left untold.
Chapter Five

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, GRANDDAUGHTERS:
PPOPULATING THE FAMILY ALBUM

This chapter aims to reconstruct the family narratives of the Collective members. Viewed through the lens of a family album metaphor, the narratives attempt to sketch missing or empty frames in the generationally transmitted stories of mothers, daughters and granddaughters.

FILLING IN THE FRAMES

27-28.1.05: I saw Sahat Debbas\textsuperscript{1} in ruins in my dream. It transposed into a giant movie screen forming the backdrop of my dreamscape. Onto it was projected the image of a woman, face split in half, holding the image of a second woman inside her, again cleft in half. The halves had come together with a visible partition between them. It was the perfect artistic portrait. Then a veil covered the image, flowing down the split portrait, covering the heads. Dust or sand was blown on them. Did it come from the ruins? Or maybe my conscious self gazing at my portrait through my dream eyes conjured it out of nowhere. I felt intuitively that the split image was my own. I saw it as a self-portrait. Who was the second woman cradled inside my portrait? Me again? Or someone else I was clasping inside me? My dream self thought the image would make a nice installation piece; I should make sure to take a photo of it when I woke up. When did naming it come into my mind? I remember a distinction I made in my head. This was not an image of virgin mary, but

\textsuperscript{1} Sahat Debbas is one of the main squares in downtown Beirut. During the civil war of 1975-1990, the Green Line dividing the city into East and West Beirut ran right through this square.
of astvatzatzin, the one who birthed god. Was it a whimsical nod, a play on the veil and the iconic way the image was portrayed? Or was the memory of Sahat Debbas, the ruins and the church of Sourb Yeghia evoked in the dream that prompted the naming? Is it the memory of my first communion there, all dressed in white, complete with veil, looking like nice cute obedient virgin-mary-to-be-wannabes? There definitely was a sense of mischievous playfulness in it all. As I looked at the portrait I had conjured up, I kept adding on the elements — the veil, the dust, the act of taking the photo. My dream self must have had a smirk looking at it...

Is there a homage/"femmage" to January 27th in all this, a curious trick my subconscious is playing on me? January 27th is when my parents got married (in the same church of Sourb Yeghia) in 1957. The image of their wedding photograph, which used to hang in their bedroom and now hangs in my mother’s room, with their radiant, joyful smiles is carved in my mind in connection with this date. The homage is to my dad who is always a luminous presence, and the femmage is to my mother. My Master's thesis was a kind of a debt I had to pay to my father. That is how I always felt. This dissertation however, is all about matrilineal narratives and the women in my life. All the mothers. And yes, it is also about reconfirmation of the past, on my own terms. It is about dealing with my internal demons and memories, both the good and the bad, the idyllic times and the war that scarred me.

In our attempts to recreate our family albums, whether for each other in our discussions or in our solitary journeys through our reflexive logs, we all tried our best to fill in the empty frames that told the stories of mothers, grandmothers, and great grandmothers. The result is a vivid portrayal of different generations of young girls and women. Like all memory work, these portraits will remain essentially unfinished, with
potential new brushstrokes revealing yet more hidden layers we were previously unaware of. However, they are not just a backdrop to our stories, but an anchor in our continuing negotiations of self and identity.

Yeraz

As we were discussing how we have heard and dealt with our grandparents' stories of survival having listened to them often as little children, Yeraz dwelled on how she saw and lived the difference of the stories on her maternal and paternal sides of the family. "[There were] two important grandmothers in my life," she recounted (Collective discussion 15.12.03), comparing and contrasting the stories of her paternal grandmother and maternal great grandmother. Her paternal grandparents lived with them at home. Like all survivors they had tragic stories of loss, which in her paternal grandmother's case was compounded with the death of her brother who had survived the genocide but fallen victim to the Stalinist purges after his repatriation to Soviet Armenia in the 1940s. "As a genocide survivor she was... she was defeated. I don't remember ever seeing her or hearing her laugh. The woman never laughed in my memory. She was always dark and depressed and depressive and depressing and gloomy..." Yeraz told the Collective enunciating almost every word and syllable (Collective discussion 15.12.03).

She contrasted "this dark woman" as she called her, with the image of her maternal great grandmother Nouritza, whom she had never met, but who had attained a mythical proportion in her childhood memories through the stories she had heard from her maternal great grandfather, maternal grandmother and mother. It is notable that she left her paternal grandmother nameless in recounting her story to the Collective, even though the grandmother lived under their roof until she passed away when Yeraz was about thirteen years old; while we were told the
names of both her maternal great grandmother (she had passed away when Yeraz's maternal grandmother was six years old) and her maternal grandmother who lived far away from their family in a rural area of Lebanon. "She [Nouritza] is so real in my imagination, or I have maybe made her real," related Yeraz emphasizing the word 'made' heavily, "and her story was something imbued with pride" (Collective discussion 15.12.03). Nouritza was courageous, independent, strong, fearless and beautiful. She was respected by both the men and the women around her and even feared by the Turks; she was an awe-inspiring woman. No wonder Yeraz's maternal great grandfather had fallen in love with her while they were both en route to deportation. She had scorned all his advances, reminding him that they were on a death march to the desert. He had persisted, she had finally given in and consented to be his wife. Their love story as Yeraz's great grandfather had continued to recount even at the age of 100, was not only a simple story of survival, but had become an example of affirmation of life and an act of defiance in the face of insurmountable odds. Through the stories Nouritza had become a larger-than-life, almost archetypal heroine. As a child Yeraz had chosen Nouritza's story over her paternal grandmother's, to confront the victimization pattern she discerned in the latter.

For me this was the genocide story. So uyqrb u'qmb lp'o n'lyp, w'ux genocide story-u 3u' n'qeq, w'ux genocide story-u n'qeq... /So she [paternal grandmother] is always crying; I don't want that genocide story, I want this genocide story.../ I could be selective. So I chose to, to... kind of internalize this [Nouritza's] genocide story.... Well, for me, I think Nouritza was the vindication of my other grandmother who was with me day in day out, you know, pulling me down... Whereas Nouritza's story was my vindication and I lived with the story, instead of living with the living figure of my paternal grandmother. (Yeraz, Collective discussion 15.12.03)

However, Nouritza's story also carried a dark secret with it and it was this secret that Yeraz had started questioning.
NOURITZA

My most potent female influence is undoubtedly that of my great grandmother Nouritza who died when my grandmother was a little girl. No photo, no frame, no portrait. Only a story, told from generation to generation.

The mythical aura around her name, character, and courage was created by my great-grandfather, who loved Nouritza, his first wife, almost to distraction to the end of his days. The stories were passed from my great grandfather, to my grandmother, to my mother, to me, and I have told them to my own daughters.

Nouritza was beautiful and fearless. She wore pants, smoked a pipe and took orders from no one.

And she had a secret. A secret I still cannot write about after thinking about how to write it for more than a year. Some stories are too harrowing to be keyed in with our own fingers; to be seen on the computer screen; to be read on a piece of paper; to be shared with others' eyes. Some stories are better kept when told but not written.

I cannot find the words to do justice to her memory.

Her story will have to remain unwritten, and only told. (Yeraz, reflexive log)

Growing up with Yeraz as children, I was close enough to her family to have heard Nouritza's story told by Yeraz's mother many times. I was privy to the 'secret' and I also had seen Yeraz many years later struggling to make her peace with it. During the Collective discussions as Yeraz started telling our circle the story of Nouritza, I was concerned for her
and was sure she would not divulge that detail. After all, we had established very clearly in the circle from the beginning that we did not need to go anywhere in our retellings that would make us the least bit uncomfortable. That is why it came as a complete surprise to me when almost at the beginning of her story Yeraz spilled out what she had kept to herself for a very long time.

Yeraz: Her [Nouritza's] story was something imbued with pride. A lot of pride. This was how it was told; but now when I think about it, I say to myself, "Oh my god, how did these people in my family tell this story with pride? How did I take it with pride?" I can't live with that now. She killed a Turk.

Anais: (confused) Who did?

Yeraz: This Nouritza. She killed somebody. On the... when they were being deported. But the way the story was told in the family, this woman, she had guts!

Mara: Ok...

Yeraz: You know... but now, I think about it, "Oh my god... she killed..." And she didn't kill one of the soldiers or anyone. She killed an innocent poor guy. This is how they told it to me. My mom told me Nouritza's story... how she went up, because she was wearing a skirt and she said to the guy who sold the yogurt...

Hourig: Tell it in context. I mean the Turk may have been an innocent bystander at this point, but tell it in context.

Yeraz: This is how it was told to me. My mom had one or two other stories, but this was my favorite. It was a bedtime story, "please tell me Nouritza medzmama's story..." you know, and no nightmares, nothing. I loved it. (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

I was not the only one astonished by what Yeraz said. The rest were so overtaken by this abrupt disclosure, that there was almost a lack of immediate reaction in the circle. Anais' spontaneous interrogative to confirm she had heard correctly as well as Mara's short acknowledgement felt as calming reassurances for Yeraz in the midst of the emotional upsurge that overtook the room. Yeraz's recounting became fragmented
from then on. She was trying to tell us the details of the story while at the same time dealing with the emotional fallout, almost struggling with her child-self for having accepted and loved the story of the heroine Nouritza. In retrospect I see that my intervention to remind her to contextualize the story was an attempt to detach her questionings and feelings of guilt from the story that was passed on to her. She then went into the details of the story as she had heard it. Her retelling was still very much fragmented.


I guess they gave the container, filled it with yogurt,
and of course she's wearing a skirt, although she also wore trousers and smoked a pipe with the men, she has to go up above you know, she said, "don't look up, look down," don't dare look at my legs. So this poor guy is looking below, she threw down the rope... this is how they've told me, she tied the rope, threw it down, got it over the man's head and strangled him. (A long silence follows)

Nané: oyyy... ok

Yeraz: This is not a joke... (there's an edge in her voice) բնականում ուղղակի է բաց ապրել իմ արժեքի, որոշ ընդհանուր... /and it's the first time I feel comfortable to tell this in public, because Hourig knows.../ last summer, she told you, we went to this conference, and... it was traumatic for me. Երազը իմ այս հարցը /The whole year/ I struggled with it, "Can I deal with this issue? Can I bring it out into the public?" And in the end, I didn't. I just told about Azad medzmama. It was very potent still, because you have so much, ություն ամեն ես ունեմ ինչպես ես հանդիպակել եմ. այն իրաբանություն է բաց ապրել/... /but this story is well, on tape now, but it is still a difficult issue for me... that revenge and Nouritza./ (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

Yeraz was obviously wrestling with ethical issues that had embedded themselves in the folds of the story. She had grown up believing her great grandmother to be a fiercely courageous woman, a heroine she had chosen to identify with and whose image she had preferred over that of her paternal grandmother who was subjugated by her own suffering. Yet this same woman was guilty of a crime. Was the victim an innocent bystander or not? If he was not, would that make Nouritza's act less of a crime? What were the details of the story that had gotten lost over time? Would those details alleviate Yeraz's painful feelings of guilt? Clearly Yeraz had difficulty reconciling the image of her strong-willed and fearless great grandmother with the horrible act she had committed. As a child, she had loved hearing her story. As an adult, she questioned how the story was passed on not only without any apprehension, but also with instilled pride. Mara's probing interpretation of Yeraz's story however, opened a new perspective into this narrative.
Yeraz: When I think of this genocide story now, it is so difficult to deal with, because it's cold-blooded murder...

Mara: I don't see it that way you know

Yeraz: Maybe.

Mara: You can't... I mean, for you, it's whatever you see and whatever you feel. But I think as children or as adults, as people so remote from the times, we're missing a lot of information and a lot of details that are not [necessarily] transmitted through generations because it wasn't proper for the mother to tell to the child, certain parts are told

Yeraz: (agrees) Yes, yes, yes...

Mara: and other parts are not told at all, so at the end you have certain features of

Yeraz: (interrupts) Well, maybe the way... they want to make it like a fairy tale

Mara: Maybe they want to make it like a fairy tale or they just want to take the traumatic parts out of it

Yeraz: Yes

Mara: And keep only certain parts in, so you don't know if that person, the yogurt vendor, was really that much of an innocent bystander or not

Yeraz: Yes, yes...

Mara: You have no way of knowing this. The chances are, personal opinion, he wasn't... But then, even if he was, nobody will know. We'll have to leave it in the past. But the fact of the story is that she was brave and she has done brave things. This was one of the many things she's done. And for a woman it is brave, for whatever reason she had at the time.

Yeraz: Well, for me, I think she was the vindication of my other grandmother who was with me day in day out, you know, pulling me down... Whereas Nouritza's story was my vindication and I lived with the story, instead of living with the living figure of my paternal grandmother. (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

Without resorting to either judgments or justifications, Mara rightfully pointed out how elements of a narrative are purposefully simplified sometimes to ease painful details. Whether or not Nouritza's act was
propelled out of vengeance or was one of legitimate self-defense will
never be resolved. However, the core of the narrative is elsewhere. It
is precisely in the way it evolves over time to create this larger than
life character — a woman who defied her times and circumstances, who
dared to survive without falling victim, who instilled feelings of
courage and dignity in a small girl who never met her, and whose story
of bravery will continue to be heard as long as it is told. On the other
hand, finally divulging this 'secret' publicly certainly eased a burden for
Yeraz. At the same time I believe, it helped her find a new detachment
from the story, to step back and look critically at the elements of the
tale, to separate her own feelings of guilt, to attempt to contextualize
the episode within a larger picture, and to let go of bygone ghosts at
last.

Earlier, Yeraz had attempted to write about this 'family secret'. She and
I had met, interviewed and written about a 95-year-old survivor,
Pergrouhi, a year or so previously. Our work with Pergrouhi had not only
led to the publication of a collaborative article, but most important of
all, it had directed us along the path to self-reflexivity and memory
work, to unearth and recount our own family stories. In doing so, Yeraz
had striven for the first time to write the story of her great grandmother
Nouritza. However, 'letting go' of the 'family secret' in such a public
manner, had turned out to be too arduous a task for Yeraz; hence her
decision to keep silent over it yet again. Writing it would have solidified
it into a reality she was not sure how to interpret at the time; whereas
telling and discussing the 'secret' in the safe and trusting circle of the
Collective much later proved to be an unexpected healing encounter for
her.
A BURDENED SILENCE

My great-grandfather Sarkis died quietly in Beirut\(^2\) on a day when the fighting was intense, and was quickly buried in the Armenian cemetery. He didn’t get his wish, even in death, to be joined with his beloved Nouritza, and to rest his bones with hers.

Grandfather Sarkis came to the city when he was a century old. He had never bothered with dentures and when he came to live with us he only had two yellow teeth in his sunken mouth. When he inhaled the smoke from his hand-rolled cigarettes, his cheeks would hollow out completely, his two teeth stick out, and his jaws outline the cave that was his mouth.

He wore a long camel-hair abaya\(^3\) that I would snuggle in when I sat down at his knees to hear his stories. His gaze would fix a point not in space but in time, and my eyes would meet his at that imaginary dot which would magically bond us in his past. How he’d loved Nouritza; how he’d fought in the Ottoman army; how he’d tricked the Turks; how he (still) loved Nouritza; and how they had never, ever, bowed either from pain or hunger.

"But now!" he would rage, "NOW!! They’ve brought me to this cement box to die and they will probably bury me here. I have to go back to the village. I want to be buried on top of Nouritza..."

*They*, were my parents, who thought he was too old to be capable of living on his own. *The village*, at the southernmost tip of Lebanon, was where he’d spent his entire life after the deportation.

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\(^2\) The capital city of Lebanon.

\(^3\) Abaya is a long, ankle length mantle, usually worn by local Arabs.
Everyday at dusk he would let out a sigh that came from the deepest folds of his soul, "shketsin mer sarere; our mountains have cast their shadows." Mer lernere, mer sarere. "Mountain" is an elevation on the landscape in English; mer lernere, mer sarere, have a nostalgic sadness that does not translate. He had lived in Lebanon for almost eighty years but this was still not his country. He yearned at every sunset for yergire,4 "our country," and now he was doubly deprived, forced to watch the sun set not behind the mountains but behind the neighbour's laundry drying on the rooftop.

My parents brought him to Beirut in the heat of the civil war, and his only wish was to die quickly. When the street fights were raging, he would go out on the balcony in the hope that a stray bullet would free him of his misery. "Oh god, spare the life of one young person, take mine!" he kept saying. He thought god had made a mistake in his ledgers and counted him with the dead, while he still had to suffer the drudgery of life far removed from everything that had ever meant anything to him. Indeed god could have been forgiven for forgetting him, for he had died a long, long time ago, in the desert.5

Sarkis was my maternal grandmother Azadouhi's father. My paternal grandparents had always lived with us. They too had stories – of hardship, of beatings by the gendarmerie, of children dying on the deportation route, of hunger, humiliation, of the endless desert trek. Their stories deeply troubled my little soul and I didn't want to hear them. I got weary of my grandmother showing me her curled up toes, crooked from the long march in the desert, exhorting me not to ever

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4 Literally meaning the world, yergir [yerkir] is an endearing term referring to the ancestral homeland in Western Armenia, from where the Armenians were subsequently deported in 1915 and led into the death marches of the Der el Zor desert in northern Syria.

5 Refers to the Der el Zor desert, which became synonymous with death camps during the Armenian genocide.
forget their significance. But how different it was to listen to my "new," or rather "new-found," grandfather. His were stories infused with courage and strength, and of struggle rather than submission, of defiance, rather than a sad resignation to the fate that had befallen them. I think, even at that age, he derived his inspiration from Nouritza. His wrinkled eyes would glow like a forlorn 17-year-old's when he mentioned her name and told her stories, and I never had enough, noren, I kept saying, noren, again, ...

Sarkis and Nouritza had met and fallen in love during the deportation march. He was taken as much by her courage and character as by her beauty. Nouritza never hung out with the women. She wore pants, smoked a pipe and discussed politics with the men. Even the Turkish men treated her with much respect. Her beauty wowed them and her courage awed them.

"She could bring a horseman down from his horse," my grandfather would boast. This woman, this legend, was so different from the other women in my life, and she soon became my hero, the one who inhabited my dreams, and the woman I wanted to become when I grew up.

When my grandfather asked to marry her, she shunned him, saying, "What difference is it going to make, you're as poor and as hungry as I am, and we probably won't live for much longer..." but in the end she gave in, and they were married somewhere along the deportation route.

Their first child, my maternal grandmother Azadouhi7 was born on a ship that was carrying the refugees to the port city of Tyre in southern Lebanon. A childless woman on the ship stole the baby and hid her. But through my great-grandfather's rudimentary detective talents, and

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6 Noren means again in Armenian.
7 Azadouhi means free in Armenian.
given the fact that the baby cried at a very critical moment, my grandfather found her and brought her back to Nouritza. This was only the beginning of Azadouhi's misfortunes.

After living for a while in the refugee camp in Tyre, most of the Armenians moved to Beirut. Work was available there, and refugee relief more accessible.

My great grandfather Sarkis, however, went in the opposite direction, further south, and settled in the village of Ain-ebl, just off the border with Israel. Some other Armenian families had settled there too, but eventually they all moved to Beirut, where there was a large concentration of Armenian refugees. All his relatives' exhortations for him to move to Beirut didn't convince him. He had work and made a decent living, and so he stayed. He ended up being the only Armenian in the village, and was known as Sarkis el-Ermeni, Sarkis the Armenian.

When Sarkis and Nouritza settled in Ain-ebl, Azadouhi was still a baby. She would grow up, witnessing her parents' struggle to adapt to the norms of a new country whose language they had to learn, and to a new village, where they would always remain outsiders.

I have heard the rest of the story from my mother. For my grandfather Sarkis, history ended when they reached Ain-ebl. His stories always ended there, and fast forwarded immediately to the present moment when he would grumble again about why he had to go back to the village to die, and be buried next to Nouritza. For all the years in between, his stare would focus on a suspended point in the room, and he would remain silent. A silence that my mother would later populate with her stories and characters; the silence of the women, whose lives were relegated to being written on the margins of men's destinies and decisions.
After Azadouhi, Nouritza bore one child after another, but they would quickly get sick and die. When my grandmother Azadouhi was almost a teenager, her brother Antoine was born. He was a weak and sickly child. Surely he would also die, like all the others before him. But he lived. It was my grandmother Nouritza who took sick and died shortly thereafter. Azadouhi became a mother before she could become a sister. As the years passed, Azadouhi blossomed into a beautiful young woman. Sarkis could see that the youth of the village were eying her differently. Yes he had stayed on in the village, but there was no way he was going to let his daughter marry an odar.⁸

He arranged a marriage for his daughter with an Armenian family from Constantinople. The groom and his family came over for a visit. Azadouhi, as was the custom, would come into the room from the kitchen only once to serve the coffee, so that she would be seen and be approved of. The short encounter was enough for her to sense her imminent exile.

The men drank the coffee and agreed on the dowry arrangements. The dignified Armenian family specified a date when they would return to make the necessary arrangements for marriage, and returned to Constantinople. Rumors circulated in the village that Azadouhi had been betrothed and was to marry. My grandmother learned the details from friends she played with on the streets, and from their mothers who had started looking at her pityingly. "Poor Azadouhi, she'll never see her brother again."

This struck terror in Azadouhi's heart. She could not yet grasp the impact of her father's decision. She wouldn't dare ask him. Never see her brother

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⁸ Odar, here signifying non-Armenian, literally means foreigner. Among a generation who had just survived a horrific extermination, marrying an odar was a stigmatizing experience and tantamount to betrayal and loss.
again? Her brother? More like her son, whom she had reared like a mother, though she herself had been motherless all these years. She couldn't abandon him and leave him to die.

The women of the village felt they had to do something, if only for the sake of Nouritza's memory. How could this heartless man separate his orphaned son and daughter? What crazy notion was this, which would almost seal his son's fate, but wouldn't let his daughter marry an odar, a non-Armenian?

The whole village seemed to be seething with the news. There was a young man, Maroun, who had been spotted by the women eyeing Azadouhi as she went to the spring for water, or played on the streets. An arrangement with Sarkis was unthinkable. So a plot was hatched, orchestrated mainly by the neighbourhood women, and one night Maroun came and Azadouhi secretly mounted his steed to flee her fate in Constantinople, and stay in the village with her brother.

They had barely made half the stretch of the village, when Maroun started to waver. How could he abduct Sarkis's daughter? This man who had fought in the Turkish army, Sarkis el-Ermeni, who feared nothing and no one? He returned when it was almost daybreak and knocked on the door, shaking with fear. He told Sarkis the full story. "Listen," he said, "I have not laid my hand on her, and I've brought her back as she left this house only a very short while ago." Sarkis raged. "She has stepped beyond the threshold of my house! She is no longer my daughter!" He struck a blow to Maroun which hurled him a few meters beyond the porch. "Get out of my sight, the two of you, and if you want to live, make sure I never see you again."
My grandmother left her father's house with lowered eyes, resigned to her fate with this stranger, this new man, with whom she had barely exchanged a few words. That blow, its humiliation, would always stand between them, and mark their relationship permanently.

They lived down a few streets in the village, but Sarkis had disowned her and would neither talk to her nor allow her in his house for 23 years. She had to pay for his humiliation as well. Hadn't he promised his daughter, man to man, to that family from Constantinople, and hadn't she forced him to bite his tongue and tell his prospective in-laws that his daughter had eloped with someone from the village?

Azadouhi had to hide behind walls and watch her brother Antoine play. She was not allowed to go near him or speak with him. They had a few hens in the yard. She would keep the fresh laid eggs not for her children but for her brother Antoine, and send it secretly to him with one of the neighbours. She hid behind walls and watched her paternal hearth. Banned and exiled. She went back to her husband's home, a stranger place still, and a stranger man.

She bore Maroun twelve children. And after all married and left, after her husband died, her brain started to slowly erase the unpleasant pasts.

After our encounter with Pergrouhi there was one thought that lingered once the volcanic surge of emotions slowly subsided. What was my Nouritza grandmother's name? Her family name. Her identifier — that label which we inherit from our fathers or append from our husbands but don't bequeath to our daughters.

I called my mother in Los Angeles. "What was Nouritza grandmother's family name?" There was a short, surprised silence. Why this question?
Why now? Then my mother gathered her thoughts together. "She married grandfather Sarkis during the deportation. In the old country, she had been married and widowed, so she probably carried her first husband's surname. Or her paternal surname? I really don't know. Maybe grandmother Azadouhi would remember. I think she still has some occasional lucid moments."

My mother was referring to grandma Azad's degenerative brain disease which was slowly spreading to different patches of her memory.

I call my sister in Beirut. "I need to know Nouritza grandmother's family name. Call Azad medzmama, or go see her, see if she remembers."

I know I'm asking too much of my sister. My Azad medzmama still lives in Ain-ebl in southern Lebanon. Access is complicated.

My sister is hesitant, but sensing the urgency in my voice doesn't cut me off abruptly and promises to try. She calls me back within a week after getting in touch with aunts and uncles who still live in the village. No more lucid moments for Azad medzmama. No, her health is otherwise not bad but her brain has shut down. She doesn't remember anyone. She remembers nothing.

When we are old and alone with only our memories, when the ghosts from the past haunt us incessantly and it becomes too much to bear, perhaps the brain wills itself into a shut-down, into a silence.

"After all my children can bear the burden of my memory. I wish to be released from its chains. I wish to die with a blank slate, in my primordial state of innocence when that wicked woman on the ship stole me from my mother's bosom and my father retrieved me. Let me be."
Is this how my medzmama feels, I wonder? I cannot know but I wish to have been able to unburden her silence, if only slightly. I want to unburden her, somehow, and yet I consciously, daily, repeatedly burden my daughters with Nouritza’s memory; I burden them with Azad medzmama’s memory, with the countless memories of all who perished in the desert, all whose bones rot under the slow slumbers of its sands. I burden them with the heavy weight of exile and genocide.

I wish, and hope against hope, that they will be given the chance to forgive, and bury the burden. (Attarian & Yogurtian, 2006, p. 17-22)

For Yeraz having her mother tell her Nouritza’s story time and time again, she reflected recently, went beyond a simple act of storytelling. It enabled her mother to tell "a beautifully heroic story about her side of the family" while at the same time creating an important mother-daughter bonding – a shared realization of a sense of belonging and an inheritance of an indomitable spirit going all the way back to Nouritza (personal communication, 15.8.07).

Yeraz’s mother Maria married very young. One of twelve siblings, she grew up in a village in south Lebanon where Yeraz’s great grandparents had first settled after the deportations, where Nouritza was buried, and where Azadouhi defied her father by marrying a local Lebanese Arab villager to be able to stay close to her very young brother. Even though Armenian on her mother’s side, having grown up in the remote village of Ain-ebl, where there were no Armenians apart from her old grandfather who refused to talk to his own daughter and her mother who had no one left to talk to in her own mother tongue, Maria’s mother tongue and first language was Arabic. At the age of sixteen she met a distant relative of her mother who fell in love with her. He lived in the capital city Beirut. They married and she moved to Beirut. Her husband’s parents, both
genocide survivors, as well as his unmarried sister also lived with them. That is how families lived then. Apart from her husband, none of them spoke Arabic. A new city, a new house, a new family, and a totally new, strange tongue. It must have been quite a hard schooling for young Maria. Until then she had known a carefree childhood and adolescence as a young village girl who was not afraid to climb up trees or go down dark wells, and commanded respect among the village boys with her fearless attitude and adventurous spirit. Maturing into a beautiful young woman and marrying an Armenian man, living very far away from her own family, she now had to wade through a totally different world from what she had known. From then on she learned to live two separate realities and to inhabit her duality deep within the folds of her heart.

Maria went on to have four children. Yeraz is the second of three daughters and the third of four siblings. At home almost nothing was spoken of Maria's dual identities. It was the Armenian side that was solely stressed. Her children grew up with Armenian as their mother tongue, they went to Armenian schools, and their lives anchored very much around Armenian identity issues. Maria's maternal home was both figuratively and literally far away now. There were occasional visits from Azad medzmama and certainly the bounty from her orchards' harvest in the form of buckets of freshly picked figs, olives, tomatoes and homemade olive oil made its way into Yeraz's family household, however there was not much else communication. Azad medzmama's family receded into the background and became the "others." The civil war in Lebanon only entrenched the realities of the physical distance into an emotional one. That is how although Yeraz had a considerable extended family with innumerable aunts and uncles and as many cousins, neither she nor her siblings had much contact with them. In addition, "they" were Arab, whereas Yeraz, her siblings, her family were Armenian. Yeraz explained this internal family fissure very matter-of-factly:
Nané: (to Yeraz) Ունե՞ք եռուսու նյութ, հայի էքս հայի /what happened to the others [Y's mother's siblings]? Are they Armenian or?

Yeraz: Ոչ, հայ չէ /no they're not Armenian/

Nané: Անգլիա առաջացած ոչ /have they all become Arab?/

Yeraz: Ունե՞ք եռուսու դուրսերու նյութը այդպիսով հայ է: Փուր տվում, հայեր Ֆրանսիայում առաջացած է հետևի ու հայավար է, այսինքն իմ եղբայր Նորավագնի արարանում, ինչպես փորձել իրենց աշխարհից եռուսու տեսանել իրենց հերթին, այնուհետև, որը քանի իմ միայն մոտ երեխա ունեի /I only have one aunt who has married an Armenian. But my mom, my dad taught her Armenian and she became completely Armenian, you know. My aunt for example who also married an Armenian doesn't speak Armenian, although her children do./

Nané: ինչպե՞ս /really?/

Yeraz: Ունե՞ք քան, բայց դուրսերու նյութը ու բարձրակոչ, այս առաջացած ոչ /apart from that, all my aunts and uncles, yes, are Arab/

Anais: Սուրբալյան /all eleven/

Yeraz: Yeah. Ես ունե՞ք դուրսերու նյութը ու ավելի /and their children are also Arab and/ in terms of a cultural context they're not people that I can identify with. Hourig knows what I'm talking about.

Anais: Կենսակոչ կրեշ նյութին մի հարավ է /do you still have family in that area [South Lebanon]?/

Yeraz: Ոչ, զվար /yes, a lot/

Anais: Փուր եռուսու համար կրեշը է /but are they family for you?/

Nané: Փուր եռուսու /but you/ you don't [identify with them]

Yeraz: Not really. (Collective discussion 22.12.03)

This second unexpected disclosure took the Collective by surprise again, who were trying to understand how Yeraz's half-Arab half-Armenian mother had suddenly become "all Armenian" in her city surroundings, making that choice of a sole Armenian identity for her children. It was also interesting how Yeraz clearly delineated her mother's family, with
the Armenian language becoming a demarcation line of belonging. By marrying an Armenian man, her mother made the choice of learning Armenian as an adult and it became the sole language of being at home. She thus also made the step back into reclaiming the Armenian part of her self. There was no doubt in Maria's mind that her own family and children were only Armenian. Whereas the rest of her "other" family lived their reality in a different context (both geographically and culturally) and "remained" Arab, claiming only that part of their original identity. Yeraz tried to explain this further.

Yeraz: Բայց հեռավոր բնակիչ բնակիչ, հեռավոր բնակիչ, իսկ սեռերի որմները, իսկ արբիներ արբիները, իսկ սեռերի որմները, իսկ գրիմի համար, իսկ գրիմի համար. երբեմն ինչևորով էին երբեմն ինչևորով, իսկ սեռերի որմները, իսկ սեռերի որմները. երբեմն ինչևորով էին երբեմն ինչևորով, իսկ սեռերի որմները, իսկ սեռերի որմները. երբեմն ինչևորով էին երբեմն ինչևորով, իսկ սեռերի որմները, իսկ սեռերի որմները. երբեմն ինչևորով էին երբեմն ինչևորով, իսկ սեռերի որմները, իսկ սեռերի որմները. երբեմն ինչևորով էին երբեմն ինչևորով, իսկ սեռերի որմները, իսկ սեռերի որմները. երբեմն ինչևորով էին երբեմն ինչևորով, իսկ սեռերի որմները, իսկ սեռերի որմները. երբեմն ինչևորով էին երբեմն ինչևորով, իսկ սեռերի որմները, իսկ սեռերի որմները. երբեմն ինչևորով էին երբեմն ինչևորով, իսկ սեռе...
grow up within the Armenian community, get married to
Armenians, our children would be Armenian. She becomes
assertive about her other part of identity when someone says
something hurtful about it. But it's interesting that/ she didn't
feel that she could pass any of that to us. She also didn't give
herself, she didn't feel she had the right maybe or I don't know

Hourig: Համարեմ նմեկ եմ /maybe she/

Yeraz: This patriarchal system in place made her feel that this
is ok I bear the children and... but that they're, իրավիճակ է
ապակած ուկ ուր իրավիճակի ուղերձ, երբեմն
իրավիճակ է ապակած ուկ ուր իրավիճակ
յուրաքանչյուր կոչումը /maybe she had taken a
conscious decision in her mind, that yes, there is a split.
Maybe because she also had suffered so much because of her
own inner split, for her two different worlds/

Yeraz: Ան /yes/

Hourig: Եթե ունենք դեր դեր մրցնել եմ այս իդեոլի ֆոնով /she didn't want you to have that as well. Don't you think so?/

Yeraz: Ան, ան, անհրաժեշտ զույգ բջիշտ եմ. /yes, yes, you are very
correct/ it was conscious, իմ ամառեր /my mom was
very/ she was very

Hourig: She's extremely intelligent and sensitive

Yeraz: Նման է ու զգաց եմ թե զույգ գրաված է իմ համար /she's an intelligent woman and very sensitive in that way/

Hourig: Ված /very/

Yeraz: Նման է ու զգաց եմ what affirms this, իմ համար
բարդ է /because of those problems համար ունենք /because of those problems
մեսրույթը է իմ համար բարդ է զույգ մոնոլիթ, կան ու կան
իմ համար /you know what even affirms this?
My mom has told us that every time, we're three sisters and one brother, every time when she had a daughter she was very upset. And her reasoning was, because she says "the suffering I've been through, I didn't want to have a daughter so she would go through the same suffering I had." She says, "that's why I preferred to have boys or when I had a boy I was happier." (To me) And what you're saying is to the point, she has truly suffered because of those problems and maybe that's why with us [she chose to be] monolithic, I mean there was no choice/ very monolithic — this is your sole identity (laughs). (Collective discussion 22.12.03)

As Yeraz’s recounting shifted into a dialogue with me, since I knew much of her story firsthand, we both came to the conclusion that deciding on passing only a singular identity to her children could have been a conscious decision on Maria’s part. It took Maria to almost completely discard her "other" non-Armenian part of her own identity to safeguard the future Armenian identity of the family she was creating. Complete immersion into her new Armenian context together with learning the language played a decisive and central role in that. Her decision could have stemmed from a concern for her children not to be subjected to the emotional rupture she must have felt between the two parts of her self. I imagine that given this broader picture, the recounting of Nouritza’s story on Maria’s part to her own children, takes on a new proportion — the story becomes a safe space beyond the reach of any anguish the duality of her identity could have caused. Nouritza’s spirit, as the woman who survived on her own terms and braved untold difficulties, must have been a powerful inspirational force as much for Maria as for her children. At the same time, as Yeraz told the Collective, Maria transformed the hidden anchor of her identity — the village of her birthplace, her own maternal family, her childhood memories — into new tales she told her children at bedtime (Collective discussion 22.12.03).

On the other hand, listening to Yeraz describe her mother’s predicament and the inevitable angst that was ever present in their family, I made a
very different realization. I had known Yeraz for almost thirty five years at the time the Collective discussions took place. Yet growing up through our childhood together I had not suspected what she had lived through. As a child I had thought that my world was more or less a homogenous one and I had made the assumption the same was the case with Yeraz. I was very solidly anchored in an everyday Armenian reality and to all practical purposes so was Yeraz. Reflecting on the situation retrospectively, as our discussions evolved, I was surprised to realize how intense Yeraz’s ‘secret world’ was. One half of her mother’s identity was deliberately masked, relegated to ‘otherness’, internalized, abdicated, to make way for the Armenian one. This certainly had a profound effect on Yeraz.

There were also other contradictory elements in the picture. As much as Yeraz’s mother Maria made a choice to raise her own children only as Armenians, without imparting anything from her other half of her identity hyphen, she could not possibly have been happy with the fractured reality she lived in. Given the patriarchal setting and context of family life in our childhood circles, the choice Maria had made was in fact partly a choice. Her husband’s (Yeraz’s father’s) decision to forge an Armenian identity for his family was in fact the crucial one. As I pondered how this reflective memory work carried out through the Collective provided new insight into the memories and stories of our childhood, I was struck by a second wave of realizations. Witnessing Yeraz deal with her deep issues on duality of self and identity, I wondered how torn her grandmother, Azad medzmama, must have felt as a very young girl forced to leave her Armenian identity behind, almost losing her mother tongue and not being able to impart either her identity or her language to her children; how by an irony of fate, her own daughter went through the reverse process to reclaim what was lost; how both mother and daughter lived different gradations of mirrored realities that must have wounded them deeply.
Having told Maria’s story thus far to the Collective, both Yeraz and I felt compelled to contextualize her father’s decision in what developed as a bi-level dialogue between Yeraz and I on one hand and the rest of the Collective on the other. We felt the need to engage in this dialogue not only because she and I had known one another intimately for many years, but also because the context we grew up in within a Middle Eastern diasporic Armenian community in the 1960s and 1970s was/is essentially different from both the North American one where Anais and Nané had grown up in the 1970s and 1980s as well as Mara’s situation in the same time period in the homeland republic. As Anais rightfully pointed out, there was/is both a generational and a temporal-spatial shift that was important to understand in order to gain a fuller perspective of the unfolding narratives.

I definitely see this generational difference, where just by your generation, you’re one generation closer to all that... weouou bi tu yu uubnU /you’re talking this much and it is apparent that you are so close to this subject not only/ in terms of a transmitted history puijg /but/ actual, factual qhutb’u, /you know/ and it hit me.... it’s amazing hearing you guys talk, qhutb’u /you know/ hthq hth wmmU ynnw tb tu yhounf weouou /we’re five women sitting and chatting like this but/ just already hauntqhotub /the difference/ of time and space. It’s just astounding how it puts a different spin. That’s the first thing that came to my head, hauntqhotub tu yhounf yu yu uubnU /you’re both talking and it can simply be seen that you are closer, closer not just because of your family situation but because/ in terms of time you are also closer to that context. (Anais, Collective discussion 22.12.03)

In this sense, Yeraz and I were “closer” temporally and contextually to the issues of loss, pain, language and identity maintenance that plagued the generation of our parents whose parents had just barely survived the genocide. In addition, the diasporic community we grew up in was more insular and had more clear cut boundaries specially when it came to
identity maintenance. Yeraz's father was a gentle and kind man, who had very strong political ideals about equality and social justice. His socialist political leanings were in fact shared by my own parents who knew him very well having met in the same political circles. In a way, Yeraz and I had a similar upbringing, growing up in family milieus where there were constant discussions about struggles for justice, reaching out across boundaries, and solidarity among peoples of the world. Ultranasionalism in any form was frowned open. Equality and fraternity among peoples was a cause to strive for.

Living in an insular minority community and in a country which had a political and social system based along sectarian lines, what both Yeraz and I were taught was certainly different to say the least. As Yeraz recounted her mother's story however and the choices she was faced with, inevitably we talked about the complexity and the controversy of those choices. After all, Maria's choice was her husband's decision. Reflecting on this issue retrospectively, both Yeraz and I had to necessarily ponder the choices and contradictions of our parents, specifically given their political backgrounds, very strong held beliefs and ideals on one hand and their clear stand on identity issues on the other. At first glance it does appear that there is an incongruity and ambiguity in their attitudes. Still, in their daily lives they truly lived and practiced tolerance and building bridges among communities. At the same time, they also believed strongly in the importance of maintaining the Armenian identity at all costs. Clearly for them, there was no conflict between the two stances. Ultimately, the concern for the maintenance of Armenian identity did not come as a mere choice for our parents' generation. I believe they were equally deeply scarred as their parents who were the genocide survivors. The pain of loss and survival was too real for them. They witnessed the shame, the hurt, the trauma of their parents first hand, and felt the danger of loss of language and identity only too palpably. This was Yeraz's father's
background; this must have been the urgency he had felt leading him to decide to anchor his children's identity safely and solely among Armenian lines, even if it inadvertently meant that Maria's choice would be an imposed one. There is of course another twist to Maria's story. I cannot help but think that having fallen in love with Maria, marrying her, teaching her Armenian, making sure all their children were Armenian, was at some level a vindication of old wounds for Yeraz's father. Out of twelve of Azadouhi's children, one was brought back to the "fold," her original identity reclaimed. This was another story of survival. And Maria was Nouritza's granddaughter after all, the bravest of all survivors.

The stories and turmoils of Nouritza, Azadouhi and Maria punctuated Yeraz's life experiences. Yet, her life had its own share of survival, although of a different nature and apart from the legacy of her grandparents.

Figure 17: Yeraz as a child

This picture must have been taken a long time before the war.
The Lebanese civil war erupted in the spring of my twelfth birthday. The war went on for another fifteen years, so by the time it was over, I was twenty-seven. By then I had been to boarding school in Cyprus, university in West Beirut, and had taught for some years at a college in East Beirut. Right after the war ended in 1990, our papers were in order and we immigrated to Canada.

This picture must have been taken a long time before the War; I have such an angelic, blissful smile on my face. I cannot say when I was that happy again. Because once the war started, fear never left our hearts and worry was never again absent from our eyes. Our daytime hours were punctuated by booby trapped cars, sniper fire and roadblocks manned by militias. Our nights were spent in underground shelters hiding from the constant bombardment. We managed to stay alive, but the whistling of the passing shells and the thunderous explosions shook us and registered a fear in our parents' eyes that was hard to forget. We came out from the shelter in the morning, walked over the rubble, assessed the damage, and if our own apartment had not received a direct hit, checked the airwaves for the "safer" streets to be able to go wherever it was that we had to go, which was school, then college, then work, as the years passed and there was no end in sight to the war.

This picture was taken a long time before the real war. The real war for me; since war, deportation and massacres were always present in the stories that surrounded our childhood. Still I smiled with real happiness for this picture. But soon that was going to change for good. (Yeraz, reflexive log)
When it was her turn to share her story, Nané’s emotions floated on the surface of her fragmented words and sentences. She started with a photograph that featured four generations of women in her family – her great grandmother Azniv, her grandmother Anahid, her mother Elisabeth and herself.

Nané: And the pictures I have, I’ll show you, I selected some. Actually I put them in some kind of chronological order…. Kind of created my own story trying to figure out ուր եթե ես, ուր եթե ես…. /what is what... This is me in Turkey (laughs nervously)

Hourig: Oh, I didn’t know you went to Turkey when you were

Nané: This is the only time I’ve gone. I think I was one and a half. That’s my mother, my grandmother, my great grandmother… (sounds very sad) so, oh (sighs deeply). ին գրանց եմ. /I don’t know. This picture has always been

Hourig: Where is this?

Yeraz: քար բակատ: /Is it on board a ship?

Nané: No, քար բակատ: /it’s not on board a ship. it’s some terrace.

Hourig: տեսք ես: /Is it in Istanbul?

Nané: Yeah, ես ունեմ գրանց բակատ տեսք ես... /This picture has always been...(pause) I’ve already had

Yeraz: Four generations of women

Nané: Yeah, it’s the only picture that we have all of us together. It’s the only one that I could

Yeraz: անձայների սանակ ես, անձայների սանակ ես. /It’s your mother’s mom right? Not your father’s mother.

Nané: Yeah, անձայների սանակ, հոր սանակ /my mother’s mom and her mother

Yeraz: So ես գրանց կար անձայների սանակ /it’s the same lineage

Nané: Yeah yeah yeah

Yeraz: ցանցերի սանակ ես էջ ցանցերի սանակ սանակ /Your mother’s mother and your mother’s mother’s mother
Nané: It’s my matrilineal lineage.

Hourig: Oh my god

Nané: So... this picture has always been for me like... "Oh this is where I come from" and... that’s when I was there [in Turkey], I don’t know, anyways (still very emotional). And this is my great grandmother, թղթի կարծիք եսում երիտասարդ եմ ես եպտահարում եմ երիտասարդ եմ ես եպտահարում եմ երիտասարդ եմ ես եպտահարում եմ երիտասարդ եմ ես եպտահարում եմ երիտասարդ եմ ես եպտահարում եմ ես եպտահարում եմ ես եպտահարու�
When I was a young child, before my grandparents moved to Canada, she lived with us. One day, I remember getting angry with her, possibly because as usual she wouldn’t let me look at her songbook which I loved taking into my lap and flipping the pages to look at the illustrations. Just to get back at her, I took her songbook, knowing that it was her most cherished belonging and hid it on the balcony between two patio chairs. She spent days looking for it and then eventually stopped mentioning it.

One day, when I had gotten over my anger and realized that my mother was trying to find the book, I went out on the balcony and brought it back in. My mother understood right away that I was the one who had hidden it. She got very angry at me and slapped me across the face. The blow was so hard that my nose started bleeding. The sight of the blood scared my mom. She took me in her arms and made the bleeding stop. All I remember after that is how guilty she seemed to feel and how she seemed at such a loss as to what to do to make everything alright for me.

I still have that image in my head.

We drove to my grandparents’ place after school. My mom was crying in the car. My brother and I jumped out as soon as we pulled up in front of the building. It was a cold winter evening. I was wearing a pink snowsuit. One of us turned to mom and asked why she was crying. She said, “Medz medz mayrig died” and started crying even more. My brother and I looked at each other and started digging our faces into our coats as far down as possible. We were both trying to hide our incontrollable laughter.

To this day, I am not sure what came over us that day. We both loved our medz medz mayrig, it wasn’t like we were happy for the loss... I think

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9 Great grandmother in Armenian.
we just didn't know how to handle the news. It was the first time that someone we knew had died.

I always have this image of medz medz mayrig. She is all dressed in black, with a shawl on her knees. She has her gray hair tied back into a bun. She is sitting on her armchair and has her yerkaran (songbook) on the bottom shelf of the side table on her right.

When I was a young child, before my grandparents moved to Canada, she lived with us. One day, I remember getting angry with her, possibly because as usual she wouldn't let me look at her songbook which I loved taking into my lap and flipping the pages to look at the illustrations. Just to get back at her, I took her songbook, knowing that it was her most cherished belonging and hid it on the balcony between two patio chairs. She spent days looking for it and then eventually stopped mentioning it. One day, when I had gotten over my anger and realized that my mother was trying to find the book, I went out on the balcony and brought it back in. My mother understood right away that I was the one who had hidden it. She got very angry at me and slapped me across the face. The blow was so hard that my nose started bleeding. The sight of the blood scared my mom. She took me in her arms and made the bleeding stop. All I remember after that is how guilty she seemed to feel and how she seemed at such a loss as to what to do to make everything alright for me.

I never knew much about my medz medz mayrig. She was just an old woman to me. It was only a few years ago that I discovered parts of her story.

Azniv Antreassian (1893), my great grandmother was the daughter of Boghos and Kayané Antreassian. The family lived in Ordu (Turkey), a city on the southern banks of the Black sea, where Boghos was considered an
Agha, a kind of count. Azniv had four brothers. She was either the second or third of five siblings. Being an only girl, she was apparently very spoiled. She had had only elementary education despite the fact that she had wanted to pursue her studies. She apparently had wanted to go to Istanbul to study, but she had not been permitted to do so because she was a girl. Her parents did not see a need for it. Although her brothers had all been sent off to schools to pursue higher education, it did not seem proper for the family to send their daughter to the big city on her own, even if it was to study. So, Azniv stayed at home in the parental house until she was forced into a marriage with my great grandfather Hrant Blodjian. She had loved another who was a teacher, but the family had specific views about the kind of person that would be worthy of marrying the daughter of an Agha, and it was certainly not a teacher!

Azniv was married off to a merchant, who was in the business of importing and exporting hazelnuts and other such things. By the time she was twenty two and the genocide deportations had started, she had two daughters — Arsinée who was born on Nov 21st 1911 and Anahid, my grandmother, born on July 20th 1912 — and a 40-day-old son. By then, her husband was an established merchant and her father had passed away. Leaving on the march with her husband, she had been able to leave behind the children with her mother Kayané. The Turks had said that the elderly and the young children could stay. So my grandmother Anahid and her sister Arsinée stayed with their grandmother, who was also keeping another four or five children with her. Their brother, who was too young for Kayané to take care of, was left in the care of a Greek woman. He was never found again. The family believes that he never survived.

Both Azniv and her husband Hrant survived the genocide and found their way back to Ordu. Upon their arrival, they discovered that most of their property had been taken away, due to some kind of tax, and though
they still had some property left, the entire family took off, leaving everything behind, and went to Istanbul. There my great grandfather, starting from scratch, was able to recreate his business and managed to get back on his feet and provide for the family. (Nané, reflexive log)

Nané had told the same story almost verbatim to the Collective.

Nané: ...After the deportation when they came back, they came back to Ordu and then the girls were there, my grandmother and her sister

Hourig: Yeah

Nané: I'm assuming my great great grandmother as well, it must have been there, since she was looking after them, and basically they went to Istanbul.

Hourig: /A question, you mean your great grandmother was exiled with her husband but the children weren't

Nané: No, the children stayed back

Hourig: The children stayed with their grandparents

Nané: The elderly and the children They gave them the right to stay behind

Hourig: (in total disbelief) But that is so curious

Mara: It's strange

Hourig: It's very strange

Yeraz: And they were exiled then they returned... do you know where they exiled them?

Nané: I don’t know...

Hourig: Probably they didn't reach Der Zor from Ordu

Nané: I don't know where they went and I'll never know (nervous laughter), so...

Yeraz: These would be, not your grandmother...

Nané: My great grandmother. This woman (points to photo), her

Yeraz: Your great grandmother
Nané: With her husband

Yeraz: With her husband, they were exiled. Their parents stayed with their kids in Ordu

Nané: Her mom stayed with the girls

Yeraz: Yeah, yeah

Hourig: (still in disbelief) That is so curious

Yeraz: It's the first time I hear it, have never heard something like this, no

Nané: Really?

Hourig: It's so unique

Yeraz: /That they gave leave for the kids [to stay behind]....

Nané: Yeah

Yeraz: I don't know

Mara: Were they girls or boys?

Nané: Girls. Well, the boy too, but he was a 40-sday-old baby or something, like really small, so they left him behind.

Hourig: It's very bizarre.

Yeraz: I haven't heard...

Hourig: No, I have never, never [heard it]. It's very bizarre.

Nané: Ok

Hourig: And then they went to

Nané: (in a subdued voice) And then they went, they went to Istanbul basically.

Hourig: Ok. (Collective discussion 8.1.04)
As she recounted her story, my and Yeraz’s disbelief grew more and more. We kept repeatedly questioning Nane, to make sure we had heard correctly that the elderly and the children were given permission to stay behind during the deportations. Never before had we heard of a similar pattern in deportation stories. Part of our suspicion was due to the fact that Nane had not heard the story first hand from her own grandparents at all, but only through her mother. What had been lost in the details through time? Were some parts of the story excised deliberately to render it benign? At the same time, the more we questioned her, the more Nane was surprised at our own astonishment and her voice grew increasingly subdued. Did she feel overwhelmed by our questions? Did they make her feel the little she knew was now even less? That day our questionings ended there and Nane went on to tell other stories.

Long after the fieldwork, during my data transcription and analysis phase, the issue emerged as a major interrogative for me personally. There was something amiss in the story. After some preliminary research I was able to find that the Ordu deportation policies were among the most ruthless of the time with the deportation route stretching from the coastal Black Sea city to northern Iraq (Kévorkian, 2006, p. 584-618; Sarafian, 2004, p. 73). Alongside the deportations, there were also stories of forced turkification of children and mass drownings in the Black Sea. It was imperative that both Nane and I revisit the story to tease out the missing puzzles. And so it was that I was able to convince Nane to probe her extended family members in search of more accurate details of her family narrative, while I continued my historical research of the subject. Together we were finally able to reconstruct a more plausible turn of events. My major source was Kévorkian’s seminal Le génocide des Arméniens (2006), which detailed the history and chronology of all the deportations in the Ottoman Empire province by province. The coastal city of Ordu where Nane’s maternal family came
from was part of the province of Trebizond. Hence the picture in the city of Ordu was not much different from the deportation policy implemented all over that province and especially its capital city of Trebizond. When the order for deportation for the Armenian inhabitants there had come in June 1915, people were advised that they could leave their children behind, if they so wished, in special "orphanages." These were established originally when the Greek Metropolitan had interceded with the authorities to spare the children of the deportees and had offered that the local Greek community take charge of them. An orphanage was established under the nominal charge of the Metropolitan, which however was later closed down by the local government and the Armenian children dispersed in Turkish "homes." The same had happened with the children housed in the American school of Trebizond, where departing parents had entrusted them to the care of its American director. Those children who were not subjected to this policy of turkification suffered an unknown fate, most probably drowned in the Black Sea, in documented such excursions of women, elderly and children on "naval trips" from one coastal city to the other (Kévorkian, 2006, p. 587-588).

In Ordu, the same pattern was repeated. The deportation orders came in mid-June 1915. The elderly and infirm were left behind, with stories circulating of their eventual demise by drowning exactly as in other coastal cities of the province. There were also documented accounts of a group of women and children staying behind in hiding with Greek, Georgian or Turkish friends and neighbours. In some cases, when they were found out, the children were either forcefully turkified or eventually "lost at sea" (Kévorkian, 2006, p. 603-604). The picture painted was a terrible one. While the parents, who had no illusions on where they were going and what fate awaited them, thought they had saved their children by hiding them with caring neighbours, the
authorities had laid down a meticulous plan of turkification of the children and in other cases, simple cold-blooded extermination. Young boys especially seemed to have their fates sealed, as stories abounded of groups of boys being taken systematically on board boats and ships and dropped in the middle of the sea. Reading these details I could picture the agony Nané’s great grandmother Azniv and her husband must have been through. Their decision to leave their three children Anahid, Arsinée and Berge behind, with Azniv’s mother Kayané could not have been an easy one. They surely knew their chances of return or survival were slim. They had to save their children. Kayané and the children must have gone into hiding with a trusted neighbour. Who was this neighbour; was it a Greek or Turkish family? The risk for all of them, if found out, must have been considerable. Who were the other “four or five children” in Kayané’s care? Could they probably have been the children of other relatives? Why did not the baby boy Berge stay with Kayané? Who was the Greek woman he was entrusted to? What happened to her? How was Berge lost? Was he lost, drowned on one of those “naval trips” or turkified? Could it be that the Greek woman simply fled elsewhere taking young Berge with her? Or was she found out hiding an Armenian child and a worse fate awaited them both? We will never know.

On her side, Nané was not only able to unearth new elements in the family narrative, but also found a family memoir compiled by a member of her extended family. The chronicle of events on the deportation orders, the hidden children, the deportation routes recorded in this memoir were all corroborated by the citations in Kévorkian’s Le génocide des Arméniens (2006). Moreover, Kévorkian’s book cited an eye witness account of the Ordu events, by the name of E. B. Andréassian — the same family name as that of Nané’s great grandmother Azniv (Andreassian is the phonetic pronunciation of Antreassian). The family
memoir Nané found also contained an extended family tree, according to which two of Nané's great grandmother Azniv's brothers had names that started with the same initial — Etvart (Edward) and Ervant. Their father's name was Boghos, which could very well have corresponded to the middle initial B. signifying the patronymic. Of the two, only Etvart survived. In the large family tree, he is the only person among the generation of survivors whose initials and family name thus matched with the eye witness mentioned, leading to the probable conclusion that the latter could very well have been Nané's great uncle. The family memoir, written by a descendant of Nané's great grandmother Azniv's first cousin, touched on the fates of all the family members. It was clear from that account that the Antreassians were a well-to-do extended family with a growing hazelnut business. Apart from confirming the generally known facts on the marching orders, the memoir also added an important piece of information on what the extended family decided to do with the children.

Dikran [Nané's great grandmother Azniv's first cousin] found out that many of his cousins were taking their little children to their good Turkish friends and asking them if it were possible for them to take care of their sons and daughters until they would be returning home from their unknown journey. These good people had gladly agreed to help. (Two of these families were the Furtunzades and the Felekzades. They were two of the most prominent Turkish families in Ordu and have stayed friends with the Antreassians until to [sic.] this date.) (Antreassian, 2000, p. 5)

The account also mentioned that Azniv's son Berge was left in the care of a Turkish family, not a Greek one, and was "never found again" (p. 34). However, nothing was said whether he was placed in hiding with the aforementioned families. Once again, we will never know which version is correct, whether in fact it was a Greek or Turkish family who tried to protect the little newborn Berge. The interrogative on his fate remained unresolved. Most important of all, the memoir specified the time frame
and the exact route of deportation the extended family members took together, which corresponded point for point with the Kévorkian reference (2006). According to this account, after a trek of eight months on foot, the family had arrived in the vicinity of Der-el-Zor. The distance from the coastal city of Ordu to the desert in northern Syria, even on a map, is an unimaginably long one. This was also the location of the most infamous of death camps. For those of the Ordu inhabitants who survived it, the trek would continue into northern Iraq. At this point in the memoir, Nané’s great grandmother Azniv was mentioned as well. We learn indirectly that she and her husband, together with some relatives were able to avoid the last part of the death march into Der-el-Zor by pretending to be sick with malaria and somehow miraculously to be taken to a hospital where they were able to stay for some time. Azniv had also tried to persuade her cousin Dikran to do the same, but apparently had not succeeded. Her cousin and his wife went on to the desert march, from which only the wife returned (Antreassian, p. 7-8). The details are sketchy. How did in reality Azniv and her relatives survive the deportation, the various death camps en route, and finally persuaded the gendarmes just before the notorious stretch in Der-el-Zor that they were sick and in need of medical attention, again we will never know. What is known is that she and her husband, along with a few relatives survived and were able to return to Ordu circa 1919, four years after they left it, in the aftermath of the WWI armistice. We can only imagine what her hopes were for finding her mother and children safe and what her sorrow was in losing her newborn son without a trace.

In an intriguing turn of events, much after this narrative was written, Nané discovered a new twist in the story of the hidden children. An extended family member was able to provide new details, which still hazy, now place Azniv’s mother Kayané and the children in hiding in the nearby city of Marzevan (Merzifun). A courageous Armenian educator
working at Robert College in Constantinople and related to the Antreassian's by marriage, had been able to help members of the Antreassian family go into hiding in Marzevan at great risk to himself and everyone involved. They had rented a room in the city and assumed Turkish identity. Kayané, Anahid and Arsinée were among them. One of the other children in Kayané's care was her young teenage son (Azniv's brother) Etvart. (personal communication, June 2008).

In our attempt to reconstruct the real story of Nané's great grandmother Azniv, I was struck with how the benign and simple words Nané initially used to tell and write her story, in reality carried such hidden depths of an unknown and unmapped sorrow. Nané simply retold the story as it was told to her and a parallel with another genocide story told benignly and retold for the Collective, resonated again. Yeraz had recounted Nouritza's narrative much as Nané had Azniv's. In both cases, the minute details of the real story will remain unknown, glossed over to make the story sound comparatively harmless and "child-safe." In both cases, it was the reflective gaze within the framework of the Collective that brought a new layer of understanding to the stories and certainly a sense of closure as well. Most significantly, in Nané's case, it was the initial suspicions and the constant probings of the Collective that finally guided Nané to piece the fragmented memories together and led her to the discovery of the family memoir. My personal curiosity to find out more in available genocide scholarship simply contextualized the family narratives historically. I am convinced however, that Nané would not have been able to arrive at this new and clearer image of her family narrative, without the initial exploratory probings within the safe and trusting space of the Collective. At the same time, despite the personal closure, I believe the story of Nané's great grandmother Azniv is clearly a story with no end, a story that is continually being reshaped, reconstructed and relived with each retelling.
In one of her earlier recollections Nane told the Collective, "they say I look a lot like my grandmother. But I don't know whether they mean a physical resemblance or one in character, I don't know" (Collective discussion 8.1.04). Her emotional and spiritual bond with her maternal grandmother Anahid was still palpable in all her words and certainly made stronger by the name she inhabited. Curiously, her memories of her grandparents and particularly her grandmother centered on questions of language and identity transmission first and foremost, preceding any awareness of her grandparents' survivor experiences.

Her grandmother's name Anahid (Anahit) is that of the main female deity in Armenian mythology. A goddess of fertility and birth, she has been revered as the "golden mother" and "great mother" of the Armenian people before the conversion to Christianity. She has also been identified with the Greek goddess Artemis. Nane, another goddess of the Armenian pantheon, was the protector of motherhood and family hearth. Some scholars have considered Nane's name and her function as a deity to be a derivative of Anahit (Haroutiunian, 1987, p. 37-40).

Grandmother in Armenian.
I guess I was destined to be attached to my grandmother long before birth. Not long ago I found out that my mother had decided as a young child that one day, when she had a little girl, she would name her Nane in honor of her own mother whom she adored.

My grandmother Anahid married at a very late age. She had been engaged to a man for seven years, but seeing that he would never come round, she decided to call everything off. Anahid met my grandfather Kegham Hekimian in Ordu at the age of 36 and decided to marry him. My great grandmother was strongly opposed to the marriage. My great grandparents' opposition was based on the fact that my grandfather was the son of a sheep farmer. They did not believe that he was worthy of my grandmother, even though my grandfather was already the owner of his own import export business at the time, which incidentally happened to be in the same area of business as my great grandfather's. My great grandmother had always had a tremendous influence and power over her daughter, but my grandmother stood her ground. This was her last chance and she did not want to miss it.

My grandparents finally did get married, but my mother tells me that the problems and disagreements between my great grandmother and my grandfather never ceased, and my grandmother was always stuck between the both of them.

My great grandfather built a building at the time in Istanbul where the whole family lived. They had separate apartments. My great grandparents lived on the fourth floor and my grandparents on the second, until my great grandfather passed away, and my grandparents and my mom moved to the fourth floor, where they all lived together. My grandmother had two children: my mom and a son who had been born some time before and had died at about 40 days old.
Everything Armenian has been linked to my grandmother and my grandfather. For a long time they were the representation of Armenianness for me. It was only in their house that I would see Armenian newspapers, Armenian books and dictionaries; Armenian writing used in everyday life – shopping lists, phone numbers, notes of all kinds.

When I used to go to Armenian Saturday school, every Friday night I'd be at my grandparents' place with my brother, studying for the next day. We would spend the whole evening working on our reading, history and grammar lessons, practicing our dictation and completing whatever else had been assigned as homework for that week. The next morning we would be woken up early to go over everything. Both my grandparents worked hard to make sure we studied well. It was always expected of us that we would be getting on the stage at the end of the school year and be awarded first or second place in our class. The competition was quite fierce and we didn't always get to give my grandparents that ultimate satisfaction of achievement.

At the end of grade 8, I couldn't take it anymore. I was sick of having all that extra homework and all those extra hours spent in school on Saturdays. I spent so much time complaining that finally my parents said that I could stop if that was what I really wanted. Suddenly, I was allowed to make my own choice. That's when I decided that with only three years left to graduation, it would be a shame not to finish what I had started. I also knew how important this was to my grandparents. So I toughed it out and continued until the end. It was the least I could do for them.

I was very attached to my grandmother. She was actually the only adult in my family who showed me any kind of physical affection. I actually
have an almost tangible memory of how her skin used to smell and feel, how her belly used to come up and down as I rested my head on her. I remember how her hands felt in mine and how her touch felt on my head and my hair. (Nané, reflexive log)

Nané's issues of belonging on the other hand converged with the memories of the traumatic past of her grandparents' survival. This past was carefully hidden from her for many years. Nané's mother, hearing the survivor stories of her own parents and grandparents, had become so traumatized by them that she had consciously cut the stories out of her own and later on, her children's lives. That is why Nané's retellings were fragmented, based on whatever snippets of memory had made through the wall of silence created by her mother.

Nané: ...Even as I have grown up, the topic of genocide has never entered our house and (pause)... with time I got to find out, (reflectively) with time actually, when I wrote my Master's thesis and I actually asked my mom, not point blank but practically about these things, that's where I found out why she has (takes a deep breath and enunciates every word) consciously, I guess consciously, made that choice of making sure that these topics do not enter our lives... but they did anyways. So

Anais: And Nané can I ask why is it she never talked about it or?

Nané: Because of her personal trauma of hearing the stories as a kid. (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

This is also where the concept of intergenerational transmission of trauma came very tangibly into Nané's life. Her confusion about her identity as a child, her anger towards her mother for imposing a forced silence, gave way to a deeper understanding of how human tragedy affects us, when finally as an adult she was able to question and dialogue with her mother. At the same time, Nané's simple assertion "but they did anyways" referred to how the past inevitably resurfaced,
despite her mother's strenuous efforts to keep the traumatic stories out of their lives. As she told us later,

I would go hiding, ask my grandparents about it and they too, scared a little, would tell me stuff. But I don't remember much of it. I remember kids hiding under someone's skirt and seeing someone shot and... I have these couple of little images or kids put in baskets on side saddles, to hide and flee, I don't know. This is all I remember.... (Nane, Collective discussion 8.1.04)

The most striking feature in Nane's earliest memories of her grandparents' survivor stories was a sense of relief she had felt as a child for finally belonging in a collectivity. She articulated that story in detail in her reflexive log.

FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING THE ARMENIAN IN ME

Journal Excerpt:

April 2001

It all happened so suddenly. I still don't believe it. "Thank you for the journey." These were the final words I had written in the little black guest book placed on the pedestal next to the brick wall that supported the fifteen pictures taken in Western Armenia (Historical Armenia, Eastern Turkey, call it what you wish). Little did I know that my journey was about to start. As I got back into the car, I was invaded by my emotions. Ani sat in the passenger's seat next to me; Nour was in the back. Both were lost in a conversation about...well, I can't even remember. I could hear their voices but I was far from listening to them. A voice inside of me was calling; images were jumping into consciousness. "Thank you for the journey." I kept repeating these words in my head. What did this mean? Looking at those pictures, my heart and mind had been stirred. But why? I remember looking at the photographs and thinking that this was where I came from. These were
places, churches, landscapes where my people had lived, prayed, walked. I knew so little about the actual sites, yet it felt like I could feel them inside me. As I was driving, I kept thinking: why is this affecting me so? I had seen these pictures before, in the photographer's home. I remember thinking that they were beautiful pictures. The colours, the textures, the angles... I admired the photographer's artistic eye. He had captured images of an Armenia that I had heard of and learned about. I remember thinking that it was nice to be able to get a glimpse of the scenery through the lens of a familiar person and wishing that I could go there myself in the future. But none of this emotional stuff! What was happening to me now? During that entire car ride and for the rest of the afternoon, I was crying. The night before, my friend Ani had interviewed me about my literacy practices in the French, English and Armenian languages. As I recounted stories about my first literacy memories, my best and worst memories, issues about my Armenian identity kept coming up. For the first time in my life I said what the Armenian language represented for me: my grandparents' language. It was for them mostly that I went to Armenian Saturday school for eleven years. Yes, the Armenian language was the language of communication in my home, but for some reason, I only saw my grandparents, more precisely, my maternal grandparents as Armenian. As I was talking during the interview, I started trying to explain why it was that I associated my "Armenianness" mostly with my grandparents.

The combination of these two events, so closely placed in time, threw me in a state of consciousness that I was not ready to confront. The tears flowed down my face; my mind went blank.

Part of the difficulty I have experienced in defining who I am and where or how I belong, I have traced back to my family situation. My parents: two people, having completely divergent mentalities and distinct pasts,
coming from different parts of a country where they had tried to hide away from their origins – my father for reasons of survival, my mother in a desperate attempt to overcome the effects of the traumatic past of her family.

Living in Turkey, my father's family had only spoken Armenian at home. My father and his brother, being boys and having spent much time outside of the home, spoke mostly Turkish. Upon marrying my mother and coming to Canada, my father has tried to reclaim his roots by learning to speak Armenian himself. Giving us Armenian second names and sending us to Armenian daycare and Saturday school have been his way of making sure that his children grew up as Armenians. My mother, on the other hand, despite her deep attachments to her Armenian roots and her desire to raise us as Armenians, has made every possible effort to get away from the Armenian and Middle Eastern society and mentality that she grew up in, trying to reconstitute in this "new world" an environment mirroring the one she was immersed in during the couple of years she had spent studying abroad in France. These bipolar forces are what have created a space, in which my brothers and I have grown up, and which has neither been truly Armenian, nor French, nor Canadian for that matter. We could not speak anything but Armenian at home, but were not sent to Armenian day school; it was the French educational system that was valued. We did attend Armenian Saturday school, but never took part in any of the activities of the community, which, I began to assume, was a place where we did not belong.

I have grown up with a constant feeling of not being right, of not belonging. I have gone through most of my education in a European French School attended by children clearly belonging to a different, not to say superior social class than mine, and who had the advantage of growing up in homes where European mentalities and ways of life
prevailed, even if they belonged to various minorities. I, on the other hand, came from a home where, although French education was greatly valued, only the Armenian language and ways of life were allowed. I grew up never being able to make or see any connections between my family life and that of the "French society" of the school. Part of my uncertainty also lay in the fact that every Saturday, I was shoved into a world of Armenians, where I still did not belong. I would feel like an alien, coming into the community school after having spent the entire week in the "foreigners' world" as they would call it. I would see Armenian school as a place where I would meet other Armenian "aliens" from diverse planets. The only links that we had with each other was our displacement and not our Armenianness.

This is how I grew up living in three, more or less connected bubbles — French day school, Armenian Saturday school and my home, which was in itself a confusing combination of what both of the others represented. This puzzlement in terms of identity and the uncertainty it has created in my life is well represented by the sometimes haunting reminder of the absence of any kind of memory of my family history.

Growing up, I did not know the difference between Armenians and Turks. We spoke Armenian at home, but my parents were from Turkey and would often use the Turkish language, especially when they wanted to have a private conversation. For a long time, I was kept in total darkness, not knowing anything about the monstrosities of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Turkish government between 1915 and 1922. In fact, I remember thinking that my family was actually Turkish Armenian (whatever that meant). Where the severe problems would come out was in Armenian Saturday school. On several occasions, I would hear horrible depictions of the Turkish people and detailed accounts of all the savage things they had done to the Armenians, and would get
completely confused. I can still remember the first time this happened. I was around six years old.

Sitting on the edge of a bench placed in front of the gym’s stage, I was looking at the horrible and terrifying black and white pictures that were being projected on the screen, one after the other. I remember thinking angrily to myself: Why are they showing us all these? This is so disgusting and horrible. Who could do this? And the answer came from one of the speakers: The Turks! The Turks? I thought. How could they say that? My family would never do such a thing. What are they saying! That’s me they are accusing, my family, the people I love. As my confusion and anger grew, I remember feeling a kind of physical distance. My mind took over and the rest faded out. I saw myself getting into a bubble, away from the rest of the crowd, which was clearly Armenian and clearly hostile towards the Turkish people, which, at that time, I believed I belonged to. I remember thinking that day that I should be very careful never to let anyone find out about my Turkish background, for fear of what would happen. I also never mentioned the event at home.

It was only years later when the topic of genocide actually found its way through the great wall of silence that my mother had built, that I began to understand. My grandparents, who had moved from Istanbul to Montreal when I was about five, were the ones who eventually mentioned the genocide in my family circle.

Journal excerpt
March 24th 2002
On Friday I went home for lunch. I mean my mom’s house. It had been a while since I had seen her and wanted to spend some time with her. The writing that I had been doing over the last week, Lorne Shirinian’s talk
which I had attended on Thursday night and the memories of a weekend spent in my friend Jane’s family house in Thetford Mines had all put me in a state of wonder and questioning.

I cannot recall the last time I had a conversation with my mom about my family history. Actually now that I think about it, some things had probably come up around the time my grandfather passed away two years ago, but at the time, my mom was very fragile, as was I, and resurfacing memories had a soothing quality that was tainted with grief.

I can’t remember how I was able to initiate the conversation now. I originally wanted to ask my mom about her memories of my own childhood and hoped that she could provide some explanations in regards to the choices she and my father had made concerning me. I couldn’t do it. Asking such questions might have revealed the issues that I was dealing with in terms of my thesis and I was not ready to let my mother in on anything.

So, not being able to get to the topics that really interested me without arousing questions on her part, I went completely around the subject to talk about my great grandmother. This started the most wonderful conversation and much discovering emerged on my part. Not only was I able to finally get a glimpse of a distant past but also came to understand why my mother had for years kept us in the dark in regards to the genocide.

During our talk, she was reluctant to speak about certain things. She would give me detailed accounts of certain periods of time and then skip over others, especially those concerning the genocide. When I kept going back to my initial question, asking her if she knew any other
details about my great grandmother's life stories, she said that my
great grandmother would often tell her about her childhood and that
every story would unmistakably lead to stories of the genocide. These
had a traumatising effect on her. She would relive the events in her
dreams. It was as if she had seen and lived through the horrors of the
genocide herself. The vivid details would terrify her and almost make
her want to kill herself. She was unable to tolerate the memory of the
atrocities and refused to hear about them. Every time the topic came
up, she would either leave the room, try to hide away in her thoughts in
order to block the conversation out of her mind or literally order her
grandmother and her parents to stop speaking about it. All the
memories of the past being so closely linked to the genocide, my
mother has made a conscious effort to cut herself off from the past.
This is why, in the same way, she has, for years, hidden this past from
her children.

I had always been very angry towards my mother because she also never
let my grandparents tell us about the genocide. After this long
conversation with her, I was able to understand that part of her choice
was motivated by a need to protect us from the traumas that she had
endured and put an end to the intergenerational transmission of these
memories. I remember now, how throughout my childhood, I would
manage to hide from my mother in order to ask my grandparents about
their past and the family's stories of the genocide. In my desperate
attempts to try to fit in one or the other of my worlds, I had to know
how much my family history was part of the collective Armenian history,
which I was bombarded with at Armenian Saturday school. I actually
remember feeling somewhat happy that my family had also been part of
the deportations in 1915. It made me belong.
It was only a couple of years ago, sometime before my grandfather got sick and passed away, that my brother and I were finally able to get a glimpse of our family’s history and their experiences during the genocide. We were sitting at the kitchen table, and somehow, rather clumsily, we initiated the topic of the Armenian genocide. My grandfather was quite reluctant to speak at first, partly due to the pain of revisiting that dreadful past. With our persisting questions we finally convinced him to tell his story and ignore my mother’s interruptions and interjections in the background. I suppose he must have felt our desperate need to discover that part of our history and our selves. Unfortunately, we never taped him or took any kind of notes. None of us really remembers now the details of what he told us that day; all we have been left with are snippets of memory: siblings shot in front of my grandfather’s eyes, others lost forever, families being torn apart, years spent in countless orphanages, never ending displacements from one country to the other, parts of a family managing to reunite years later and survive the memory of its past.

My understanding of my Armenian identity has evolved with time and I have found ways of reclaiming it. After going through the stages of complete denial and rejection, the various curves of my life gently brought me back to my roots. An unexpected job within the Armenian community, establishing meaningful friendships with countless individuals of Armenian background, a month spent in Armenia, all these contributed in their way to help me carve my place and define my Armenianness. The uncertainties of my childhood still have their effect and I often find myself thrown from one end of the spectrum to the other when I think of what it means for me to be Armenian. (Nané, reflexive log)
An acute silence had accompanied Nané’s account of her story of belonging in pain, within the Collective. Happiness at the thought of identification with pain and at such a tender age was not something any of us had expected to hear naturally. It was Anais however who reminded us then that Nané’s poignant story illustrated how the traumatic event of the genocide operated in fact as a reference of identity in a collectivity (Collective discussion 8.1.04). It was also no wonder, as in Nané’s case, that the more the memories of the event were suppressed for whatever reasons, the more their later impact became forceful. For Nané, the confusion, guilt and trauma she felt as a child translated into an endless exploration of identity and belonging issues as an adult. Charting her matrilineal narratives, Nané was finally able to trace the root causes of her negotiations and positionings.

**Anais**

**WHAT’S IN A NAME?**

I had a very interesting conversation with P last night. Out of the blue, I mentioned to him that I would like to transmit my last name too if we ever had a child together. And to be correct, I thought of giving the child both of our last names. "Poor child is gonna get beaten up in school!" was his reaction. But like a five-year-old girl who wants her candy I replied that I would REALLY like to pass down my family name too... logically though, there are many many male descendants with my family name and only two of his — But what about the WOMEN of my family name I thought? And what is in a name? That famous *ian* that non-Armenians and Armenians refer to in order to put Armenians on the social map? Will my child be excluded from being recognized as a member of that group with a quick read of his/her name? Why should my side be muted? On papers, documents, certificates and archives? On PAPER – literacy – translated into words and letters. Exactly who chose this for me? Would
I be happier to substitute my ian for another ian? What about the Armenians of no ian names like Inak, Turak, Amadouni and so on? And sadly, it dawned on me. All the women in my family, except for one, willingly gave up their last name so that I could be a Janigian. Arnetto became Merinian, Merinian became Janigian. Will this Janigian become Thomassin? Arnetto's mother, I imagine, had a Greek last name and was born in Constantinople. But she gladly became Arnetto and adopted an Italian identity. When her Italian husband died, she took both daughters to Italy—not Greece—and taught them that they are Italian. After all, she herself had become one. Yet, the few times I met my maternal great grandmother, everyone referred to her as “Yaya.” My maternal grandmother, Francesca, speaks Greek to this day. My own mother understands Greek from the times she spent with Yaya. Like mother like daughter. It baffles me sometimes to think about my grandmother’s—Nonnina’s (“little grandmother” in Italian) parcours identitaire. Was she aware when she got married, of the changes that were awaiting her? To this day she has a disgusted look on her face when she speaks of the beginning of the time she spent in my grandfather’s family in Ethiopia. Because of the Italian occupation, a lot of people in my family learned Italian. But they refused to speak to her in Italian so that she will forcibly learn Armenian. «ti punqis mi hanimemtu qunthav» /“And they all knew Italian,”/I can see her say. How much she suffered in Ethiopia no one knows. But there are two dynamics to this—changes that were somewhat ‘imposed’ on her and identity changes that she operated à son propre gré. No matter what, that lady is born Italian and will die Italian. But with Armenian clothes on. (Anais, reflexive log)

Anais’ family had a very different trajectory from other common diasporan ones. Both her maternal and paternal grandparents had deep roots in the small Ethiopian Armenian community which flourished until the military coup in the 1970s. Many Armenians had left the Ottoman
Empire after the first massacre waves of the 1890s and had fled to different destinations including far away North America or closer to Egypt, which had an already established diasporic community. Originally from near or in Constantinople, Anais' great great paternal grandparents had taken the latter route and after a brief stop in Egypt, had immigrated even further south into Ethiopia. Her maternal great great grandparents on the other hand had traveled from Smyrna directly to Ethiopia. By the early 1900s both sides of her family were already established in the capital city Addis Ababa, where later Anais' paternal grandparents and maternal grandfather were born. The extended family continued to live there until the mid 1970s. Anais herself was also born in Addis Ababa. Her family immigrated to Montreal when she was still a baby. When referring to her family's unique trajectory, Anais always commented during our Collective discussions that in a sense, her family was not "directly" affected by the genocide, and that none of her grandparents or great grandparents were actual survivors. However, we did agree in our discussions that the loss, dispossession and despair the generation of survivors experienced knew no physical boundaries and had repercussions in distant corners of diasporan communities worldwide. In this case, collective experience and memory had a far-reaching impact especially on perceptions of identity maintenance among diasporan Armenians. Anais' family history carries traces of this powerful resonance.

Anais' paternal grandparents had met and were married in Addis Ababa. Her maternal grandparents met in Italy. Even though the Addis Ababa community had Armenian schools, her grandfather Sarkis, named affectionately as Serko, had completed his schooling at a renowned Armenian boarding school in Venice, the Mourad-Raphaelian that was established by the Armenian catholic Mekhitarist Brotherhood. This was indeed a very famous school, with both the educational institution itself
and the brotherhood's monastery on the tiny island of San Lazarro being important armenological studies centers throughout centuries. I had heard many stories about the school as a child through my father who had won a scholarship there just before the beginning of WWII. He had spent formative teenage years studying not only with renowned scholars, but also with classmates from very different parts of the world. I still remember how fascinated I was hearing that he had Armenian friends from Ethiopia who studied there as well. As a child, it was very difficult for me to imagine that Ethiopia, a country that sounded so exotic and so far somewhere in Africa, could have Armenians living there. And as Anais recounted her tale of her grandfather studying at the same school, we were both shocked to make an accidental discovery.

Anais: հու ճապաստակ և ճապաստակ կարճագնա հույն ճապաստակ հայցիչներով բազմաթիվ տեսք /my grandfather and my grandfather’s brother have gone to the same school in Venice with Hourig’s father/

Hourig: ինչպատում երկու տեսք /they were classmates/

Nané: (totally incredulous) O-h-m-y-g-o-d...

Anais: Can you believe that?

Hourig: Isn’t this...? I cannot believe

Anais: I can’t get over it

Hourig: That this is coincidence

Yeraz: (to Anais, incredulous) եռչ եմ մարմինը /your mother’s father?/

Anais: հու ճապաստակ և ճապաստակ կարճագնա հույն ճապաստակ հայցիչներով եռչ /my mother’s father who married an Italian woman/

Yeraz: (to me, still trying to make sense) տեսք, եռչ եմ մարմինը /and your father were in Venice together?/

Hourig: Yeah. եռչ եմ մարմինը /I always knew that my father had Ethiopian
Armenian friends from Venice. So her grandfather and grandfather's brother

Yeraz: Երազ Երազ հորք եւ երեխայում /the two brothers know your father/

Hourig: Ուրի, Արարուս /yes, in Venice/

Anais: Ինչպիսի բռնագնք, տուրբուր եզրակացություն, այսպիսի էր բյուստ է։ Երազը հանգիչ, «ռոտ պատմություն, իր հերոս Ատառանի իրատեսակ ընդհանուր»։ /but Yervant, my grandfather's brother, was closer to him [Hourig's father]. I asked my grandfather, "grandpa, do you remember an Attarian from school?"/

Yeraz: Երազ Երազ ելու հուշակոտ են հետ/ do you speak Armenian with him?/

Anais: Yeah, yeah. Անաիս /he said "yes."/ You have to see this man he's really

Yeraz: (still a bit confused, to me) Երազ Երազ հանգիչ հույների հետ/ /he's alive, you went and talked to him?/

Hourig: Երազ Երազ հանգիչ հույների հետ/ /I haven't seen him/

Anais: Երազ Երազ ելու հուշակոտ են հետ/ /I asked him if remembered an Attarian/

Yeraz: Երազ Երազ հանգիչ եւ երեխայում /you asked him if he remembered an Attarian /

Anais: Անաիս, «իմ հաստատություն երեխայում երեխայական է։ Արարուս բռնագնք երեխայում իրատեսակ ընդհանուր է։» /he said, "yes, he did very well in Armenian studies subjects, but Yervant was closer to him."/ And then it's just amazing, for me it just totally triggered... Անաիս Անաիս հանգիչ եւ երեխայում /this much with Hourig/ (laughing) I've created this weird... but just like (groping for words) and this, c'est antérieur to what we're doing now... Անաիս Անաիս հանգիչ եւ երեխայում /it's something strange, I'm sitting with you like this around this table, and with this person [there is] this type of... / you know, and it was just like, in my head it was just like, "oh my god... I'm not going crazy?!" (laughs) Անաիս Անաիս հանգիչ եւ երեխայում /is there something/ you know?

Hourig: But it, it, it... blew me away, it blew me away

Anais: I couldn't believe it
Hourig: It blew me away, my god, I mean, what a small world. I mean որ որպես ու որպես /where from?/

Yeraz: Yeah

Anais: Even at that time... globalization, you know....so it was just really amazing. որը երբ հիշում երբ հիշում էր երբ հիշում սերմերը, ընտրում, ավելի մեծ ավելի մեծ ավելի ավելի ավելի ավելի տեղափոխվեց, ունեցել է ունեցել ու ունեցել ու ունեցել, ու այլ
Anais: (speaks with a lot of emotion) Nonnina has been through so much, everything you can imagine, you know, moving continents twice, [but] I've never seen her look so sad as when she told me ուտու կարճ կարծեշ երեխա քուրմ կարծեւու ու ուտու Հայաստանի բարձրակերպությամբ ու կարծեւու կարծեշաձևությամբ. զգացել այս անհաստանա երևագնացի երեխա թե ուտու Հայաստանի բարձրակերպությամբ. /that grandpa had promised her they would return to Italy and they never did. This European woman lived in Ethiopia for twenty years and I think until now/ elle est marquée, elle fait un traumatisme. (Collective discussion 22.12.03)

From then on Francesca's story carried a strong resonance with that of Yeraz's mother Maria's we had heard earlier in the Collective. Francesca learned to speak the language, cook the food, and live the ways of her new family. Adopting a completely new culture, in a remote part of the world, very far from her own family, did not come easy for her however.

Echoing Maria's predicament, Francesca faced a similar intention of "patrolling boundaries" in her new family, which manifested itself first and foremost in acquiring the language to insure that the Armenian identity can be passed on to her children. The deep parallels in the
stories of the two women, Maria and Francesca, overlap traversing continents and communities as far apart as the Ethiopian and Lebanese ones. Asked if Francesca embraced the Armenian side, Anais gave a nuanced response, "I think she embraced the cultural etiquette of what it takes to be accepted in the Armenian side of the family" (Collective discussion 22.12.03). As with Maria, Francesca's integration into "Armenianhood" must have affected her deeply. Even though within her nuclear family setting both Italian and Armenian were present in equal measure, the hard-negotiated addition to Francesca's identity must have left some wounds. It is most probably that internal appropriation of identity that led Francesca, just like Maria, to express a naïve wish that all her grandchildren marry Armenians, since all her daughters had already done so. The hope was that by proclaiming a sole identity, they would be spared the discord that she herself had lived through. Yet nearly one or two generations later, both Yeraz and Anais were not only questioning and reflecting on the rupture these women had experienced, but also essentially reclaiming their internalized "other" side.

Anais confided to the Collective that her strong identification with her matrilineal line also came with the distinct physical resemblance and similar character traits she and her mother shared with her maternal great aunt Zia Michella. Even though Anais had never met Michella herself, she always felt a powerful association with her, which solidified over the years when members of the extended family continually expressed their astonishment over the resemblance of physical features, mannerisms and temperament. The first tangible imprint of this bond came with Anais' memory of Michella's passing. "I really believe that we all unconsciously make narratives out of memories, regardless if they're true or not, if it exactly happened like that or not; chances are maybe I reformulated [the story] in my head" (Collective discussion 22.12.03), reflected Anais recounting the event. She was a small girl of seven or
eight years old, the only link to the temporal context in her mind being that it was a time when cabbage patch dolls were in fashion. They were sitting around Nonnina’s kitchen table. They knew Michella was diagnosed with terminal cancer and close to death. Nonnina suddenly sprang to her feet with, «هنسبهُا التي قبل أرطخ نحسلي رحل»/“I have to call Italy”/. As she reached Michella’s family, she was told that her sister had just passed away. In Anais' memory this was the instance when she realized the power of inexplicable connections, something that is always related to her matrilineal line. Nonnina had barely reached Rome to be by the side of her sister’s grieving family, back in Montreal it was already Halloween time, and then word got home that Nonnina and Michella’s mother had also passed away. “It was just like گیل‌فیلی گیل‌فیلمی یمپاسیتی، ستی آکونم. I she couldn’t bear the pain they said, I don’t know!" (Collective discussion 22.12.03), Anais told us.
I have always been told that I look exactly like my mom and that she is and looks exactly like Zia Michella. Here you have an old picture with both. Apparently Nonnina (my mom’s mom) was nothing like her sister Michella. Instead, my mom had her aunt’s temperament. So I have always been linked to this woman I have never met, but who is very dear to all. All I remember of her is when Nonnina found out about her death and rushed to Rome. It was in October. A little while after, her Greek mother passed away also in Rome. There were no records of her birth in Turkey — no one knew exactly how old she was. That Christmas, only two months after these two deaths, my sister and I received Cabbage Patch Kids as gifts. All of a sudden, though there were eleven people in the room, there was silence, an aghast silence, then tears started flowing. My grandmother looked disturbed. I was really young, but I asked my mom what’s wrong — my aunt Zia Lucia, my mom and my Nonnina were speaking in low voices as if to protect us (or them?) from some information. Then my mom explained that the Cabbage Patch Kids had two middle names, Michella and Sofia. One was my grandmother’s sister’s name (Michella) and the other her mother’s.

Figure 21: Anais’ nonnina with her sister
I can still feel, at that second, how the presence of inexplicable things made its way into our social family gathering that night. From then on I understood that we are all attached to things we don't see, feel or know, but that are present all the same. And in this case, what I couldn't see, feel or know is the part of where I come from, scattered from Turkey to Greece and to Rome; these charged sites that trace the history, the HERstories, the unbroken HERstories of MYSTORY-MYSTERY. And there is nothing Armenian about all of this, if I trace down my mother's mother's mother and sisters, etc...

Is this why I am SO sensitive about people raising questions about *ouiym* '/foreigner'/, a word I have come to despise? So typically, so many of my Armenian friends were taught Armenian songs and lullabies from their mom, who learned it from their mom, who learned it at the time when being Armenian in Eastern Turkey was somewhat dangerous. No, my women's stories are planted in further away places, very non-Armenian settings. Yet I am made or encouraged to feel that it is less, because it is not Armenian. That I have to downplay the value and what it brings me, how it shapes my identity, because I can't cash in Nonnina, Zia Michella and Yaya and all their families as chips, brownie points towards an idealized, standardized Armenian representation of self. I used to feel (and still do sometimes) bad, uncomfortable, like I had missed out on something, when people will sing or recite poems and lullabies for children, like an Armenian oral family history. But now I question the mechanism that directs and links situation A — HERstories in Turkey, Greece, Italy to situation B — feeling that I had missed out on something. This is why I get so angry, at least inside of me, when I hear talk among Armenians of Other with a "they're just not Armenian" O. Because this strategy, this 'entreprise identitaire', would have me compromise the "reality" of my personal matrilineal setting. And I refuse to feel less for anything, ANYTHING, out of respect for my mother, her mother, her
mother and sister, and so on... Herstory for me comes first. The Armenian aspect for me is very much a 'male' thing. Nonnina married Nonou [grandfather] — from my mom's side what "Armenian" is, is an adoption, a marriage, a choice. A conscious decision on behalf of Nonnina. And the male side imposed all that is Armenian. And the female side accepted this by adopting it without questions out of respect for the institution of marriage. (Anais, reflexive log)

ZABEL MEDZMAM

Figure 22: Anais' grandmother

In the back [of the photo] it's written Հայությունը եղելաբար էկոլոգիական հաղթականություն տրամադրող դիմաց երկարաչափելով /with loving kisses for my lion cub Sevag/. Je viens tout juste de réaliser que cette photo ne m'appartient pas, mais elle est dédiée à mon frère, Sevag. Արծրունու տեղի /my dearest grandmother/, elle est décédée paralysée, il y a exactement un an et un jour, le 8 Avril 2003, le jour de l'anniversaire de Vahé. Quand on

Do you know how hard-headed Vanetsis are?" En d'autres mots, c'est une femme à la tête dure, with such strong poise of pride, always set up straight. It was always a joking way to explain her hard-headedness, the fact that she is Կուտքի from Van. So one day, convinced that she was 'from Կուտք/ Van', I asked my dad (her son) if she was born there. She seemed to be the only 'direct physical link' to that region where Armenians come from. «Անհետ, կարդ այստեղ երգելիսը ծածկում է․»: "No, your grandmother was born in Ethiopia." WHAT? «Ու, ու ու Կուտքի»: "So, who is from Van?" Her mom, my grandmother's mom is from Կուտք/ Van. Զաբել մեծամարտն տեղա ծածկում է․: Զաբել medzmam was born in Addis. And all I could remember thinking was that she seemed to be the only 'authentic' and direct transmitted link which explained some family presence in a site so widely recognized by Armenians as an important historical site. Everyone knows that Կուտք/ Van is Armenian! But alas, these roots are long forgotten, flourishing only to jokingly explain behaviour. Once again all the arrows reguide me towards this large African country, where three of my (Armenian) grandparents lived their Arménéité, as did my parents. But somehow this equation doesn't make sense.

1. Where are you from?
2. Ethiopia
3. Oh! So you're Armenian?

No no no. That is not how it unfolds. Dammit, I am not from a place identified as what I am. My Armenia is in Addis, as in Serko's (mom's dad), Սերկո/ medzmam and medzbab's (dad's parents). Even the only one who was supposed to be from there, isn't really. And so I, we, my whole family continuously lives where they are not from. And then they make it be "from where they are." Զաբել/ Zabel is from
Addis. Raffi is FROM Addis. He IS Ethiopia. The embodiment of making it where he's from. He started out in staunch poverty, with eight (or eleven? I can never remember) siblings and ended up owning and managing the largest printing company and stationary in Addis (Artistic Printing). I remember how touched I was to get one tiny millimeter closer to "where I'm from" when I went to interview an Ethiopian Jewish informant in Montreal for my M.Sc. Her mom asked about my family in Addis and recognized my grandfather. "He used to own the largest printing company, it was very good." I was taken aback by what seemed like his grandiose stature in Addis. With all their wealth and "social status", rubbing shoulders with aristocracy, army generals and other wealthy foreigners, no one in my family ever gave a hint of "us as superiors," or "important." Hell no, my grandfather worked for everything he owned.

And so a year ago I saw my beautiful grandmother enter the last phase of what was already a comatose world, where each day she seemed to curl up and disintegrate little by little, on her side, looking like a skeleton, an alive dead body, going back to this embryonic position as if to complete the circle of how she came into this world.

"Oh medzmam. I hardly knew her. I've only heard about her classiness, her poise, her demeanour, how loved she was, how beautiful she was, how hard her mom worked to open the Armenian school in Addis, how hard she and Raffi worked for the Armenian community there.

No, I knew none of this — as I was growing up, medzmam and medzhabab were more often voices at the other end of the line, calling from this far away place called Addis, a place where we all came from. Then once in a while they would visit, bringing Ethiopian
Anais and her mother seemed to have divergent views on perceptions of their personal identity. Whereas Anais admitted that reflections on her own identity perspectives had been sometimes painful experiences, she portrayed her mother in her narratives as someone who was very comfortable in her dual Italian-Armenian identities. The key to understand the different mother-daughter perspectives seems to have been in the role language played in their childhood and youth experiences. Anais' mother Laura grew up in a family where Armenian and Italian were spoken on an equal footing, because of her Italian mother and Armenian father. Moreover, the family setting must have mirrored the reality of everyday life in the Armenian community in Addis.
Ababa, where the "outside" language of interaction was a multiplicity of tongues (Italian, English, Amharic and some French) and the "inside" community and family language was Armenian. After her primary schooling in Addis Ababa, Laura like her father Serko, was sent to Italy to complete her secondary education. That opportunity had given Laura the chance not only to keep in touch with her mother's family, but had also created an everyday lived cultural context for her Italian roots. Naturally, Laura had felt that the two parts of her hyphenated identity were well-balanced and that she did not need one particular allegiance, since she genuinely felt that she was both — she lived a true fluidity of identities.

Anais: There's so much more [to identity] you know, it's so much more fluid it's like it's like water, it's all around you and you just, you negotiate with it daily without even knowing and next thing you know, you identify with it, even if it is by recognizing that you don't identify with it, it's just part of [your life] so

my grandmother... (refers to her maternal grandmother) I think it has a lot to do, I mean it says a lot that my mom has a fluidity between both identities, I think it's something that she received from both parents and that makes a huge difference that my grandfather speaks Italian and Armenian, my grandmother speaks Armenian and Italian. That way there was no [difference] at home, you know.... I mean my mom is literally half-Italian half-Armenian, I really am amazed at how balanced my mother's identity is, I have not seen anything like this in my life. She speaks Italian, she speaks Armenian, she is both. And I'm just like (sounds amazed), why can't I just, you know? my mom/ she's both, she's so both, it obviously has to do with her parents that gave her both, like her first tongues were Armenian and Italian....

Now when the whole family comes together, you'll see/ in every gathering there is Italian and Armenian. That's just innate, that's just how the family is. It's even on the Armenian side of the family,
The contrast in perspectives between mother and daughter appeared in Anais' fragmented question "And I'm just like (sounds amazed), why can't I just, you know?" (Collective discussion 22.12.03), comparing her predicament with her mother's. Throughout our Collective discussions as well as in her reflexive log Anais acknowledged time after time, that she felt torn over her own identity issues. She felt that while sometimes the rigidified and essentialized collective understandings of Armenian identity became stifling, her Italian side was not as much a part of her life as she would have wanted it to be. Anais attributed that mostly to her maternal grandmother Francesca's lack of desire to teach her grandchildren Italian. She wondered at her grandmother's attempts to project ideas of a monochromatic identity in her wishful thinking of Armenian spouses for all her grandchildren. On the other hand, there were also not many opportunities of relevant cultural embedding, apart from shopping trips to Little Italy or the many parcels of clothing and chocolate that arrived from the extended family in Rome. Clearly, these were not enough to provide a solid anchor for Anais to learn and know intimately about "this 'other' within you" (Collective discussion 22.12.03). At the time the Collective discussions evolved, the personal and professional trajectories in Anais' life converged around deep-seated reflections on identity construction. On one hand, she was in a committed relationship with a non-Armenian partner and on the other, her graduate research work dealt with identity issues in diasporic constructs. Coupled with the extremely honest conversations in the Collective circle, Anais continually questioned the turmoil she felt surfacing inside her.

(Spoken with deep emotion) ḡw tă prejudices, I now know that we're talking/ you know, the world, two worlds, ḡtū
Anais’ reflections clearly continued the dialogue Yeraz and I had started earlier, questioning the contradictions our parents’ generation lived through, caught in the web of the urgency of identity maintenance on one hand and their own practiced ideals of openness on the other. This closing outward-opening inward rhetoric is nothing new of course in diasporic constructs. Exploring the impact of its consequences on individual family histories and narratives, especially on a generational level as happened in the stories recounted by Yeraz and Anais in our Collective, not only sheds light on individual struggles with deeply divisive questions of identity, but also becomes an important stepping stone in negotiating our personal choices and perspectives. Needless to say, it was at times painful for both Anais and Yeraz to share not only these stories, but also their own reflections on the inner schism they lived and faced. Yet, I believe the safety net of the Collective helped all of us collectively to understand, contextualize and reconcile what seemed to us as sometimes conflicting and ambiguous choices by either our parents or grandparents. Certainly there were nuanced struggles for example, between the impact of collective experience through the dual axis of loss and survival on one level and an individual interpretation of
"patrolling the borders" of identity on the other. These nuances clearly illustrated in the story of Anais' great grandparents enforcing, with the explicit cooperation of their son, that their Italian daughter-in-law learn Armenian and the story of Anais' mother growing up in a family context where both Italian and Armenian were spoken on an equal footing.

For Anais understanding and reconciliation within herself came with a previously unplanned visit to Italy. While in Europe working on a graduate degree she received an invitation from her mother to join her on a short trip to Rome. Their brief sojourn together evolved into a memory journey for Anais' mother Laura. Anais recounted to the Collective how visiting the actual sites of her mother's childhood and adolescent memories together with her mother, revealed unexpected layers in their mother-daughter relationship and created a new bond between them. It was as if all of a sudden she was seeing her mother in a totally new light previously unknown to her. Listening to Anais, I thought about Pergrouhi and how I was first enticed to meet her, because I knew she had been familiar with my mother's childhood. I was as much fascinated by Pergrouhi's story as with the possibility of finding out about my mother's childhood memories. Thinking about this parallel between my fascination and Anais' actual exploration, I wondered whether this was how we reached out to touch our mothers; to make them more real by bringing them down from their "mothership" pedestal and seeing the child in them. That way the mother-daughter relationship was reversed temporarily so that the daughter (us) is not perceived as the vulnerable child and the mother (them) is not the invincible force of nature; rather the mother (they) becomes the child like the daughter (us) and the daughter (we) can discover and touch the vulnerabilities of her mother (them).
While exploring "Laura's Italy" Anais was not only able to discover tangible links to her own trajectory, but was also able to see for herself how sometimes mundane and trivial clues opened up the possibilities of culturally embedded contexts which made meaningful connections in our identity negotiations. These ranged from bus rides around the city to a tour of her mother's school grounds to a money exchange stand Laura used in her teens and finally to a candy store that stocked Laura's favourite candy during her school years. These curious "sites of remembrance" brought alive the reason why Laura had glided with such fluidity between her two parts of the hyphen. Experiencing this reality together with her mother brought a sense of healing of the identity rift Anais felt inside her. Intriguingly, she was able to commune with what she had felt missing in her self, through the vicarious experience of storying/"memorying" her mother's life experiences in Italy. As she recounted the story of this journey to the Collective, we also all shared the childhood candies Anais and her mother had bought in Rome, which Anais had specially brought back for us. Something magical happened in my living room that day. It was amazing to see how such an insignificant and ordinary item as a candy took on the power of a talisman and transported us all into the realm of memory tinged with nostalgia; how it bonded us through Anais' story and also symbolized a safe space. For Anais, the candies came to represent a part of her identity she had been discovering and piecing together slowly. On her return from that trip, while still away from home, the candies symbolized for Anais a ritualized association with her mother and her act of "pigging out" on them became a ritual of connecting with a nurturing bond. They also helped Anais demystify her mother by enabling her to see a snapshot of her mother in her youth. And once we are able to truly see our mothers beyond their "motherness" to us, to imagine them as children, young girls and women just like ourselves, I believe ultimately our mother-daughter bond grows deeper and richer.
MEMORY JOURNEY

I purposely (purposely?) left a blank page here... Different time. I haven't opened this book in a while, in such a long time. It just waits for me on my top shelf, next to other notebooks I am to write in. But this one is different. It beckons me to call onto the women I've known and not known, through whom my existence was made possible. Women like Zia Michella, my Nona's sister. Just two weeks ago I was in her city, in Rome, with my mom. That trip was one of the most "identity finding" trips I have ever made. I wasn't looking for it. I just couldn't wait to go away for good food mixed with beautiful scenery. In fact I wasn't sure how I would be able to spend five straight days with my mother... that is the everyday reality, the canvas onto which every thing I have written in this book comes alive. Rather, what I got was the most memorable trip I have had with a beautiful lady — my mom. We mapped out her childhood and teenage years on sites and street corners, shops, hotels and candy stores across la bella cità, Rome. On a parcouru là où se sont déroulées l'histoire de sa mère, son père, sa tante, son oncle et ses quatre cousins. We saw the hospital where she got her tonsils taken out, for goodness' sake. The city is engraved in her like her blood flows in my veins. Where Zia Michella worked for a large company and Zio worked, the different areas where Zia and Zio had lived with their four children, where my grandparents would come for summer holidays, where my mom would go and exchange Ethiopian Bir for Italian Liras while she was a student at a very prestigious and luxurious school. We went to see it, her cousin took us to all these sites. The sister who was the head of the school at that time was still there, but too tired and was resting. My mom got out of the car and told the gatekeepers of the lavish grounds that she was a graduate. And so they opened the gates and let us in... She walked around like it was her home and told us where they would go horseback riding, how waiters used to serve their meals, the daughters of which
diplomats were her friends, what they did on weekends... "Signora Merinian" they would call her. Walking on those grounds with her was the most precious thing I've done. I wish I had a video camera or at least film in my camera, but those moments are written to be remembered and relived only through these words. Goddess had chosen so. Her cousin then took us to my mom's favorite candy store where she bought half the merchandise in there, again! And she found what she was looking for — this candy called La Negrita that they used to have years ago... She bought a bag for me.

She took me out to eat, bought me things, showed me where Nonnina had come to hear Mussolini's speech from a balcony close to La Piazza Venezia... And she whizzed us every where across town on buses, in fluent but accented Italian, asking everyone how to get here, there, all around. And she WAS the city, shaped by it and a part of it. I was not. I mean, I felt such a strong attachment to it, like people feel when they go to Armenia (which I have never felt). I felt roots and history. I felt territorial STABILITY though this is such a construction because my Italian grandmother's parents (Italian father from Genova and Greek mother from Turkey) met in Constantinople. But it just felt like some kind of home. A home that reminded me that it is not. I don't speak the language — well, oddly. I can get around with my Italian and can converse in Italian with Italian friends in Montreal. But in Rome, I couldn't speak. Out of the four times I've been there, this was the first time I was conscious of my horrible grammar, non-existent conjugaison de verbes, and appallingly horrifying accent. These things never bothered me before as I stuck words together and invented "my" Italian to get by during former visits. But THIS time I was ashamed. THIS time I held an Italian passport that I was not worthy of. This time I felt like an insult to my heritage. Coupled with my emotional fatigue and everything going on at home with my cousin's health situation, I could not speak. I
could not put words together. But I had to with Paulo (my second cousin), his girlfriend Laura and their friend Stefano. And I realized that I don't/can't/did not wish to speak the language. And what a barrier that was. Or I put it as a fence between me and Rome. But that was logistics. I knew I could learn it if I wanted to. Once again, so pissed off that Nonnina did not teach me. SO pissed off.

And I realized, if I've mapped all of my mom's family here, Nonnina's family in this city, and I lived this amazing experience of "Laura's Rome" (Laura is my mom), this city that is engraved in her, but really is where she spent a portion of her childhood/adolescence, what would it be like, how many times more intense would it be for me to see Laura's Addis or Armen's (my dad) Addis, and Serko's Addis with his father's coffee plantation – and last but not least, Nonnina's Addis, that place she hated so much but lived in for twenty some years...

All these her/stories mapped out across these beautiful lands that I have the honour to live in/live out and visit...

Mara

Of all the women in the Collective Mara was the one with the least words in her stories. She very often had incisive, witty, and insightful interpretations of the narratives of the other Collective members. However, when it came to her own, her retellings barely seemed to scratch the surface of a rich heritage in family memoirs and they all concentrated on the figure of her great grandmother Victoria, an extraordinary woman and survivor. In the end, Mara's narratives represented a true portrait of poetic minimalism. Born in Tbilisi (Georgia), Mara had grown up in St. Petersburg (Russia) and lived most of her life in Yerevan, Armenia before she immigrated to Canada in her
mid 20s. Her conception of her relationship with the homeland was very different from any of the other Collective members.

Mara: I think we talk about all that identity issue personally I feel, I might be completely wrong about this, but it’s easier for me than let’s say it is for diasporans, because... I mean, I have Armenia to identify with, I don’t have

Yeraz: We don’t have a physical homeland

Anais: We have a symbolic [one]

Yeraz: (repeats) We have a symbolic

Hourig: But we have an imagined homeland. For her [Mara] it’s not imagined

Anais: Yeah.

Yeraz: It’s very real.

Mara: It’s, it’s there. And it’s very tangible.

Anais: Very concrete.

Hourig: I really have to [interrupt]... it’s very interesting, because you said, “you diasporans”

Mara: Yes. Yet I am a diasporan Armenian...

Hourig: Yeah

Nané: Huh! (laughter)

Hourig: Yet you don’t consider... That’s another fissure...

Mara: I don’t know...

Hourig: You don’t consider yourself a diasporan Armenian

Mara: I don’t. I consider myself Armenian who just lives in Canada now... (pause). It’s very strange, I know... (Collective discussion 8.1.04)

Mara also naturally spoke the Eastern Armenian dialect of the language, while the rest of us spoke in Western Armenian. Yet interestingly she also considered herself at least partly Western Armenian, because both her great grandmother Victoria and grandmother Hasmik were born in
Turkey, and because her great grandmother Victoria spoke the Western Armenian dialect at home.

Mara: ...And the other funny thing is that in Armenia my family was always treated as *western Armenians*.

Yeraz: ինչպես իսկի՞ անկեղծ է?

Mara: Because my grandparents are western Armenian. So they were in Armenia quite like you know, looked upon, and my great grandmother spoke western Armenian and they spoke Turkish at home when they had to swear at each other and we learned all of them... it was, I always felt myself as a matter of fact that I'm partly western Armenian. And then I came here and I realized that no (laughter) I couldn't be... yeah like truly... I identify with it. I mean I don't identify, but my great grandmother was always pulling me, you know [she was] this incredible person and I admired her incredibly. So I wanted to identify with her and she was western Armenian so I identified with that. I tried to imitate the way she speaks and... would sit around and imitate her accent.

Hourig: She never spoke eastern Armenian basically?

Mara: Towards the end of her life she mixed up very much but she still used a lot of western Armenian expressions and you know, way of speaking and so on and so forth. (Collective discussion 8.1.04)

Mara's positioning was unique. She did not consider herself a diasporan, but an Armenian of the homeland who happened to be outside Armenia at that particular point in time; yet she also considered herself strongly rooted as a western Armenian, while she lived in Armenia. Certainly no one else in the Collective placed herself in these blurred boundaries of being as Mara did, in a unique transient state of *neither here, nor there; both here and there*.

More than once, whether in personal communication or in dialogue in the Collective, like Nane before her, Mara expressed much regret for not writing down the many stories her great grandmother told her and for not recording her voice. In all her exchanges she also clearly talked of
the charismatic spell her great grandmother Victoria had on her. In reflecting on both Yeraz's and Nané's stories, Mara often reminded the Collective that the experience of trauma is always different in different people. Remembering her own great grandmother in our circle immediately after Nané had spoken about her mother's reaction, Mara illustrated her point by referring to Victoria's many retellings of her lived experiences which never dwelt on trauma, but focused on creating pride in the act of survival. "The way the stories are told is how they shape us and how they affect us," reflected Mara (Collective discussion 15.12.03).

For Victoria tatik12 her stories served a specific purpose.

I think of my own experiences in terms of hearing the same survivor stories and how different it was presented to me and how (pause) it was never a source of [pain] (pause), it was always a source of pride...that (articulates every single word slowly) what I come from is strong and has survived; but also specifically the generation, the source that they come from is strong... and I should be strong. The way she told the stories was always, it was like stories... I loved listening to them no matter how old I was. And I never remember myself being, feeling pain. Pride, only pride... she [Victoria] was a very interesting person in that sense. And she was very young when she was facing this whole horrible thing. She was 14-15. What amazed me when I grew up, I always think back and I think how come I was never you know scared, that I never had any nightmares? ....It was just like stories children read before going to bed and some common fairy tales would be the reason of nightmares more than these horrible stories that she would tell me, but the twist she would put to it was so positive. (Mara, Collective discussion 15.12.03)

Victoria tatik passed away in the summer of 1990 in Armenia, two years after the Sumgait13 pogroms in the neighbouring republic of Azerbaijan. The events perturbed her deeply and stirred memories of the unspeakable

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12 Tatik means grandmother in Eastern Armenian.
13 In February 1998, while the Armenians of Nagorno Karabagh (then an autonomous region within the republic of Soviet Azerbaijan) demonstrated peacefully asking for self-determination, the Armenian population in the industrial Azeri city of Sumgait was subjected to a meticulously organized and state-sponsored pogrom. For Armenians worldwide, the events triggered parallels with the 1915 genocide.
catastrophe she had survived as a teenage girl. At the time she had
confided in Mara "Oh, why did God give me such a long life so I
would see two genocides in my lifetime?" (Mara, web post 27.3.04)

Victoria tatik was born in 1900 in the city of Shapin Garahisar in the
easternmost corner of the Sebastia (Sivas) province. The legendary
military commander and national hero Andranik\textsuperscript{14} was her maternal
uncle's son once removed. When Mara first revealed this connection in

\textsuperscript{14} Andranik Ozanian (1865-1927) popularly known as Zoravar [commander] Andranik is a
legendary hero, a freedom fighter and a military commander who instilled hope and pride among
Armenians during the years of the genocidal killings and deportations. He became the symbol of
resistance and the subject of many folk songs and poems.
the Collective, everyone was surprised. To my constant personal probings on what her great grandmother could have told them about this larger than life figure, she had a different response:

You know, it's really funny but my interest in regular people's lives was always stronger than famous people's. Andranik was Victoria's mother Haykuhi's maternal uncle's son. The children hardly ever saw him, since he would appear only at night and disappear by the morning. There were always searches at Victoria's house because of him. I believe she was in touch with Andranik afterwards, when he was in Fresno; I should ask my aunt and great aunt to tell me about him. But I am guilty; I liked Victoria tatik's stories better. Everyone was always interested to hear about him, but I always asked about her life in the American college (that's where she was when her town was wiped out). The college became an orphanage, of course, since all the children there became orphans in a matter of days. (Mara, Web post 27.3.04)

The American college Mara referred to was a school for girls in the nearby city of Sebastia. Victoria's family must have been well to do to send their daughter to a boarding school in the provincial capital city of Sebastia which boasted seventeen boys' and four girls' schools (Mikaelian, 1984, p. 257-258). Several of these schools belonged to foreign Missions, including the one Victoria attended. Victoria apparently stayed at the school during the week and returned home to her family in Shapin Garahisar over the weekends (Mara, Collective discussion 15.12.03). In the spring of 1915 however, she must have been stranded in the school, as unrest, arrests, and deportations became the order of the day in all provinces and cities. The Armenian inhabitants of Shapin Garahisar put up a heroic resistance for a whole month from June to early July 1915, retreating to the citadel of the city. By the end of the month-long siege, an internal decision was made for the armed fighters to make their way out under cover of the night. As the Turkish authorities finally made their way into the fort, they shot all males over the age of fifteen, regrouped the rest and deported all, together with the remaining women.
and children (Kévorkian, 2006, p. 562-567). How much of the details of these events Victoria found out at the time, we can never be sure.

Mara: One day her compatriots came, I think other travellers that came to the school and said there is no more town. So everybody was massacred...

Yeraz: So she lost all her family.

Mara: So she lost all her family except her sister who was much older and who had married and moved to the US long before. They had more than ten years difference between them. So same thing happened to lots of girls in the school, so the school automatically changed into an orphanage.

Yeraz: (repeats) Became an orphanage.

Mara: ...So it became an orphanage and she finished the school, stayed there and became a teacher. (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

The only certain fact is that she was the sole survivor from her family at the tender age of fifteen. The next episode in Mara's narrative of her great grandmother was about her bravery. Like Nouritza before her, here was another great grandmother who defied death, loss, and pain with unspeakable acts of courage. Becoming a teacher at the orphanage where she grew up, in clandestine operations she rescued other Armenian girls who were forcefully turkified.

Mara: But the biggest thing was that... like you know, your great grandmother (refers to Yeraz's great grandmother Nouritza), she was very brave... she'd sit on a horse, go to Turks' houses and kidnap Armenian girls and bring them to the orphanage.

Yeraz: To the orphanage... ooohh.

Mara: Yeah. So that was her thing.

Yeraz: (repeats) That was her thing.

Mara: That was her thing. And there are lots of stories. Stories that the orphanage had no... I mean they were under US protection, but there was no security. They had one old, you know, person sitting as a guard you know, old man. So there was constant (enunciates every word) attacks by young Turks,
because they knew there were young Armenian girls there. So the only way they could protect themselves, was [by] themselves. They had these ingenious ways of throwing թունթուն /boiling

Yeraz: թունթուն ջուր /boiling water.

Mara: ոսկ, ջուր կա, ջուր /no, not water, oil.

Yeraz: ջուր /oil.

Mara: թունթուն ջուր, բունկ, բունկե ջուր, ջուր... /boiling oil, coal, and this and that... Anyways. (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

And here Mara stumbled on a very important issue. The way Victoria tatik chose to tell her stories to her great granddaughter was also indicative of how she herself chose to deal with what befell her. The mundane tone of her stories was meant to minimize the impact of the traumatic events and to lay the focus elsewhere. Mara used her tatik's "voice" with her unique mix of Eastern and Western Armenian in the retelling to illustrate this further.

Mara: But the story is... another thing that was interesting, when she told about her story, she always told [it] very light, you know... «Ես նույնիսկ հեռանի, երբ այնուհետների բանի անդամ է, ասամբել է, բայց մեր բանի, հավաստիվանելու այս գծի, երբ այնուհետ բանի, հավաստիվանելու այս գծի, ածկել է, որ երկարէ, երբ այնուհետ երբ Բանի, հավաստիվանելու այս գծի, այնուհետ, այնուհետ, այնուհետ... Ես, Ես, Ես, Ես...» /"so yesterday we went, I took the girls, they were sitting indoors all day, can't have it that way. So I decided to take the girls on a picnic, we gathered everything, made everything ready, we went, and then suddenly half an hour later the Turks came, I took out the rifle and I said, I'll shoot, I shot, then escaped... and this and that..." (laughs) it's told as if like it's you know, "we went to the shopping malls and..."

(Nané laughs)

Mara: "And we saw this great picnic basket and we bought it..." da da da da... (laughs)...when she told her story, there were horrible stories, but she told it with such matter of factness. Like «այս երբ է... հեռան այսուհետ, բունկ, բունկե է, բունկե այսուհետ, երբ այսուհետ, այսուհետ...» /"it
wasn't a big deal... we shot them, we threw down burning coal, we boiled the oil, we threw it down (Yeraz laughs), they were all blinded, all the Turks were blinded and fell down..." (Nané starts laughing.) (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

The person who emerges from these snippets of stories is not just a colourful character but a young woman of enormous courage. In charge of the well-being and security of orphaned girls much younger than herself, she evidently had to be strong in their stead as well. There was no time to dwell on personal pain and loss when a catastrophe of immense proportions was unfolding all around her. Obviously, for a young Mara, listening to these stories, Victoria was a symbol of strength and an inspiring role model. Despite her own vivid personal stories however, Victoria could never tell the stories of the orphans in her charge. Retelling their experiences was too hard, probably even traumatic for her.

Mara: *fitujg luilth pl//p... hi/; tp mqnul u/utp, np /But all this... what did I want to say? That how what we survive, we minimize them... the impact of it or, at least she [Victoria] didn’t see it as traumatizing what she had survived, but what these girls had survived, which was not necessarily more traumatizing, she couldn’t deal with... She couldn’t deal with other people’s pain, but she could deal easily with her own. I think it's the same thing you know, with lots of people. It's like what you survive it's ok, it's not a big deal.

Yeraz: Yep!

Mara: But once you start seeing something that you haven’t experienced yourself, that somebody else does, it’s too much, it’s too traumatizing.

Yeraz: Even if you have... yes. (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

While Victoria consciously played down her own ordeal, she also however felt compelled to bear witness to the plight of the other girls. At the time, she recorded their stories in a manuscript.

Mara: *mpbi/l/... *h'g h' th nqnuj wuth, np /So... I've spent lots of time with her, listening to all the stories that she had, but whenever it would come to just telling the stories of the orphans, she couldn’t. It was too traumatic. She wrote about it and lost it. It was a loss. It was
lost in Turkey and it was... she tried to redo it in Armenia and she couldn't. It was too traumatic for her to put it down. I tried to tape her, it was too much for her and there is a whole family story connected to it, those tapes are lost as well... and this is one thing that I can't live with is that I lost that... I had that source, I could get that information and I lost it. And she had over a 1000, she saved over a 1000 orphans from Turks' houses and she recorded all their stories. And this information, incredible memory, and I've lost this information. I just could... it could never... (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

Mara of course was too harsh in blaming herself. As in all the other stories told in the circle of the Collective, there were eventual gaps and fragmentations in Victoria tatik's account as well. There were also many lingering questions in my mind. How had Victoria actually survived the deportation orders, when even school students and graduates, alongside their teachers were all deported (Kévorkian, 2006, p. 540-548)? In the city of Marzewan (Merzifun) in the same province for example, the authorities had even forced the US mission to close down the school and hospital under their official protection, so that no one would be spared (Kévorkian, p. 559-562). One source mentioned that eighty orphans of a Swiss orphanage were kept behind in Sebastia (Kévorkian, p. 543), but there was no mention of an American one. Could it have been that there was confusion in the naming of the orphanage and Victoria was among them? In another instance, Mara had recounted to the Collective that her great grandmother had immigrated to Armenia in 1923. By then she was already married and had a three-year-old child — Mara's grandmother Hasmik. This sketchy fragment took Victoria and her new family from Sebastia to the port city of Samson first and then to Istanbul, accompanying the orphans who were leaving for Greece. Apparently Victoria, her husband Yeghishe, and their daughter Hasmik were also destined to leave for Greece and then on to the United States. However, the story went, the ships were late in arriving. Yeghishe's life was in danger, because he was in fear of being drafted into the Turkish army and they made the decision to immediately
leave for the Georgian port city of Batumi instead and from thereon to Armenia. Victoria also lost a newborn baby on the long journey from Sebastia to Istanbul. It was thus that her young family arrived in Armenia in the early 1920s (Collective discussion 15.12.03). This hazy fragment as well, had opened up more questions than answers for me in Victoria's story. How had all these orphans moved from Sebastia to Greece? Surely by then the orphanage must have come under the tutelage of a Foreign Mission. Could it have been the Near East Relief and if so, would the historical sources on NER shed some light eventually on Victoria's life story?

It was the fascinating story of the manuscript Victoria had compiled of the orphans' experiences that became a key point in understanding the life circumstances of Victoria in those trying times. In answering my personal queries Mara clarified that Victoria tatik had written the original manuscript in two copies. Mara was also able to verify with her aunt that one copy of the manuscript was given to Victoria's immediate supervisor, Miss Mary Graffam, who was the director of the orphanage. It was she who must have sent it to the US, probably to her Mission headquarters. Victoria had kept the second copy. At one point, when the Turkish authorities had raided their quarters and searched Victoria's room for subversive documents, they had found the manuscript written in Armenian. The story went that the Turks had an Armenian translator with them. They asked him to translate what was in the document. The man took a look at the papers and told them they were love letters; he was too ashamed to even translate them. He then immediately threw the papers into the fireplace. This total stranger had saved Victoria's life with his smart and audacious move. However, the manuscript was burnt and lost irretrievably. Mara did not know how to trace the original remaining copy in the US, or whether it had even survived in any missionary archives (personal communication, April 2008). However, finally the most important clue in the story was revealed — Mary Graffam.
An American educational missionary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in Ottoman Turkey, Ms. Mary Graffam was posted in 1901, at the age of thirty, to Sebastia (Billington Harper, 2003, p. 218). The same year she was appointed principal and supervisor of all the ABCFM's girls' school in the city and the district, with seven hundred students under her charge (Billington Harper, p. 218; "Kaiser's land", 1921). In her twenty years of service in Sebastia, until her death in 1921, Graffam came to be known as an extraordinary woman whose acts of unspeakable courage instilled respect, hope, trust and love in all those who knew her. She was Victoria tatik's teacher, principal, protector. In a recent personal conversation Mara revealed that it was Ms. Graffam who had entreated with the authorities to keep some of the students behind, despite the deportation orders. She had specifically arranged for several of her students to work as nurses in the hospital of the Mission, while she had taken on Victoria as her own personal assistant (personal communication, April 2008). Given the fact that early on in WWI, in 1914, Graffam had spent considerable time as a volunteer nurse for the Red Crescent on the Russian Front, dealing with a typhus outbreak in the Turkish troops, had earned her the respect of the local authorities. Later on in 1917, she was even decorated by the Turkish government for her services. She was able to use this clout apparently successfully with the local authorities to help friends, colleagues, people in need and to alleviate their suffering as much as she could (Billington Harper, p. 220-222). In August 1915, when her appeals to release the imprisoned and wave the deportation orders were not heeded, she became the first and only missionary, who challenged the authorities to accompany the deportees to safeguard their journey. Her own letters from this period and eye witness accounts tell the story of this lone woman in the caravan of deportees, sometimes riding frantically from one end to the other, entreat ing with gendarmes, using forces of persuasion, bribing them, to help save lives. Five days onto the deportation route however, in the city
of Malatia, the authorities refused to let her continue. By that time, it was clear what awaited the rest of the deportees. Graffam was forced to return to Sebastia, where she was dictated by the authorities to care for the orphans from the Swiss orphanage or risk their deportation (Billington Harper, p. 223-236). Graffam then took charge of several hundred orphans, continued to visit the imprisoned and became the only American to remain in the province throughout WWI. Stories of her bravery made her a legend among the survivors of Sebastia.

She organized efforts not only to smuggle food to Armenian soldiers hiding in mountain caves, but also to rescue Armenian girls and women from Turkish and Kurdish homes and to save refugees from starvation through public and clandestine factory work. She hid from the police jewelry, valuables, and accounts that had been left in her care before the deportations by burying them and re-burying them in every portion of the town. (Billington Harper, 2003, p. 237)

This was the woman who was Victoria tatik's mentor and protector. Learning about Graffam, Victoria's life path became clearly silhouetted. Suddenly all her tales about riding horses to rescue girls were not stories anymore, but real life events. She was herself a 17-year-old teen according to her own testimony, when she was involved in these clandestine acts with her mentor. By nineteen Victoria was already married, having fallen in love with a dashing young man, Yeghishe, she had seen riding a horse in the town square. At that time, she was also Graffam's right-hand person, assisting her in the many tasks of the orphanage and the adjacent factory work. A year later, she was also already a young mother. In the stories and articles on Graffam there were also records of hostile events against the orphanage during the war years ("Former Kaiser's Turkish estate", 1920). Victoria's colourful stories of self-defense can now be seen on this documented backdrop. In her own dictated memoir in 1919, reflecting on her experiences in 1915 Graffam admitted how she carried on despite her harrowing times and exhaustion.
"At this time," Graffam remembered in 1919, "I was like a skeleton and looked like a refugee myself. I was half crazed; I could not be left alone, and yet I could not give in...because refugees were beginning to come from Marsovan and other places." (Billington Harper, 2003, p. 236)

Clearly, Graffam was a heroic woman and an inspiring role model for her young protégé Victoria, who learned first hand from her mentor to put her own needs and pain aside, to assist those suffering around her. By the end of WWI, the number of orphans in Graffam’s care had grown to 1,200 ("Former Kaiser's Turkish estate", 1920), authenticating Victoria’s account yet again. At this time, Graffam had become the director of the Near East Relief in the region of Sebastia, yielding much influence and integrating "general post-war relief efforts with the work of the mission's large orphanages, schools, industrial shops, a farm, and a hospital" (Billington Harper, 2003, p. 238). We can only imagine how Victoria's role and responsibilities had also expanded within this context. By 1923, with the new political turmoil engulfing the region, the Near East Relief had taken on the task to move their orphanage with its burgeoning number of over 10,000 Greek and Armenian orphans to safety. The fragment of the journey from Sebastia to Constantinople in Victoria tatik's tale attained flesh and blood in a journalist’s account of the trek of the orphans through mountains in wagons and on foot, in batches of 300-500, to reach the portal city of Samson on the Black Sea and from there on to Constantinople and Greece (Williams, 1923).

All the puzzles in Victoria tatik’s life story had now fallen into place, except one. Could the original copy of the manuscript Victoria had compiled, detailing the life stories of the orphans and bearing witness to their experiences, be found somewhere in Mary Graffam's archives? It will remain to be seen.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} Mary Graffam's unpublished letters and other biographical archives are to be found in the ABCFM archive collection of Houghton Library at Harvard University (Billington Harper, 2003, p. 216).
Dreams
    Heroes
    Life

How does it all begin,
How do people become...

Imagine
Imagine a kitchen
Imagine sunlight
Imagine a table
    2 chairs
Imagine a story
Told a thousand times
Imagine a woman

Imagine a hero
(Mara, reflexive log)
Mara's poetic tribute to her great grandmother in fact aptly portrays all the great grandmothers, grandmothers, mothers, daughters whose stories we wove collectively in our small group. These stories represent for me true manifestations of a mother/tongue. Speaking with the mother/tongue is a linguistic choice. I view speaking to the mother/tongue, as an approach to voice the maternal narratives within. Speaking to the mother/tongue, is letting the mother voice be heard. It is the sum total of the encapsulated mother stories that are passed down generationally to me and through me, through a conscious act of autobiographical inquiry. It is reconciling the duality of self and voice, to make a whole. In the end, all these stories told with the tongue of the mother, speak truth to the tongue of the mother.
Chapter Six

SURVIVING THE MEMORY OF THE PAST

THE MEMORY WE WERE BORN WITH

Memory is not the past. It is the water you swim through, the words you speak, your gestures, your expectations. (Saul, 2002, p. 213)

Memory is conditioned by emotion. (Allende, 2003, p. 179)

After my paternal grandmother Zohra’s passing, my mother always recounted one of her comments that had made a deep impression on her when she was a young bride.

"We used to think we would never be able to be happy, to love, to marry, to live, to have children, to laugh. Yet we loved and married and lived and had children and laughed, had told Zohra the survivor.

Her words depicted the reality of how their generation dealt with their wounds and battled with their pain in their day-to-day existence. Reflecting on my grandmother’s words and on the dialectic of memory and forgetting, I have often wondered how she and her generation lived with their painful memories. In one of our conversations Yeraz mentioned, "There is my memory and then there is the memory I was born with” (Yeraz, Collective discussion 9.12.03). What Yeraz alluded to were the generationally transmitted memories of a trauma that echoed Sontag’s definition of collective memory:
All memory is individual, un reproduceable—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. (Sontag, 2003, p. 86)

This chapter looks at how we remember and retell painful memories of atrocities lived and survived. Some memories are generationally transmitted, while others are based on our own lived experiences. I look at issues of loss and pain by exploring the generational legacy of memory in the delicate portraits of grandmothers the Collective sketches. I reflect on dealing with traumatic memory, narrating survival, and on how storying memory becomes a healing journey.

GAPING FRAMES

In a series of Web posts in our forum over the course of a week, initiated by Anais, the Collective had to deal with one of the most delicate and painful issues that surfaced during our many discussions together. Yeraz had just received the news of her grandmother’s passing in South Lebanon. In the ensuing dialogue among the Collective, the legacy and burden of memory in the intergenerational transmission of stories took center stage. How do we reconstruct and retell our memories as we deal with the pain of an irretrievable loss; how do we honour the lost presence of our grandmothers while their empty gaping frames stare back at us from our family albums, was what we asked one another between the lines. Finding words of consolation for Yeraz, translated into a collective act of healing for all of us. We found solace in writing our stories of loss, love, and deep bonding with our grandmothers. This was a significant act, considering that throughout our discussions we had always emphasized that telling our stories was a better and (emotionally) more comfortable medium than writing them.
Responding to Anais' earlier entry on the issue of loss, Yeraz poignantly revealed to us her own loss of her grandmother, Azad Medzmama. Trying to word the unthinkable, she questioned what the language of loss and pain really was; whether it could be translated and transmuted into the legacy of memory.

Anais
Web post, Tuesday, March 2, 2004 9:54 AM
I am in my own void, at this present time, and I will try to compose something that is relative to these ongoing expositions of selves. Nané and Mara, I felt layers of my own skin peel off as I read your entries ... It is odd that I have not really felt that way, but it was so thoroughly expressed in your writings that I too felt naked and vulnerable, cold and scared.

I guess I think of myself as a voluntary exhibitionist, and maybe this is aided by the fact that though I have my own narratives to work through, my family (which obviously includes all the women in it) is my backbone. My parents are happily married, and in that were able to provide us with the most secure and loving environment. This was extended to almost all of the landscapes (aunts/uncles, etc.) of family ties. My first experience of loss, of serious loss, was when I was twenty years old. I lost my first grandfather (Raffi medzbab, my dad's dad) eight years ago, and last year I saw Zabel medzmam (dad's mom) recoil into a cocoon, in an embryonic position much like the one she was in when she came into the world — except this time she was leaving it.

Yeraz
Web post, Thursday, March 18, 2004 8:09 PM
my grandmother died last week. Azad medzmama died last Thursday, or was it two weeks ago Thursday?? I don't remember. What difference
does it make? It hardly affected the flow of my existence. It's hard to perceive of a physical death when someone is already confined to the folds of memory. My memory. Her memory was wiped out. Erased. Tabula raza. Towards the end she had even stopped talking and withdrawn into a sea of utter silence. I last saw her many many years ago. And now that I think about it, I can probably "count" the times that I'd seen her... Though supposedly one country, South Lebanon and Beirut were worlds and ages apart. She always had two long braids of snow-white hair. Her features were roughened by the sun. There was a directness, a matter-of-factness about her manners which was probably the result of years of hardship and abuse and harsh work and twelve children... When I met her, she had perhaps almost forgotten how to love and care. Love had had too heavy a toll on her so I guess in the end she had simply given up and resigned herself to a literal existence. I could be wrong of course. I never got to really know her. I know her through my mom's stories. I called my aunts and uncles and had to rehearse in mind beforehand how to express condolences in Arabic. My words sounded so fake, my accent so contrived. How can I feel sorry for the death of my medzmama in a foreign tongue? I do the shopping at Adonis (a Middle Eastern grocery store) in Arabic but otherwise the language has absolutely no mental or emotional intimacy. I cannot feel pain in Arabic. So my pain for my medzmama's loss had no language, really. She herself had never spoken to me in Armenian because she only knew the `qawwawuqipmuqw/dialect and was ashamed to use that, so I remember hearing her speak Armenian with my other grandmother but with us she spoke Arabic, although I could understand the `pummuqw/dialect. Yet this bond, that had no language, that had not known physical intimacy or everyday affection, is so present in me... The nameless pain is bearable, but the weight of memory is a little heavier than that.
Mara’s intuitive first response to Yeraz was that the loss is metamorphosed into rebirth. I argue that the rebirth especially comes into play through the act of retelling, which in turn emphasizes the intergenerational aspect of storying the memory.

Mara
Web post, Friday, March 19, 2004 10:30 AM

As I was reading a flow of memories, thoughts, feeling, rushed through me, perhaps much more than I can handle right now, at this stage in my life (especially sitting in the office). I would like to express my condolences for your loss, but I question if it is a loss or a rebirth of some kind. Do we ever truly lose people, or perhaps their existence takes a new form within us, becomes a part of the soul, almost physical part somewhere in the body. And you know it is there and it is real because when it hurts, the pain is very much real. There is only one reassurance — the person can never be taken away from you any more...

The loss of course is not just the physical absence of a loved one, but as Anais wrote, that of a whole world, untold stories, and a legacy that had neither the time, nor the circumstances or the context to be passed on. Somehow this intangible loss weighs heavier than the actual one. It is about mourning for a memory you were not even aware existed. In Anais’ paternal grandmother Zabel medzmam’s case, as with Yeraz’s Azad medzmama, there is a tangible loss of voice (through stroke and Alzheimer’s) that precedes the physical loss and grief of passing.

Anais
Web post, Sunday, March 21, 2004 10:53 AM

I am so sorry to hear about your loss ... I am really sorry to hear about it ... It’s never a comfortable experience, no matter how close or far away, is it? I always wonder and am scared to realize that when Nonnina
dies (mom's mom, Italian/Greek etc.) she will take Italy with her, and my link to it, to the language she never taught me ...

And when Zabel medzmam died last year, the link between me and medzmam's past had already been severed over a decade ago when she had a stroke and was paralyzed. I never got to hear about how she is a Vanetsi, or how, when her mom got to Ethiopia, she founded the Armenian school, and she had to rent the house to mean people to make ends meet with all her kids... The only link I have of a tangible territory in historic Armenia so easily recognized ... Van. Well that territory is in me, wherever that is. "Ուտկերիսռի գյուղաբեր է, գործին գյուղաբեր էւ"! "Your grandmother is from Van, she is strongheaded". Medzmam's memories died fourteen years before her death, when she stopped talking. In a way, when she was alive it was a body. She couldn’t communicate with us, none of the memories she kept intact in her head... She was the gatekeeper who swallowed the key ...

In a way, Yeraz jan what you were meant to receive from her you already have, just like I have with my Medz. The rest — language (in your case) or non-language (my case) are details which build the matrix of the mystery of the medzmams ...

Amen.

Anais came up with a powerful analogy with the image of a gatekeeper swallowing the key. I wonder how we carry the memory of these untold memories in us, the ones whose existence we never suspected, these "un-memories" if you will. This is also where we start to imagine, in order to fill in the gaps, to create our own versions of memory based on those "un-memories". It is thus that we create our own personal fictions, which are inevitably fragmented. Both Mara and Yeraz comment on how
difficult it is to write about their grandmothers, how difficult to find adequate words to translate their memories into reality. Yet Mara's portrait of her great grandmother, Victoria tatik, as that of Yeraz's Azad medzmama, is a delicate etching of a strong woman who found courage to survive against all odds.

Mara

Web post, Saturday, March 27, 2004 2:21 AM

Attachment: Mara's family photo 1

Last time, when we met at Hourik's, I didn't have any of my family photos, but I will bring them to you this way. So, here comes my story, and my turn to share... My family. I always say, I have a small family, but small or not, every member in it played a huge role in how I turned out to be. So here they are — My great grandma Victoria, great grandpa Yeghishe, and their children, my grandma Hasmik, her brother Davit, sister Knarik, and younger brother Vahan (Sevo).

Web post, Saturday, March 27, 2004 2:25 AM

Attachment: Mara's family photo 2

I don't think I have ever met two people more different then my tatik Hasmik and her sister. I don't think I have known a stronger person than Victoria. It's harder to write about it than to talk. She was fifteen when her village was massacred, everyone was killed except her, she was at school, and her cousin was Andranik (Andranik Zoravar.¹) I will never forgive myself for not writing down everything she ever told me. She often told me her stories, and I loved to listen and imagine, like a movie. It was strange though. It is strange how stories from those horrible times, can be told in such a luminous way. There was a fight in her stories, a fight for survival, there was a struggle, determination, but not fear. How can a fifteen-year-old face what she faced and not be

¹ Zoravar Andranik (1865-1927) is a legendary hero and a military commander.
afraid. I can't even begin to describe what she meant for me, I could sit and look at her for hours. The lines on her face, the solemn look, tranquility and peace. I felt safe when I was with her. Funny, when I knew her, she was half my size, with a hunched back, could only walk with a cane and only short distances, and yet I felt safe. She was a strong woman in a fragile body. Never in her life had she raised her voice, yet her word was as strong as iron. I wasn't scared of the Turks, are you going to frighten me?/ she told our neighbour, a big, rude man, who tried to threaten her because of some household problems. See, I have nothing to be scared of. I have a wooden bat/I was her argument when I would tell her she shouldn't leave her door wide open all day. And she was right. She had nothing to fear. Sumgait events shook her, she took it very hard. She told me then why, ήδη ηννηνώδη χωρίς ητώλη οντός, ην ηλιγμι ηναλ ηνπής /"Oh, why did God give me such a long life so I would see two genocides in my lifetime?/ And there came out an article in the paper "Two genocides on the path of one life journey". Hourik, this is going to be harder than I thought...

Like Mara, I had a hard time actualizing my grandmother Tefarig's story. I have almost never written about my medzmama, for the simple fact that I found it too hard emotionally to write about her. Reflecting on our collective angst on this issue in our circle, it feels almost as if we "sabotage" our own efforts to pin them down, to sketch their portraits, to make them tangible with our writing. We want part of their story to stay as ephemeral as their beings after their passing. Revealing more would feel like a sacrilegious act. We want to keep them all to ourselves, hidden in the innermost recesses of our beings. Personally, I had never told the story of my medzmama's passing before this time. In
contrast to the others in our Collective, who had shared bits and pieces in their retellings, I chose to write rather than tell anything of the story.

Hourig
Web post, Saturday, March 27, 2004 4:01 AM
Ever since I read Yeraz's entry on Azad medzmama and the responses to it, I've wanted to write back. I have read and reread each of your entries several times. I have met Azad medzmama and have a very vivid recollection of her inner beauty that glowed from her warm compassionate smile, as well as her beautiful long white braided hair. Yeraz didn't mention this in her entry — a week after she heard the news, Yeraz and I had a presentation at a conference in Ottawa on women, exile and memory. We decided to dedicate our presentation to the memory of our maternal grandmothers.

Mine passed away ten years ago on March 31st. And I still remember very well where I was, what I did the moment I heard the news. When my mother informed me that my Tefarig medzmama's days were counted, I decided I had to be with her. She was in London at the time. I could only get away for a week. This was the second time I was having a very close encounter with death. The first had been with my dad four years before that. In so many ways, it was like reopening a fresh wound. The most difficult part though was saying goodbye. I knew I was seeing her for the very last time. I still remember the very last encounter, the very last moments I talked to her. My beautiful angelic grandmother was in a hospital bed, emaciated, turned a pallid white, her skin wrinkling around her hands as I held them in mine. I caressed them with a heavy heart. I didn't know how to pretend, how to say goodbye, how to turn and leave. Less than a week later, when I was already back in Montreal, the news came. I didn't know how to react, how to cry. In the solitude of my apartment, I still felt the need to be alone. I walked into
the shower and let the hot water stream down my body. As the water hit me, I felt a painful knot in my belly pushing down. I looked down my legs, I was bleeding. I was having my period right there, under the hot water. I cried my heart out loud. It felt like my very first period, when I was twelve, in the middle of the war that had just started, and feeling very confused. It felt as if I was bleeding from an open wound in my body. I have never ever told this story before. It has been too painful to retell. I still feel my words are too bland, too superficial to explain what was happening inside my head, my body. I still have an exact recollection of the physical pain I felt that moment ten years ago. It was like labour pain, except that what I felt was born, was enormous sadness and anguish. It is an episode in my life I will have to revisit though and reword, especially now. In so many ways, it was/is a wise wound that I had/have.

And so Mara jan, I understand what you're going through, why you feel it is difficult to articulate the story of both Victoria tatik and Hasmik tatik. We all feel that pain. Yeraz's words, Anais' story of her medzmams, they all feel as if they are the layers of one huge long story... There is so much more I want to say, but to quote Pergrouhi (the survivor Yeraz and I interviewed two years ago), .wp լսառ ղաղահի I can't go on anymore."

I admit, my words were few and painfully articulated. They will have to suffice, for despite how I felt then, I do not think I will be able to revisit, reword, edit what I wrote for some time to come. I also think that personally, writing about this episode was easier than any retelling I would have done in the circle. We all have our different strategies in handling these most painful issues of loss. I needed to face it first on my own. I needed to tackle the pain, to objectify it, to get it outside of myself, in order to be able to externalize and to face it, all in the
intimacy of my solitude. However, I was only able to go through that process, because of the safe space the Collective afforded me. It is still difficult for me to read through my piece, long after it was originally written. My whole retelling is very fragmented, just as the vocalization and expression of pain usually is.

Incidentally, the silence of Nané from this dialogue signified yet another fragmented memory of loss. We had all tacitly understood then that there was the story of a hidden pain behind that silence. It was only very recently, in a personal conversation reflecting on those stories of loss, that Nané recounted how she had missed seeing her grandmother minutes before she underwent an operation she never recovered from. Reading our words of loss and pain had awakened those still throbbing memories in her, which not even writing could soothe at the time. Later I found this excerpt in her reflexive log:

Nané (reflexive log)

My grandmother waited for me to go see her before going into the operating room that day. I was late. They couldn’t wait any longer. By the time I arrived, she had already gone in. After that I don’t think she was ever really conscious enough to talk. She had tubes all over her body and never made it out of the intensive care unit. She died one winter night, while there was a storm raging outside. My parents came home and told us the news. I went to my room. I cried and cried and cried. This was the second time I was faced with death. Right before her funeral service, we went to the funeral home, where they had exposed her body in her coffin. I couldn’t bring myself to get close. I watched from afar. Eventually I approached her. She looked nothing like herself. They had put makeup on her, her face was all puffy. I touched her hand to say goodbye. She felt cold and hard. I felt my legs giving up under me.
and almost fell to the ground. Someone caught me, picked me up and pulled me away. I was crying uncontrollably.

CREATING FRAMES: HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES

Yeraz and I had initially met Pergrouhi, a genocide survivor, while we were working on a community project to bring survivor stories alive. Her name in Armenian meant joy; a strange name for someone who had experienced so much suffering in her life. What had impressed us most about her at the time was the spontaneous way she had connected to us and instantly held us captive with her storytelling. Despite her harrowing experiences, she had been full of love, serene and attentive towards us. Encountering her had been a true joy. Pergrouhi lost her mother when she was a girl of six. She became a wife at thirteen, just after she had had her first period, a mother at fourteen, a grandmother at thirty and my surrogate grandmother at ninety-five.

AN ARMENIAN’S FATE

My name is Pergrouhi. My mother’s name was Hadji Mariam. My father’s name was Boghos. I don’t know my family name.

I just remember the walk. On and on and on and on we walked, for endless days, and endless nights. There were gendarmes around us, mounted on horseback. They had whips and canes and they would urge people on. Oh how frightened I was of those whips and the soldiers. My mother would tuck me under her arm; cover my eyes not to let me see what was going on around me. There were other children around us, all crying and wailing.
The villagers would bring bread; barley bread, corn bread. They would give a piece of bread to the mothers and take their children in return. That's how the children would be sold, for a piece of bread.

There were bodies lying all around us. Corpses were lying all around us, but we had to walk on, on and on, with no food and no drink, just the occasional piece of barley bread. Some bodies were hung from walls. They would lay the little boys on the ground; hit them, hit them and kill them. But we had to walk on.

Finally we reached Der Zor\(^2\). I remember crossing a bridge, and then they told us, "You are in Der Zor." There was a huge crowd, lots and lots of people. I lost my mother in the confusion. My mother was crying out for me. I was crying, looking for her, running around and crying, "mother, mother," until we finally found each other again.

People had made up songs about Der Zor —

\[\text{I went through Der Zor,} \\
\text{I drank the bloody waters.} \\
\text{There are many sick and wounded in Der Zor,} \\
\text{But don't come doctor don't bother,} \\
\text{For there is no cure,} \\
\text{We only have God to turn to.} \\
\text{I woke up early and looked into my bag,} \\
\text{With tears in my eyes I threw it over my shoulder,} \\
\text{I left my father and mother in the desert,} \]

\[\text{This is an Armenian's fate; this is an Armenian's fate... (Attarian & Yogurtian, 2006, p. 16-17)} \]

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\(^2\) Desert area in northern Syria, then part of the Ottoman Empire, where most of the death marches led to. It has now become the site of annual pilgrimages.
When we went to Yaremja, they let us sleep in the barn. The animals would return to the shed after having grazed the whole day, and we were allowed to sleep there, in a pit, almost. But the heat, the fleas, and the lice were unbearable.

My mother would always keep reminding me, "listen, my child, your name is Pergrouhi, my name is Hadji Mariam and your father's name was Boghos. Don't you ever forget that."

During the day I would go and play with the Turkmen kids in the field. I was playing one day, and noticed that my mother was lying on the ground. I went closer and saw that her eyes were open, so I spoke to her, but she wouldn't answer me back. I went back to play. I was only a child, barely six years old. I would play during the day and go and sleep next to her at night.

For three days I slept like that in my dead mother's bosom. After three days, my cousin's mistress, the old lady said to my cousin, "go tell her, her mother's dead." So she came and told me.

Four Turkmen brought a hemp sack, opened it, put my mother's body in the sack and took it out. I was crying and running after them. They took her out in the fields and buried her there. I guess just covered her with some earth and came back.

I would go every day to where her body lay and cry endlessly, "mother, mother, please come back, please get up, mother, please." But my

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3 Refers to a town near Kerkuk in northern Iraq.
4 Refers to the Turkmen of Kerkuk.
mother wouldn't answer back. They would come and take me back in and
tell me not to cry. They would give me a rag doll to console me.

On the third day, I went to where she was buried again. Her arm was
sticking out of the ground. Like a piece of wood. I was very frightened.
The next day I went back. The dogs had pulled her body out of the
ground and were ripping her apart. Those village dogs were very
ferocious. Those dogs were very ferocious.

I have so many more things to tell, but I cannot go on anymore.

A SINGLE RED CARNATION

Everyone who had met Pergrouhi was always surprised at her lucidity
and her flawless memory. She knew intricate details of family stories,
the dates of weddings, births, deaths, baptisms of all her near and
distant relatives, great grandchildren, grandchildren, children as well as
the minutiae of their places of birth and residence, addresses, phone
numbers. In the recesses of her mind, all memory was parceled neatly.
Yet, she had no recollection of family records indicating her exact date
of birth. The official papers from the orphanage though, where she spent
her childhood after her mother's death, stated her birth date to be
January 1, 1907.

After a short illness, Pergrouhi was hospitalized in the late winter of
2005. She was very weak and had gone totally blind. However, she
remained lucid as ever, always reciting a poem from her orphanage days,
singing a song, murmuring a prayer, recounting a story for me on each of
my regular visits to her. She charmed everyone around her and certainly
took me under her spell. Every time I was about to say goodbye to her
she would tell me, "you are so busy, you have so many things to do, you
don't have to come again. I know you are thinking of me and that is
enough.” Every time I entered her room and she heard my voice, she would say, “It’s you my Hourig, I was waiting for you…”

In her hospital days, the stories Pergrouhi retold took a different sense of urgency. Even though I had heard them from her countless times, I felt they attained a distinct and unusual reality. They hovered between worlds - mine, Pergrouhi’s, my grandparents’, of the living and of the dead. They got under my skin. She had known my grandparents in Iraq, in a diasporic landscape of displacement where a generation of survivors had tried to patch their lives together. I had met her long after my grandparents had passed away and had always wondered at what mystery lay behind that coincidental encounter. In the early days of my acquaintance with Pergrouhi I was mesmerized with what she would be able to tell me of the early years of my grandparents I knew relatively little about. Little details about the street they lived in, the courtyard my mother and her siblings grew up in, the houses they inhabited, all attained vivid colours through Pergrouhi’s memories. What I was not prepared for however, was the intriguing way Pergrouhi’s story kept unfolding in my life. On numerous occasions during my hospital visits, she would speak to me of lucid visions of my late grandfather who would comfort her or be a soothing presence. All these stories of encounters left me without words. My grandfather had passed away in his sleep, in the early morning hours of April 24th, 1997. At that time, I was haunted by that symbolism and could not believe it to be coincidental. Now I felt the presence of the past ever stronger.

My last visit to Pergrouhi was on Sunday, April 24, 2005. There was a single red carnation in a vase, next to her bedside. The evening before, an interfaith ecumenical service in the St. Joseph Oratory of Montreal had commemorated the 90th anniversary of the genocide. Red carnations were handed out to the very few remaining survivors during
the service. Pergrouhi’s grandson had accepted one in her name. With a proud and serene smile on her face she recounted to me how her grandson had brought the carnation to her and how her name was read aloud during the service. She then repeated to me her vision of my grandfather. Her voice was very tired. As I held her hand to say goodbye, she told me, "thank you for coming, thank you for not forgetting me." It was to be my last visit to her, her last spoken words to me. Two mornings later she passed away. Dignified even in her suffering and her pain, she was gone as so many of her generation, leaving us trying hard to comprehend the symbolism of their lives.

What will always remain engraved in my memories of Pergrouhi is the image of her as a little girl. On one of my visits, she was asleep when I entered her room. As I sat next to her, holding her hand, her daughter insisted on waking her up so Pergrouhi could talk to me and tell me about the nightmares that were troubling her. She certainly was not her cheerful self when she heard my voice that day. "As soon as I closed my eyes I heard them coming, I heard them coming after me," she said in a trembling voice. All I could do was squeeze her hand softly and mumble a few comforting words to her. "The dogs are coming, they are barking loud, they are fierce. They’re going to rip me apart just like they did my mother." She sounded so helpless. In an instant, she was the little girl who had witnessed it all. I didn't know how to comfort her. I felt a helpless rage inside me. 90 years had not been able to wipe away the fear, 90 years she had lived with this pain. 90 years and the wound is still raw. (Attarian & Yogurtian, 2006, p. 30-32)
Roughly a year after our discussions on loss and pain, I was faced with the inevitable with the passing of Pergrouhi. In retrospect, I realize that my connection with Pergrouhi, over the course of the last three years of her life, came to symbolize the essence of mother-daughter-granddaughter bonds for me. Through my encounter with her I was given the chance to relive the memory of the last days of my medzmama and to finally find a sense of healing. On the other hand, Pergrouhi's story embodied the archetypal tale of survival and of the generational legacy of memory. Recounting her story and how she impacted my life, became part of my story. A few hours after her passing I wrote to the Collective, informing them the sad news.

Hourig

(Collective log 26.4.05, 1:36 PM)

I feel very compelled to share this with you. Pergrouhi, the survivor Yeraz and I interviewed a couple of years ago, just passed away. I still don't know how to react, what to say, what to do. I think of the mystery
and the symbolism not only of her but of countless other survivors’ lives....This morning, by the time we got to her bedside, she was gone. As I looked at her emaciated and peaceful face, I thought of the many stories she told Yeraz and myself, also of her smile and laughter, her blessings and prayers, and her suffering that was once again at her side in her last days. She greeted me with a smile on April 24th, although she obviously was tired of living, and told me again as I was leaving, “thank you for coming, thank you for not forgetting me”.... Հերամխիս ամուր մարդ, ինձ համար, հաջորդական օրը: /May the soil rest lightly on her./

It was almost unbelievable that the timing of her death was one of pure coincidence. Reflecting on her life, I contemplated how embracing this symbolism at the end, it had transcended into story. In her response, Yeraz was caught in the same web of thought.

Yeraz
(Collective log 26.4.05, 2:40 PM)
I cannot write anything. Not at this moment, and certainly not in this context. But I find one thing simply baffling, their appointment with this symbolic day, as if to complete the circle. Again.

Nané, a person of few words, expressed poignantly how Pergrouhi deeply touched all our lives.

Nané
(Collective log 26.4.05, 7:39 PM)
Hourig
I am sorry...I don't know what to say. As I read the e-mail, Զենիզե նվագու: Ա ստպում եմ ճառագային, իսկ ինձ կարողացրած չէ սպահակ իմ ձեռքեր. Ի գեր, ինչպես չկարողացի հանակ իմ երեկոյան, ես հիշել էի մեկից հետո նախկինով տալ մասնիկ, իմացել իր երգերը տարեկանը երեկոյան, միայն տանթավանք աշխատել եմ. 230
what her situation had become and worrying about her well being, she almost became part of my life too. I feel so sad.

Hourig
(Collective log 26.4.05, 8:03 PM)
I know...funny enough all I could think about today after I got home from that place, was the day I walked home with you from school, through the park, in the snow and told you about how she made me laugh with her naughty stories...She also had the uncanny ability to get everyone under her spell. I don't know how she did it. I watched a bit of her video today in the afternoon and I laughed again at her unique vocal inflections. I remembered how she used the same intonation on Sunday to tell us how she didn’t like the way the nurse gave her the medication....

I sat all day today in front of the computer, not knowing what I was doing. I ended up writing a eulogy. I don't even know if I'll be able to read it at the funeral, but I had to do it. Finding words at a time of loss is always the most difficult. Finding words when there is this type of a loss is even harder. I'm going over to her daughter’s place now with mom. I don’t know what I will say there. And inside, I feel a terrible tiredness and a big void. One more person gone, one more voice silenced. And we all carry the burden. Doesn't that also make survivors of us in a way?

I wondered where along the intergenerational timeline the healing circle began. What was the closure the survivors sought? What did we, their progeny, seek? I felt that by allowing me to verbalize her story, Pergrouhi in her passing, in closing a life circle, certainly opened up another one for me that was about tolerance, compassion and love. Writing to the Collective as an audience in this instance, felt authentic
and validating. They had shared so many vulnerable moments with me in
the circle with such openness. Trusting them (my "alter voices," my
sisterhood) now with this story became my pivotal moment of sharing. I
have to admit that voicing this story was also an act of trust in myself,
to utter the words in a text, to set them free, to acknowledge the deep
soul-searching I was going through.

Hourig
(Collective log 28.4.05)
One of the most moving moments for me at Pergrouhi’s funeral was that
I finally met a man I have heard so much about. The 102-year-old baron⁵
Manoug, who is a close friend of Pergrouhi’s family. He’s a Kharpertsi⁶
survivor. He first came to the church service, then the gravesite and
finally to the family meal of hokedjash.⁷ And he was walking all along,
then standing all the while at the gravesite under the rain... Incredible,
truly incredible. I was sitting next to him at the hokedjash and he
started telling me his stories... At the hokedjash prayer I told him not to
get up, it was ok if he stayed seated. «Ձե, ես երբեմն վերջին գերիս: /"No, no, I can stand."/ He slowly got up, holding on to his cane, not
even paying attention to my extended helping arm, then slowly took off
his beret as he joined in the prayer. That subtle delicate movement of
his hand taking off the woolen navy blue beret is still imprinted in my
mind. It was a moving gesture of respect. Pergrouhi was a friend, a
fellow survivor. There must have been so many things about each other
they understood silently. Pergrouhi had told me many times how I should
speak to baron Manoug as well, because according to her his story was
deeper than hers. Amazing the reverence the survivors had for one
another.

⁵ An addressing title, meaning Mr.
⁶ From the region of Kharpert in Eastern Turkey/Western Armenia.
⁷ Literally, "meal for the resting of the soul," it is the traditional meal shared after a funeral.
I had heard stories about baron Manoug's incredible lucidity and the live proof was sitting next to me. He told me how he went to Yeprad College («ԵՊՐԱԴ ԱՄՆՈՒՐԱՅԻՆ ԱՆԵՐՋԻՆՈՒՄ ՏՐԱՆՍՖՈՐՄԱՏԻՎ ՀԱՏՎԵԼ») "I always came first in my class. If I had stayed in school I would have been somebody now."), how the gendarmes closed the school, («ԴԵՋԵՐԵՄ ԱՄՆՈՒՐԱՅԻՆ ԱՆԵՐՋԻՆՈՒՄ ՏՐԱՆՍՖՈՐՄԱՏԻՎ ՀԱՏՎԵԼ, ՀՈՒԹԻՆ, ՀՅԹՈՒՄ ՏՐԱՆՍՖՈՐՄԱՏԻՎ ՀԱՏՎԵԼ») "They had locked the door and put a big lock on it. And they were standing there. 'Get lost from here!' they told us." what happened to the Armenian men who were held prisoner (all burned), how his own uncle escaped once from being slaughtered («ԵՊՐԱԴ ԱՄՆՈՒՐԱՅԻՆ ԱՆԵՐՋԻՆՈՒՄ ՏՐԱՆՍՖՈՐՄԱՏԻՎ ՀԱՏՎԵԼ, ՆՈՐՈՒԹԻՆ, ՄԱՐՏՈՒՄ ՏՐԱՆՍՖՈՐՄԱՏԻՎ ՀԱՏՎԵԼ») "He had bitten the rope that bound his hands with his teeth, cut it, and escaped just like that." Then we got back to the present and how he lost his wife last year, how years ago when he was looking for a girl to marry, no one wanted to give him their daughter's hand in marriage. Then with a whisper he said, «ԵՊՐԱԴ ԱՄՆՈՒՐԱՅԻՆ ԱՆԵՐՋԻՆՈՒՄ ՏՐԱՆՍՖՈՐՄԱՏԻՎ ՀԱՏՎԵԼ, ՆՈՐՈՒԹԻՆ, ՄԱՐՏՈՒՄ ՏՐԱՆՍՖՈՐՄԱՏԻՎ ՀԱՏՎԵԼ» "Let me tell you this though, my wife was not Armenian, she was Assyrian. No one wanted to marry off their daughters to me. They kept saying, 'Who's this? He's a Turk' because apparently he had stayed behind in Turkey for some 20 years before he could get out after the genocide. Then he told me how he loves to drink tan. «ԵՊՐԱԴ ԱՄՆՈՒՐԱՅԻՆ ԱՆԵՐՋԻՆՈՒՄ ՏՐԱՆՍՖՈՐՄԱՏԻՎ ՀԱՏՎԵԼ, ՆՈՐՈՒԹԻՆ, ՄԱՐՏՈՒՄ ՏՐԱՆՍՖՈՐՄԱՏԻՎ ՀԱՏՎԵԼ» "I never drink water, only tan and pepsi... And I make the yogurt. I used to make

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8 Yeprad or Euphrates College was a famous school in Kharpert (Harpout) operated by American missionaries.

9 A drink of yogurt.
it. I used to make three packs of yogurt\(^{10}\) every time. Then last year, my son said, “Dad, you’re not drinking that much and it’s going bad. Why don’t you get it from the store?” So now I buy a tub each time from the store... But the one I used to make was different!” Then he asked me what I do, if I’ve ever had a chance to listen to his stories that are recorded on videotape.... «1985-ը հեշտ հարցահրաժեշտություն եղել: Թե երեխան Շահիկը չի ստացեց, այնտեղ էին տեսնել կապակցված թափ-ի արձանագրություն, երկրորդ երևույթ, սեփական փոխազդեցություն. Այդ թափը նվազեց պատմական հնագույն ժամանակներին, հանդիսանալով ծանրական պահանջում. Նրանց համար այն էր արդեն դեպի կարդալ հեռավոր հարցեր, անհրաժեշտ էր զառել այդ հեռավոր հարցերով. Այն կառուցվել էր 1985 թվականին. Հայոց Ազգային Կոմիտեի հետ հանդիպալ էր. Վահե Երետսյանը գրել է հարցույթը. Այս հարցույթը 3 ժամի ծանրությամբ էր.»

They videotaped it. Have you seen it? Azniv [Pergrouhi’s daughter] has a copy. I gave out a copy to everyone, to each of my children and grandchildren, and I gave one to Azniv.”

A few minutes later the meal came. It was grilled chicken. Pergrouhi’s daughter Azniv asked me to help him and cut up the chicken. He looked at me and said, «իմ ցեղացունը էսկուդ, հեմի հետ կախեգիտ չէ»: “You’re my grandchild as well. You’ll cut up the chicken for me, won’t you?” I wanted to cuddle him. I told him I was so happy I was finally meeting him after hearing so much about him. So he told me, «Քենունք տեսնել եմ, հայերի և ազգերի մեջ էր»: “That German guy came as well, asked me questions and was astonished.” The German guy was Hilmar Kaiser, a genocide scholar, who interviewed him last year then gave the footage to a French-Armenian filmmaker, who then used it in a new documentary which aired on Paris TV last week to rave reviews. «Գեղեցկություն էր, հայերի և այլ ժամանակների էր հայրենիք. Երեխան առծածքի էր այգից, տեսնել էր հայերի և այլ ժամանակների հետ կանխառնելու հանգստավոր ընդհանուր բնագավառ.»: “The guy was astonished. He said, “how can you remember all

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10 He means using three 1L packs of milk.
these things? We’ve been going these many years [to Turkey], looking for things in papers, while you remember the name of each kaymakam [governor], each person in detail..." See?" I told him I’ve seen photos of that interview he did with Hilmar. «արտահայ տիրույթ։ ուր անցեք եւ պատճ»: /"Really? Where from? Who gave it to you?"/ There was pride in that question as well. «ես ենթու եմ հաղորդությունը ում ու Հայաստանի տեղում, ում ու պատճառի ապահովում էի զոհի, այծ մե պատվ»: /"And then this interview that this German guy did, I told him everything, he took it to a French person who put it in a film."/ I told him I’ve read about how it was aired the past week and that it was a very good documentary. He looked at me with obvious pride, surprised a little that I knew and very proud that he was part of it...

After the meal it was the coffee. «ես ենթու եմ հաղորդությունը ում ու հատկություն»: /"Yes, pour it, pour it. I drink coffee. Put two sugars. I don’t want any milk."/ Then we got into his politics and his marriage again and the funeral of his wife last year... «այնուհետև ես ենթու եմ հաղորդությունը ում ու զարդարը»: /"After I stayed there for two years [there is somewhere on the northern border of Syria], they came and told me, "we’re going to make you a party member." I said yeah. I became a party member. Then I served on the district subcommittee. Then I became the district chairman. I served for twenty years."/ He veered back then to the whispered truth about his wife being Assyrian. I told him my grandmother’s aunt’s story and how she was married to an Assyrian, escaped genocide and how I have distant cousins who are Assyrian and assimilated Arabs now. I guess I gained just a few brownie points with my understanding. «այնուհետև ես ենթու եմ հաղորդությունը ում ու զարդարը»:

11 The Armenian Revolutionary Federation — a nationalist political party.
Yeah. She was Assyrian, but she was very nice. Every night, every time when they [the party members] came to our place for a meeting, she would take care of everyone, make coffee... And last year when she died, they all came to the funeral; the clergy, the priest, the primate, the church was full." She was a reclaimed Assyrian, an Armenian-Assyrian for him in fact. And there was obvious love in his eyes and words when he spoke about her.

Then at the end when he got up to do his final round of condolences, he sighed deeply. It was a sigh of pain. "Akh, akh..." I looked at him worried. "It’s my leg. I sat too long. It hurts like this when I sit long." He walked around the table, hugged Azniv and her sons and as he was walking back, he told me, "See? Now that I walked, the pain is gone. I’m better now." He put his beret and walked slowly out with his son. I couldn’t believe it. If my maternal grandfather were alive, he would have been the same age. I thought again of the incredible strength and resiliency this generation had, the will to overcome and the will to survive. It simply dwarfs you, honestly. The 102-year-old come to pay respects for the passing of the 98-year-old...

It is a strange feeling, but I have felt blessed every time I have visited Pergrouhi. Today, sitting next to baron Manoug I had the same feeling. It is such a humbling experience knowing these people in their intimacy. It is amazing that they take you into their confidence almost immediately. Understandably as soon as they realize you’re there to listen to their stories, they plunge into the most detailed accounts of their lives.
What moved me most today in baron Manoug was not the stories of the gendarmes and escapes and the massacres and the names of the kaymakams he remembered, but that gesture of removing the beret, that whisper about his Assyrian wife, the story of how no one wanted him to marry their daughters (poor guy, he looked for a wife for two years), his slow walking out of the dining hall and my glimpse of him from the back, his shoulders curved in, him leaning on his walking cane, the small paces he took. I have always had this fixation that there is a movie camera in my head when I look at things like this. It was one of those moments. I was looking at him from inside a camera lens and he was vanishing out with every tiny pace he took into the space beyond. I had a similar feeling at the gravesite when everyone walked away and got into mundane conversations of “Come to the meal, we’re waiting,” “Get into the car, you’ll get wet,” “Are you cold?” and I was left standing there next to the coffin drifting over the gaping hole. Me in this space and Pergrouhi in that beyond space. Water pools and mud around. The tidbits of voices floating over us. It was at once a banal moment and one that propelled me into a very contemplative mood.

In the car, going back, there were other voices hovering, my mom and another woman, again mixing the mundane and their reflections on the passing, while all I could see from the camera lens were the rain drops striking and gliding down the window diagonally, the shafts of grass next to the sidewalk beaten from the rain and thoughts, very strange thoughts hurrying into my mind. Maybe I should have a child? Maybe it’s not too late yet? I will tell him, why him?, I will tell her all these stories, so they won’t be lost. How selfish of me, thinking of having a child so I can pass on the stories? Is that a reason for having a child? And the grass looks so green all of a sudden. My head is spinning. What is Tigran to
think of my declaration? Should I tell him? It is spring. There were
daffodils at the entrance to the cemetery. Someone had planted daffodil
bulbs at the cemetery. So why do I think that’s strange? At least you can
tell that way that it’s spring even among the dead. And Pergrouhi’s coffin
was of the most exquisite mahogany. It was shiny and beautiful. Yeah, a
beautiful coffin. It was just like Azniv wanted it. Crying at Pergrouhi’s
deathbed she told her son, «Ազնիվի մամի համար ամենից տարած
սուր կոֆին։ Իգինք ոչ ոքից։»: "Get the nicest coffin for my
mother. Don’t get anything cheap."/ Well, I should tell the girls not to
bother with a coffin at my time. I’ve already told Nané and Yeraz, I want
my ashes scattered. No mahogany for me. Maybe they should scatter
some of it where there are beautiful spring flowers like these daffodils.
No, no, what daffodils, I’ve told them many times it should be in the
Mediterranean... So what about the child?

Tigran called half an hour ago, anxious to hear how I was doing.

«Լուսեր բարդ, զուրկի։ Ես ե
told, the he and she child, into a ten-second frame. Enough to hold a lifeline.

In the meantime, in the car, in the middle of all these thoughts I'm having, the other woman, who is a very nice person and a family friend of Azniv, keeps telling us of her four children, what they are each doing, etc. She's a divorced single mother. I guess my overt silence made her somehow think I'm very shy and need to be in their conversation. On the way to the cemetery it was the «իր իմ հույս, զինրի» /"What do you do Hourig?"/ bit, so now that that was clearly established, she asked me the inevitable question.

«իր իմ հույս» ինքնագրից եւ, զինրի» /"How old are you Hourig?"/ Right when I needed to be reminded of my biological clock of course.....

"Forty-two" I chuckled, back firmly with two feet in this space again. And a whoosh of gasping sound from the front seat...

այլևս: իմ դեռ գույները: իմ... եւ կան երեխաներ, իր իմաբը ինքնագրից եւ»: /"No! It can’t be. I thought the most 28-30. It can’t be! You don’t show it a bit! Not a bit... So what do you think, how old am I?"/

«ուս հանդիպու»: /"I don’t know."/

«իմ, իմաբ դեռևս է, ինքնագրելիս աշխատել եմ եւ իմ դեռևս կան երեխաներ»: /"Yeah, it's difficult now, because I’ve already said that I have four children."/

«զինրի» հույս» /"Fifty-five?"/ ventures my mom to break the odd silence that follows the woman's comment.
"No! You said fifty five, because you thought about the four children, I became fifty. Others never know. They think I'm younger, about forty-forty five."

In the backseat I'm laughing silently, thinking how genuinely the woman was shocked I was not the very-good-darling-Hourig-how-well-you-recited little girl, but someone who was close to her age; then thought she must think I'm out of my mind, I'm forty-two and I'm not married, I don't have children and I go to school...

WE'RE ALL SURVIVORS: INTERNALIZING TRAUMA

It was through Pergrouhi's story that Yeraz and I had first become engaged in a personal quest into our own inherited matrilineal life stories and memories of trauma. That interest had also translated into a collaborative text. Trauma for us however, was not simply inherited memories of genocide stories. Before making Canada our home, we had both lived through fifteen years of civil war in Beirut. Soon it was our own memories of war and violence that we were writing and talking about, something we had avoided doing for many years. The civil war in Lebanon erupted in the spring of 1975, just as Yeraz and I were turning twelve. We had attended the same school and lived on the same street since early childhood. The war for us would mean our years through high school, college, university, and work; it ended shortly after we had both immigrated to Montreal. Here too we always stayed close, though revisiting our horrible days during the war was a subject we actively avoided. Our encounter with Pergrouhi brought everything to the fore – not only our childhood
memories of genocide stories told by mothers and grandmothers but also our first-hand experiences of war, re-evaluated this time through the experiences of Pergrouhi when she was only a little girl.

NOT YET TWELVE AND IN GRADE SIX

(Yeraz’s story)

We had hardly taken in the full impact, the immensity of our grandparents’ stories when our war started. Not yet twelve and in the sweet twilight zone of childhood, that borderline space where realities and fantasies flow in and out of each other seamlessly, still trying to make sense of the deportation stories, my grandmother’s toes, my grandfather’s defiance, Nouritza’s mythical aura, my father’s insistence on how despite being a star student he’d had to leave school after grade six, so he could work and get the family out of the refugee camp... Barely twelve, when our first rush of hormones and our first infatuations had landed upon us with full force. Grade six, and awaiting that most important of all events in a young person’s life, graduating from primary school, the celebration, the heady expectation of going on to high school and making our grand exit from the realm of childhood and being accepted into the world of grown up people, so we would be able to go to the parties that previously only our elder sisters were allowed to attend, and perhaps be allowed to wear bell-bottom pants...

Barely twelve, when our war started.

It was April 1975, when the first incident occurred. It was a shooting on a bus carrying civilians.12 We were lost trying to make sense of the

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12 On April 13, 1975 in Beirut, the right-wing Phalange party militiamen shot at a bus full of Palestinian women and children, which was passing through the Beirut suburb of Ain el Remmaneh. 27 people were killed as a result. An incident intended to provoke armed conflict, it is seen by many as the trigger to the fifteen-year-long civil war in Lebanon. (Fisk, 1992, p. 78)
grown-ups' confused conversations, some insisting that this was only an "isolated event," and others ominously insinuating that this was only the beginning of much more blood to be shed. How or for how long they couldn’t guess, but they knew this was only the beginning. I would have lied if I said that we desperately wanted the first camp of optimists to have been in the right. Sure, we did want that year-end ceremony, but we’d also had a week off from school because of that first incident, so these "events" (nobody was calling it a war yet) held a wicked excitement for us too. We held on to the fairy tale belief that it was possible for incidents to happen that were not grave enough to kill people or for all out war to start, but that would be serious enough for the schools to be closed.

Little did we know then that this was only the start of a long and drawn out civil war that would last fifteen years and consume not only our teenage years but last through college, university and first jobs, and it would be our long march in the desert that our grandparents had gone through in their time, only different in its intensities and experiences, but nonetheless a baptism in blood and fire. And we, like them, would love and study and work and marry throughout the bloody civil war, the numerous booby trapped car bombs, the overnight shelling, the sniper fire, the invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon, and the blowing up of the American marines.

The bus incident was a story we only heard on the news, but soon the real fighting spread all around Beirut. It would usually start with rounds of machine gun fire. Then we heard the militia yelling at people to empty out the streets, stay indoors, and stock some food... This would send my parents into a flurry of first making sure that everyone had
returned home from wherever they were, and then closing all the shutters and ordering us not to go near the balconies. There isn't anything an eleven year old wants to do as much as disobey her parents and of course this for me was like a direct directive to go and watch what was happening on the streets through the slots of the shutters.

And I did.

A man was tied from his feet to the back of a pick up truck and was being dragged around in the streets. The gravel was tearing him apart, and he was all bloodied. It was a very short glimpse, but enough to catapult me full force into a new world, where suddenly my grandparents' stories of death and hunger stopped being "stories" and acquired the full force of reality. I reproached myself, oh so profoundly and with all the penance that an eleven year old is capable of, for my jubilation at skipping school for a week. Oh dear god, I'll go to school Saturdays and Sundays too, study until the late hours of the evening, please let this not happen. Deep down I knew that my pleas were in vain, and that ours wasn't going to be an adolescence of bell bottom pants and parties...

Another experience was soon to complete my rite of passage.

Soon after the fighting started, the government collapsed, and regional militias took over. I have no memory of how our garbage was collected before the war. My first childhood memory of garbage is how it was piled up on the street corner for a couple days, and then burnt, as there was no authority responsible for collecting it any longer. Surely the militia had more important matters to attend to. The sweet stench of the smoke that wafted through the air was unbearable, but like all horrors that eventually become "normal" in any war, this too, shortly, just
became part of our daily smells, together with the exhaust fumes of diesel from the militia trucks and the smell of gunpowder.

One day though, the smell was different. It was almost nauseating. My little head got to thinking its very first deeply profound and philosophical thoughts. Why does the burning garbage not smell the same every day? Is it what people eat? Is it the kind of plastic bags they use? Is it me? I went down with my mother to deposit our daily share of garbage that was to go on the pile. My mother was holding my hand and we were walking at a brisk pace, not hurrying yet, but there was the sound of automatic rifles coming from a distance, better get back home as soon as possible.

My mother pulled on my hand forcefully and turned my head the other way. But it was too late. I had already seen the charred remains and bones of what was surely a human figure, shrunk, shriveled and black.

This was the summer of 1975. My twelfth birthday had come and gone in May of that year. It was a very hot summer and September brought relief neither from the heat nor from the fighting, and the schools stayed closed for the whole academic year.

We had turned twelve, and now, everyone was calling it a war. (Attarian & Yogurtian, 2006, p. 22-24)

Yeraz's memories of living through the civil war years in Beirut echoed mine. We wove our narratives of those memories as we worked together on our interview with Pergrouhi. In the process, we both acknowledged that we would not have been able to revisit those painful episodes we had lived through, had we to face them alone without each other's support.
Yeraz and I grew up together on the same street in Beirut, amid the chaos of civil war, our blossoming friendship our lifeline to sanity, our defiance to the turmoil engulfing us.

The year was 1975. The day April 14. Three days before I turned twelve. It was a bright spring day. The early morning ritual when our whole household was up, always started with the aroma of coffee my father brewed for himself and my mother. Then he would open the green shutters of the verandah, to let the sunshine and the waking street noises in. This morning though there was an eerie silence on the street and my father behaved in a strange way. Instead of finding him in the kitchen boiling the coffee, I saw him peering outside through the cracks of the green shutters. My mother was standing next to him. They talked in low whispers. "No school today, go back to bed," was their response to my and my brother's bewildered looks. "It is not safe. There has been an incident." I couldn't understand why the shutters had to stay closed. I couldn't understand why the sunshine could not be let in. It was only three days before I turned twelve.

The events that unfolded in the coming days and weeks though proved to be a lesson in honing my comprehension skills overnight.

The summer I turned twelve, I had my first period. The day I walked through the threshold of womanhood is imprinted in my mind as the time I bled out the pain I felt in my heart.

The summer I turned twelve was a very hot one. My bedroom window that overlooked the garage of a neighbouring building stayed open at

\[13\] See above note on April 13, 1975.
night, in the hopes of carrying a waft of a breeze inside. Instead, what invaded my bedroom were the moans and cries of the blindfolded young boys I saw hurled into the dark abyss of the garage during the day.

The year we turned twelve, Yeraz and I met daily to talk about the books we read, the boys we had crushes on, the school we would go to if the roads were safe again, and the childhood that was robbed of us.

DISCONNECTIONS

It isn't easy to talk and write about trauma, especially if it is your own. Some of the stories unfolding in these pages belong to a different generation, a different time, a different dimension. Yet the distance time affords does not prevent them from haunting us. How does the plot of ghost stories usually develop? The ghosts revisit the living until justice is done. In this case the ghosts of the past have not even had that poetic justice. This is the story of the generation of my grandparents, of my parents, of mine and of those who come after us. Some years ago I tried hard, very hard to avoid writing about it. In the process, I realized then that my only way of coming to terms with the countless stories of my grandparents' generation was by letting go of the pain. Ninety years ago a million and a half Armenians were left to perish in the sands of Der el Zor. Six years before that thirty thousand of them were butchered in one city. Fourteen years before that three hundred thousand of them were slaughtered. Do I need to go further back? My dictionary has run out of synonyms for the word "murder". Ninety years, ninety-six years, a hundred and ten years, what difference does it make? We still carry the burden.

I feel torn. How can I reconcile my belief in pacifism with the reality of the anguish my grandparents (and through them my people) suffered? I
question my parents' wisdom. Why instill the essentials of love, brotherhood and freedom in their children? Didn't they know we wouldn't fit in a society obsessed with violence? My adolescent years were spent in war-torn Lebanon. I watched my whole world shatter with every bullet, every shell. The humanism my father taught and cherished was dismembered slowly, painfully, crippling my sanity and my hold on life. I grew up in a matter of hours and days. I felt how the insane rage of the absurd war was defining my helplessness and I could not come to terms with it. The arbitrary absurdity of it all entrenched in me an obsession with peace. Peace, peaceful, pacifism. I suppose my inward drive for pacifism sprang from the very absence of everything peaceful in my life then. The more outspoken I became about non-violence, the more silent I was about the growing pain inside me and its after-effects. Until now.

There are too many parallels stretching across the generations from my grandparents' to mine, to ignore. The pain, the trauma, the disconnection, the shattering of everything around us are only some of the common points. During times of reckless shelling, when the whole family rushed downstairs to the relative safety of my grandparents' corridor, and I tried to huddle under the protection of my father's or mother's arms, I often wondered how the madness I lived through must have been similar to what my grandparents experienced long, long before my existence was thought of. They weren't even teenagers when they were forcefully deprived of all that is known as home, family, love and warmth. And now they had come full circle. They were the orphans of the lost homeland. We, their grandchildren carried on the legacy of that orphanage. How else could I describe the terrors I felt every time a shell exploded nearby, every time I witnessed a corpse dragged behind a truck with a group of onlookers cheering the scene...
The horrors, our respective generations lived through, could have been different in their variety, but there must have been a streak of similarity in the pain they caused. Worst of all was the issue of recognition and retribution. How did my grandparents manage to cope with their suffering in the face of constant denial of the validity of their life stories? How did governments continue to proclaim the genocide my grandparents survived, to be an “alleged killing” or a mere “tragic event”? How did I live “normally” in spite of the daily butchering of all the ideals I was brought up with? The anatomy of our survival has deep, very deep roots. Resurrection was not a grace from heaven, but an imposed survival mechanism. This is what countless teachers have taught generations of Armenians. “You will avenge yourself by living/ Living a thousand fold more stubbornly” wrote one poet. 14 And so I have lived.

I was brought up with the stories of my grandparents. The deportations, the massacre, the suffering. They were robbed of their childhood, of their memories, of their way of life. Hurled into the wilderness of the desert sands. Their stories scorched from the desert sun. Every time my grandfather told his story, every one knew exactly where he would stop to catch his breath, when he would suddenly stumble over his word and swallow the tears in his eyes. Every time we urged grandmother to tell her story, we knew she would refuse on the pretext of not remembering anything. These stories live in me. Through me they will attain new flesh and blood or will be lost forever. It is too heavy a burden to carry. But the journey back is an inevitable one. “To recount the past is to reclaim it, to reevaluate our selves in relation to others” writes Andra Makler (1991, p. 46). Our past bonds us to our futures. It is only then that we can attempt to become complete.

14 Excerpted from the poem Mtoroumner djanaparhi kesin [Reflections midway in the journey] by the East Armenian poet Silva Kapoutikian. (Kapoutikian, 1996, p. 225)
In recent years, in my attempt to come to terms with the painful memories of my adolescence, I have sought answers in the harrowing tales of the survivor generation. Their compelling narratives have been a source of inspiration. The more I have listened to them, the more I have been able to untangle the hidden knots that make up my life story. (Attarian & Yogurtian, 2006, p. 24-27)

In retrospect, both Yeraz and I admitted that revisiting our war memories was an experience we found much harder than recounting the survival stories of our grandparents and reflecting on their impact in our lives. Verbalizing our narratives brought to the fore again wounds that had barely scarred of witnessing unspeakable violence at a tender age. In that context, the question that preoccupied me was how my grandparents' generation sought healing and found the courage to survive the memory of their past.

HEALING

In picturing the impossibility of comprehending the violence of war, even when staring at images of it, Sontag explains, "we don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine" (2003, p. 125-126). I stayed silent for many years about my lived experiences of the civil war in Beirut, probably in the hope of forgetting the pain. I have often thought that researching and writing about survivor narratives became both an instinctive defense mechanism and a cathartic experience for me. It helped me voice my inner silence by detaching me from my own difficult memories, while creating an avenue to actively talk about trauma and memory. Unknown to myself, in doing so, I was also creating a space for self-healing. In time, writing brought me back full circle. Storying myself, I learned to find my peace.
Journal entry
August 30th, 2001

The internal effects [of the speed at which the world is changing] may be even more disquieting, as memory itself seems accelerated, and yesterday's dramas become as remote as ancient history. (Iyer, 2000, p. 13)

We watched *In the shadows of the city* today, a Lebanese film about the civil war in Lebanon. With the very first scenes, as the sound of the shellings and the guns rolled, Yeraz leaned over. I could clearly see her agitation in the dark hall. "Do you really want to watch this?" she asked. I looked her straight, very straight in the eye. I don’t know where I found the strength to answer her. "Yes!" I said which sounded more like an affirmation than a simple answer. Then, all throughout the 102 minutes of the film, one thought was racing in my mind, "you can do it. You're strong. You can face this. No tears. NO tears. NO TEARS."

I looked around me. Nané was sitting with her hands over her mouth, shocked. Joan was leaning over Suraya, comforting her through her sobs. I could not see Yeraz, but I was sure she was stunned, completely stunned. As I watched the planes racing wildly in the clear blue skies, the tall white buildings bursting into flames underneath it, with each deafening sound of a shell explosion, I thought, "I want them all to know what we have lived through. I want them to see. I want them to hear. I want them to feel." In the meantime, was back there again. The sounds of the exploding guns were so near, so real. Just like the ones that still inhabit my dreams often enough. The sounds always start from far away. How I recognize that smell of terror they breed when they crack in the distance. Just like the one that has filled my nostrils now. Yet I still retain this calm. It is like an out of body experience. I watch the horrors unfold in front of my very eyes, I am transported back in time, yet
miraculously I am still calm, I breathe easily, no tears cloud my eyes. I watch the scenes unfold with a surgical gaze, thinking this is how it must have looked like on CNN, BBC, CBC, NBC, ABC, CBS and the rest of the alphabetic jungle. Deafening noise reverberating in your skull and body, buildings collapsing, black smoke engulfing everything in sight, and behind them all narratives dis/membered, decimating, buried untold in the rubbles of the war. And why am I so calm? What happened to the fright that used to echo through every single cell in my body? What about all those times I rushed downstairs looking for safety in added walls of a corridor? Thinking, always thinking where to rush first: The corner of my grandparents’ corridor which was protected by three exterior walls, or the bathroom which was unsafe but where the nervous wrangling of my intestines kept pushing me towards? And still I watch all this calmly. Have I become an outsider looking inside my narrative? It feels strange. Yeraz meanwhile is distraught. She, who used to be the perfect model of calm when everything was hellish around us, she who used to laugh at my total loss of control, is in tears now, lost in the folds of the film. Nane looks at me bewildered. “Oh my god, you actually lived this. How did you come out sane?” Sane... I smiled. It all depends on the definition of sanity.

Natal says she now understands why I never want to go back. Yes, I don’t. I adamantly refuse to. Yet I keep a photo of the Baalbeck ruins inside my writing pad. Of all things Lebanon, this is what I most identify with – the ruins.
The broken down walls echo the solitude of my soul. Drenched by the sun. Dry. Desolate. Yet so serene and grand. They reverberate the paradox that is my Lebanon I harbour in my soul. To be totally frank, I do miss Lebanon. But not the physical, geographical one. Rather a Lebanon of ideals and beliefs, of times lived and memories forgotten, of stories of resistance and simple acts of love, a place I ran away from with all the force I could muster, yet one which I am bound to inextricably. I think of all my thoughts, it was this last realization, that it is so much and still a part of me no matter how hard I have tried to extricate myself of it, that undid me so profoundly and completely. I felt all my defenses crumbled. I cried and cried, as if I wanted the tears to wash away those thoughts.

They did not. And I am glad for it.

Braveheart and De Bruyn describe the healing practices for resolving historical grief among American Indians. They explain that participants in a healing circle are asked to

- diagram a lifeline of their traumatic experiences and share these with partners and in small groups.
- The entire four day process involves daily prayer, an *inipi* (Lakota purification ceremony), and concludes with *wasiglaki istamniganpi*
wicakcepakintapi — wiping the tears of the mourners (B. Kills Straight, personal communication, February 13, 1995) — a traditional Lakota grief resolution ceremony. Through this ceremony participants become, in essence, part of an extended family to facilitate continued contact and support. (1998, p. 71)

I was struck how in this concept of lifeline, the line stretching from one generation to the next is fraught as much with pain and suffering as it holds the seeds of healing. The act of “wiping the tears of the mourners” stretches the lifeline further, as an extended kin listening to the story validates the pain and wipes the tears. There is a powerful bonding in that image, along all the infinite points that stretch together to make up the lifeline. I wondered whether my attempt of creating a lifeline through the circle of the Collective was also motivated by a similar, albeit unconscious, decision. One thing was certain: Whether exploring and reconstructing the transmitted memories of unspeakable horrors or writing about the personal individual memories of lived violence, seeking healing became an important quest. For,

The connectedness of past to present to future remains a circle of lessons and insights that can give us both the consciousness and the conscience to heal ourselves. Understanding the interrelationship with our past and how it shapes our present world will also give us the courage to initiate healing. (Braveheart & De Bruyn, 1998, p. 75)

storying memory

Thus, despite the painful family secrets and fragmentation gaps in the transmitted memories, the retellings in the circle of the Collective ultimately led to creating internal pockets of healing. As we recounted the stories, we came face-to-face with our interpretations of the stories heard over time. In reconstructing our narratives, the question then focused on making the leap from the literal dimension of the story, specially its trappings of violence and trauma, to its transformative
aspects. This deliberate act of remembrance against forgetting, also carried in it the seeds of public truth-telling, while storying memory became the ultimate healing journey.

Figure 27: Azniv

Azniv was a legend. For the longest time I thought she only existed in my father's stories—a little woman who spent fifteen years living with the Bedouins in the desert of Der el Zor. She was my grandmother's cousin. When my grandmother returned to her birthplace, Dikranagerd, in the early twenties, she tried to bring the family back together. She was the eldest in the family, so it was her responsibility to find the rest. Her grandmother, mother and father were killed, her two brothers lost. Out of a family of nine, only four children were left. She found her remaining sisters and brother, took care of them, had them sent to America, with the hope of rejoining them one day. She then married and moved to
Aleppo (in Syria). It was there that my grandfather heard rumors from the Arab villagers of a young Armenian girl from Dikranagerd, who was looking for her cousin Zohra. My grandmother was incredulous. Could it have been her long lost cousin? They were searching for her brothers only, thinking that her cousin must have been killed with the rest of her family. Yet there she was, after fifteen years of lost hopes and dreams. My grandfather brought her back from the tribe of Bedouins that had rescued her from under a pile of corpses.

Grandmother took her to the public baths on the very first occasion. She had to be cleaned of all that dirt. The supervisor of the baths cast a suspicious look at Azniv's face. Who was this strange person? What were those blue marks on her forehead? "Was Mrs. Zohra aware of the regulations in that place? No disturbance of the public would be allowed." How could taking a bath in the private quarters be considered a disturbance? Hadn't Zohra paid to have her privacy? "Yes," the supervisor agreed, but there was this terrible stench coming from her quarter, it filled the whole place. People were complaining. They came there to smell the clean perfume of the herbal soaps, not some horrible stinking smell. It had something to do with this Azniv woman, she was sure. Not that she had anything against Mrs. Zohra, on the contrary. Mrs. Zohra should know she was one of her most valued clients and try to understand her. She has to keep her business, that's all; she too has to take care of her orphans. Zohra, my grandmother, kept on being defiant and pretended to be ignorant of all the supervisor's claims. Aggression is the best defense. How else would she be able to disguise the truth? The smell did come from Azniv. It was the concentrated stench of camel urine embedded in the pores of her skin. That was the only form of a bath she had known for all fifteen of her years in the desert.
1973. Father took us to the airport to meet Azniv coming from New York. I was excited that I was finally going to meet this "larger than life" of a woman. Were all these wild stories about her true, or had father made them up to give his stories a fantastic twist? Azniv won our hearts instantly. She was a small, lively, delicate woman, as gentle and kind as her name bears witness.\textsuperscript{15} Everything about her promised to be as fabulous as father had pictured for us. Her forehead still bore the worn out marks of the traditional blue tattoo of the Bedouins. On her left arm was the deep scar of an old wound. I had never seen anything like it before. Every time I hugged and cuddled her, I deliberately touched that mysterious part of her flesh. Her arm seemed to be split in two at that spot, as if the scar held some secret abyss under it.

Azniv loved to tell stories. It wasn't very difficult to convince her to unfold the incredible episodes of her life journey. For us, they sounded so unreal, so mythical; they belonged to a different time frame, in a different space. It was on one such evening, when the whole family had gathered in my uncle's living room, that my brother and I asked her to tell us how she got that scar on her arm. There was an uneasy silence in the room and a faint glimmer of a smile on Azniv's face. We could hear the silent moans of my grandmother. I caught a supportive look in my father's eyes. It was meant for Azniv. I knew then, he had planned for this day a long time ago.

Azniv must have been almost ten then. They were told to take everything they could with them. On the first day, just on the outskirts of the city, the men were separated from the group. They never heard from them again. The accompanying gendarmes told them they would be reunited at the end of the journey. They walked and walked. She couldn't really remember how long. All she knew was that she grew

\textsuperscript{15} Azniv means kind and gentle in Armenian.
tired. Then the gendarmes took the women to one side. Some of the children started crying. They were very young to be separated from their mothers. But who was there to listen to their cries? She didn't even have time to say good-bye to her mother. She only remembers they were a large group of children. They were taken inside somewhere. What kind of a place? A big one, like a large hall. They all huddled together. The gendarmes were arguing. She couldn't remember what. She only remembered their voices. Then one of them took out his scimitar and started lashing left and right. The moans, the screams, the smell of blood were everywhere. Suddenly she was lifted from the ground. She felt a blow of terrible force on her arm. Next moment she was on the ground. She felt heavy. She felt crushed. She felt numb. She died. She couldn't move even if she wanted to. There was this terrible mass weighing down on her. It was a body, bodies, of persons who were talking, looking, breathing, hoping, dreaming only a moment ago. No, she doesn't remember how long she hovered between life and death. She only knows she was scared to breathe even long after she opened her eyes. What if the gendarmes were there and could detect her? They would kill a dead person a second time surely.

Was it days or hours, she couldn't really tell, when she next opened her eyes, there was a face peering at her. She closed her eyes, to escape the gendarme's look. "There's one here who still breathes," rang a loud voice near her. "Why didn't I die?" was the only response in her veins. Her eyes were still closed, but she could hear the shuffling of bodies thrown to one side. Two hands got to her body. She clenched her teeth. She was lifted from the ground again. "Water, bring some water," someone whispered. "Why aren't they hitting?" she thought. It was becoming unbearable. Someone stroked her forehead. "Do not be afraid my child, you are safe now."
A sigh of relief passed in the room. My mother's eyes were red with tears. My father still clenched his fists. How many times has he heard this story, I wondered. My grandmother stared at the wall. My brother hugged Azniv. I closed my eyes and touched her scar with my fingers. I could see how it disappeared under my touch.

The unavoidable gaps, the multilayered silences in the generational transmission and narration also implied that the rememberings sometimes contained inaccuracies in the details. What happened in these cases is that storying the memory meant letting our imagination fill in the missing contours of the story. Doing so became an inevitable act of personally owning the generational memory.

The stories of my two great aunts, Azniv and Anoush, felt like reflections in a broken mirror. Both lost in the desert. One miraculously reunited with part of her family. The other resurfaced and lost again. When I first wrote my maternal great aunt Anoush's story, I wrote it as I remembered it told by my mother. Later I asked my mother and my uncle to read it to make certain I had not missed any details. Sure enough, they pointed out that my great aunt Anoush was not given to Bedouins to save her life. A Turkish army officer had approached my grandfather's family and had convinced my great grandfather to give Anoush to him to save her, since they were all doomed to die. He had promised that he would look after her as a daughter and had even given an address where my great grandfather could find him a few kilometers away from their temporary campsite, in case he changed his mind. He had succeeded in convincing my great grandfather that this was the only option for Anoush to stay alive. My great grandmother was inconsolable. Seeing her distraught, my great grandfather had gone after the Turkish officer, to the address he had given. He found neither the address, nor the officer. They were deceived. My great grandmother had never spoken after that. Her
silence was partly due to her pain and partly to maybe rebuke her husband. Her death was also hastened by this loss. As much as these details added to the scarcely known facts about Anoush's life, they also led to more questions. How had she reached the Arab family in Kerkuk where she had resurfaced many years later? Had the deceiving Turkish officer given her away or sold her? I will never know any of these details.

Despite these new facts I unearthed about Anoush, I chose to leave the story in its original form. It was my memory of Anoush after all. Where the actual memory faltered, I had inserted my own imagined episode based on historically existing factual ones of giving children away to the desert Bedouins. This was how I made the story my own.

Yeraz related a similar incident. She had imagined that her great grandparents Nouritza and Sarkis met and married on the deportation route. Verifying the details with her mother, Yeraz found out that Sarkis had been married back in his hometown Tomarza before 1915. He was conscripted into the Ottoman army and himself ended in Der Zor, while his wife was deported as well. He never heard from her again. He survived and reached Aleppo. He mended shoes and became a porter, scratching a living for himself. One day, he saw an Armenian refugee woman begging for food on the streets. This was Nouritza. He called her and reprimanded her for begging. She told him her husband was killed and she had a young daughter to take care of. Sarkis gave her the little money he had and befriended her. A while later they married or probably simply co-habited, who knows. Certainly doing so would fall into Nouritza's iconoclastic character. A baby girl was born to them in Aleppo and not on board a ship as Yeraz remembered. She was named Azadouhi in reference to their deliverance. They boarded a ship to the southern Lebanese port city of Tyre when Azadouhi was still a tiny baby, together with many other Armenian refugees, seeking to rebuild their
life there. Once there, after some time elapsed, Nouritza fell ill probably with tuberculosis and the doctor recommended fresh mountainous air. That is how Sarkis took his family further south, while the rest of the Armenians were moving north to the capital city Beirut. Nourtiza’s older daughter in the meantime repatriated to Armenia after WWII. "Apparently I got my facts mixed up," Yeraz explained, "I wrote it as I remembered it told to me. It is amazing how we find out something new every time we dig deeper" (personal communication, April 29, 2007).

Reflecting on our acts of imagination in storying memory, I wondered whether I could use the process as a deliberate healing choice in my writing. I was particularly interested in trying to bridge my adolescent memories to my childhood ones, hoping the attempt would help me recount my difficult memories through a benign lens. Interestingly, I could only write the piece in Armenian. Moreover, my own efforts at translation failed. I was too close to the text. I asked Yeraz to translate it.

CHILDHOOD ACACIAS
Անեկդոտիկ ձեռքբերում մեկ հանդեպը ոչ պայմանական բացումներ, և փորձում է կարծես նաև այս դեպքում գրավել ամեն վնասի շնորհով և համար կարծես, որ ըստ փորձի սկզբում պատրաստ էր վկայել կարծես, և ինչպես է կարծես անհրաժեշտ էր իրեն համար վկայել, որ դրանց ճշմարտությունները պատրաստում էին նաև այս դեպքում գրավել ամեն վնասի շնորհից։

Մեկ գրական ուժախնական գրականություն ներկայացնում էր այս գրականություն, որը հանգեցրել էր համար վկայել, որ դրանց ճշմարտությունները պատրաստում էին նաև այս դեպքում գրավել ամեն վնասի շնորհից։
Հանդիպումը սկսվում է որ ռեսուրսերի բջիջը: Մեր տույները լավ հաստատվելու են այս համաձայն կանխավորմամբ, որոնք ենթադրվում են այս Կենսաբանական տարբերակությունը ներկայացնելու համար, որ կարող է մեզ մեծ ավանդույթ երկրաշարժի պատճառներում գործակալ լինելը: Այս մենաշրջանում գործակալ է, իսկ ոչ թե այս պատճառների համար: Լսողություն են կոչվում գործակալների միջոցով նոր ռեսուրսերի հաստատումը, որը չի կարող մեզ մեծ ավանդույթ երկրաշարժի պատճառներում գործակալ լինելը.
Tom and Jerry cartoons before the main screening. He never turned us
my university years with my friend Véras, and ask the operator to show
There was also cinema Céramoncell, where I would go regularly during
side, with its dynamic cultural scene, mostly in a local, Lebanese sense.
was a lifesaver for me; I felt oxygen was more abundant on the western
eastern side of the Green Line. Crossing over to West Beirut, although we lived on the
luckily I spent my time mostly in West Beirut; although we lived on the
that the war years were somehow interesting in a strange sort of way;
live those years vicariously, through their experiences. I should admit
memories of my parents and their circle of friends; as if I wanted to re-
in Beirut, and I have always filled the gaps through the stories and
only have sketchy childhood memories from the wonderful prewar years

CHILDHOOD ACACIAS

C. B. F., "Children's Garden"
down. In fact, our West Beirut saga could rival any Italian neo-realistic film. I should write it, sell the story and get rich quick... For years, the real and the remembered, stretching from my youth and adolescence all the way back to my childhood, co-existed in perfect harmony. I still cannot figure out how I managed. Perhaps it was an instinctive defense mechanism to try and face the war.

My childhood years passed within the Demirjian School, between Zarif and Zokak-el-Belat, perched on the most beautiful stretch of street on earth. This semi-circular side road was lined with small villas on both sides, and the British Ambassador’s mansion sprawled out majestically on the corner. The old stone wall surrounding it would blossom every spring with the rest of the garden, while the branches of the trees on the opposite side of the street would stretch out through the cast iron gates, bloom and spread their petals and sweet perfume all around. Even throughout the daily darkness and gloom of my adolescence, this vista never changed. I think that street was a small paradox in war-torn Beirut. A surrealist corner.

I still remember very vividly Onnig Sarkissian’s voice during my high school literature classes. Isn’t it strange that even war can sometimes be “fortuitous”? Had it not been for the civil war, I would have been obliged to attend the Tarouhi Hagopian School in Hazmieh and been subjected to the whims of a dull Armenian language arts teacher. But because of the geopolitics of the war, Onnig became my most venerated teacher throughout my years in high school. I worship even his memory. The class period would go by in an instant. Onnig would tell us about his student

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16 Neighbourhoods in West Beirut.
17 Onnig Sarkissian was a prominent editor, educator, and literary critic. He was also co-author of popular Armenian Language Arts textbooks for the primary level.
18 A neighbourhood in East Beirut.
days at the Melkonian,¹⁹ with episodes about his teacher Oshagan,²⁰ and I would totally forget that only in a few hours' time I would be crossing the strait of death called "Barbeer",²¹ only to have to go through the same hell the following morning.

It was on such a day when Onnig spoke to us about Medzarents.²² We were reading "Under the Shade of Acacias," and "Sweet is the Night," when we ended up in Melkonian, with Oshagan, and then with one of Onnig's mischievous friends who had such a strong sense of smell that he could spot pistachios even if they were in a tightly closed bag hidden deep in a distant desk; and then back to Oshagan, this time to pay homage to Medzarents, a superbly sensitive young man; and then back to his mischievous friend, who for whatever reason started resembling Medzarents; and then the sweet night, anointed with balsam and hashish;²³ and once again the parallel of splendidly sensitive souls; until I closed my eyes and imagined that Medzarents was indeed writing about the jubilation of the spring flowers on our street corner in his "Acacias." From then on those trees became acacias for me. Every time I read Medzarents, I relive that memory from my childhood and adolescence.

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¹⁹ The Melkonian Educational Institute (MEI) was a Secondary boarding school in Nicosia, Cyprus. Established by the wealthy Melkonian brothers in 1926 as an orphanage for children who had survived the genocide, it eventually became one of the most important educational institutions of the Armenian diaspora, taking in students from diasporan communities all over the world. The graduates of the MEI were among the most prominent cadres of Armenian community leaders, writers, editors and educators for many a generation.

²⁰ Hagop Oshagan (1883-1948) was among the foremost of Armenian diasporan intellectuals of the twentieth century. He was an educator, author and literary critic. Throughout his life, he taught Armenian literature at various diasporan educational institutions, parallel to his literary career. He taught at the MEI between 1926-1934. Onnig Sarkissian was one of his numerous students there.

²¹ Barbeer Hospital was located on the green line between East and West Beirut. The crossing at that point between the two parts of the city was named after it during the war years.

²² Misak Medzarents (1886-1908) a brilliant (Western Armenian) young poet, had already established himself as a leading figure of the aesthetic movement in Armenian poetry by the time of his premature death at age 22.

²³ Lines from the first stanza of "Sweet is the Night."
Foliage and flowers are dancing around me, and my nostrils are filled with their deafening fragrances.

The best days of my youth were also spent in the same neighborhood. I was now a student at Haigazian University, only a few blocks down from my old school. Countless times I walked up the main road in front of "Ayoub's" gas station, going up to the Lycée, and from there to "Mar-Elias", to go to my mother's office. And every time I would throw a furtive glance into the street, to make sure that my arboreal dream was still there.

In a most bizarre coincidence, my mother recently strikes up a conversation with the guy serving her at the gas station right next to where I live now. She insists that his features are very familiar, that she must have seen him somewhere, and the man says that he will surely remember my mother. At last they solve the riddle. The man was the owner of "Ayoub's" gas station in Beirut where my mom used to fill up all the time.

And the moral of the story... my tree, my dream, the old stone wall around the British ambassador's house, the acacias, Medzarents, Onnig, my memories, my childhood, my adolescence, the school street, the fragrance of the flowers, are all still with me thanks to "Ayoub's" gas station. May god grant him strength.

I have always thought of my adolescent years in Beirut as an empty gaping frame in my life contrasting it to the idyllic childhood I imagined I had. Fusing my adolescent memories with my childhood ones in one text was my first attempt to look back at them as parts of the same trajectory instead of the separate entities I had projected them to be. This process was also my attempt to become whole, to make sense of the violent times I lived, to heal.

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24 Street in West Beirut.
Chapter Seven

THREE APPLES FALL FROM THE SKY:

INQUIRY AS STORY

In early 2005, following a particularly intense group discussion with the Collective that took place after a long hiatus, I wrote an email thanking the Collective members for attending and sharing their stories.

Hourig

(Collective log, 14.1.05 00:53 AM)

Gals,

A huge thank you for being there tonight. I know what it meant for each of you to come tonight and was done at what cost. I know that you're all going through some rough times and yet you came, stayed late, chatted, were amazing, funny, insightful, moving, and just plain beautiful. I appreciate what you did deeply. I too am riding some rough waves lately and know full well what it means. I have to say that having you over tonight and listening to you inspired me again, made me think how much I love what I do, despite its unpredictable pathways and the inevitable hardships I face. You make it all worthwhile. I can only hope that when I start writing I can do justice to your amazing stories and the lives you've chosen to lead. You are a guiding light. Your presence tonight was important for me on many many levels and I'm deeply touched by it. Now if I could only bottle the energies released tonight in a small vial and take a sniff of "essence of Collective" whenever I'm feeling drained, it would be just magical...

I love you all,

Hourig
Our initial group meetings had taken place in a relatively short interval between late 2003 and early 2004. Immediately after those meetings, we had plunged into intense virtual discussions first through a Web forum and later through group email. Our face-to-face meetings had been suspended since one member, Anais, was away for graduate studies. Coming together again in a physical group setting, after almost a year had passed and too many secrets had been divulged, was not the easiest task for everyone involved. I sensed the contours of awkwardness at the beginning of that "reunion," everyone trying to retrace boundaries.

Outside the confines of the Collective meetings, we had continued to get together occasionally in that interval, while waiting for Anais to return. However, both consciously and unconsciously we had carefully avoided all conversation around the resonating topics of our discussions. This distance may have been because we acknowledged the need for a certain detachment and a clear laying of boundaries between our private lives and friendships and the collaborative research inquiry I was leading. It was under these circumstances that we met again in early 2005 after Anais' return, to take up where we had left off our physical group meetings and our virtual discussions. Naturally, we all felt a bit tense and exposed at the beginning, until the ordinary flow of dialogue was reestablished.

After that meeting came to a close at a very late hour, I felt humbled by the participants' generosity and inspired by their insights. The "coming-together" that night marked a new phase in my fieldwork with the Collective. In hindsight, I believe that our intimate virtual exchanges over the course of a year gave us all a new perspective on the Collective. The detachment that interval provided coupled with our collaborative writing, propelled us into a self-reflexive mode that
became apparent at that first meeting in 2005. We were now ready to
look at our stories from a distance, to try and make meaning of our
process, and to prepare for the final solitary journey of composing our
self-portraits. It was a crystallizing moment.

It was at this time that I felt the roles of researcher and researched
became truly interwoven. I had previously taken the lead in initiating
the discussions both offline and online by subtly guiding my participants
to follow the flow and tolerate ambiguities. The roles now seemed
reversed, with the members of the Collective not only taking the lead,
but also reminding me that the interpretative phases would dictate the
flow and final shape of the narratives. This was when I learned as a
researcher that the support structure of the Collective provided me with
counterpoise.

"I think your whole dissertation is gonna be a story from the moment you
write your first words to the moment you write your last....There is us
five and there is the larger story that everybody tells at the same time"
told me Anais (Collective discussion 10.2.05) when I confided my feelings
of being overwhelmed to the Collective. "Methodologically it sounds
insane, but I have a lot of faith in that the material will be very telling"
she added calmly and prophetically (Collective discussion 10.2.05).
Anais’ insight surprised me. I wondered how I, the researcher, had
missed this most important discovery. There actually was another story,
a metanarrative, that we the Collective had created over the course of
our meetings, through the stories we told for one another, in the
generated laughter and the lurking sadness. Taking on Anais’ lead, Mara
probed further on that day, asking me to consider the relationship
between the Collective discussions and the individual stories told
(Collective discussion 10.2.05).
Certainly a symbiotic relationship existed among the Collective. This relationship translated into a dialogic process in our conversations and narrative constructions that in turn created a frame through which we viewed the possibilities of our stories. The trust and openness we collectively worked on creating, guided the path of the stories through the exploratory questions we asked and the mirrors we held for one another. Through this collective effort the narratives were imbued with reflexivity and a critical approach in the retelling.

I realized that at the very beginning of my journey as a researcher within the Collective I had envisioned our work together as five parallel stories. I had thought of them as individual stories that could connect or intertwine in certain points in time. However, Anais’ intuition led me towards a new path not only to view the individual stories as inextricably interwoven from the very beginning, but also to seek out our collective story. Certainly, as the fieldwork progressed, the five of us created our own unique narrative together. The power of a collectivity is in its shared and situated knowledge. In the case of our group it came to encompass our understanding of community on our own terms as an alternative space with generative forces from within. We wove the story of the Collective, of five women who sought answers to questions of “Who are we?” “What do we aspire to?” “What identities do we choose to carve out for ourselves?”

This concluding chapter explores the story of our questionings, struggles, positionings, and collective meaning-making of “who we think we are.” I revisit the methodological framework of my inquiry through the interpretive lens the Collective affords and look at how we choose to draw our self-portraits through a dialogical process. I reflect on writing vulnerably and conclude the text with our self-portraits.
REVISITING METHODOLOGY

Throughout the process of the fieldwork, what drew the contours of the story of the Collective was how we constantly negotiated our expectations of each other. I always felt an internal tension in our process, trying to balance my position as a researcher and a participant as well as a person who had very close friendships with these women. I was aware of the pressure to arrive at some "deliverables" by the end of my data collection phase, while at the same time both the women and I negotiated the free flow of the discussions. Understandably, at the beginning of the fieldwork, the Collective members were full of questions about my research design path, sometimes asking for clear signposts and more structure in the form of deadlines or concrete tasks. Whereas I stressed the importance of going with the free flow of ideas and trusting the wave of discussions, Yeraz challenged me from the very beginning asking me to actually tell them in concrete form what to write about in their self-portraits (Collective discussion 9.12.03). This negotiation of tolerating ambiguity and free flow in contrast to a controlled discussion leading to concrete deliverables was not a simple one-way street. I was intrigued how I slipped into a "controlling" mode once in a while as a researcher, intent on making sure I gathered enough data by the end of my fieldwork. In one particular instance during our second Collective discussion, I insisted that the Collective members start using the scrapbooks I had prepared for them as their journal sites, to reflect on the themes and stories we had discussed at our meeting.

Hourig: I want you to start using your scrapbooks.
Yeraz: I wonder if I will ever be using the scrapbook.
Hourig: No, you should...
Yeraz: (laughing) I don't work that way. (Imitates my voice) "you should."
function that way. What do you mean "you should"? (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

At times like that I was driven by my concern as a researcher to make sure that process and product coalesced and that a tangible outcome materialized. Unfortunately, I forgot in these instances that I too was a participant and needed to look at these issues from that added perspective. Thankfully both the other members' healthy dose of humour as well as my deep instinctual beliefs in collaborative work, co-researching and co-narrating with my participants, kept my "control" under check and reminded me to trust the process. In retrospect, I was fascinated to see how I was caught up in an internal tension I never thought would exist in the first place, but apparently surfaced as soon as I forgot my role as a participant. That we were all able to talk openly about our misgivings helped me balance my fears and intuitions as a researcher, and gave the Collective members a chance to question their own assumptions about what constituted a structured discussion.

In the ebb and flow of negotiating the internal tensions I felt between free flow and control, I shared my doubts about it openly with the Collective members.

Hourig: Հուզ թենայ է նոր նահ ամույն թենայ թենու! It feels as if I left something incomplete...

Mara: Հուզ մանման թենու թենու/What did you leave incomplete dear?

Hourig: Օգնենք, ես պատմում ես պատմում, պատմում, պատմում! I don't know. We got together, told nice stories. But then, what next?

Mara: Տեսնի ու միայ նանկու բարձք ամանույն թենու թենու/Then you will sit and write all these stories.
Hourig: (laughing) Հո... Ծայր նույնը/No... and you?

Mara: Ճանաչում եմ ինձ, պատերը ինձ ենթադրում/Then you will give it to us and we'll read it. (Loud laughter)

Hourig: կան բանիներ, հոսքի չկամ/Then I have nothing to say, I do have good friends....So I don't need to say anything then? I don't know... (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

My anxious question of "what next?" partly waited for an answer from the Collective members and partly invited them to own the process. In pushing the edges of the collaborative research, I communicated to them the vulnerability I felt about the process, while Mara skillfully threw the ball back in my court. In the humourous tug of words between us, as Mara continued to teasingly respond to my questions, I continued to insist impatiently on the necessary role of reflexivity. Sometimes, the concern that I was not doing enough as a researcher emerged:

Hourig: Let's put it this way, that by our next meeting, there should be something solid that you already have. The thoughts should be kind of transcribed into a frame... If you do it in the scrapbook, it's fine. So by then, all this should be in a solidified, tangible form. Whether you do it in the scrapbook or not, it's your choice. (Collective discussion 15.12.03)

Instinctively, I knew that concentrating on process and free flow was not only important but the only way to go forward for my collaborative inquiry to succeed. However, I was visibly torn with wanting to do things "by the book," of showing "accountability" by showing tangible "evidence." How else could I explain my irrational insistence on having something solid by our third meeting, when we were at the very early gestation period of ideas and stories. As an afterthought I can now safely reflect on how the internal tension I felt in reality transformed into a delicate dance between me and the participants. Thankfully, letting the process take over helped me overcome my temporary shortsightedness. Eventually, as the fieldwork progressed, it became very clear to all of
us, that we needed the whole fieldwork time spanning over roughly two years, to be able "to produce" that "something solid" I asked for in the first place.

The misgivings and internal tension I felt at the beginning of the fieldwork, reared their heads again towards the end, in the form of uncertain expectations. My field log entry immediately after our last discussion illustrated this.

Field log, 10.2.05
My checklist on what to ask the Collective during the very last discussion together included reflections on what the experience of the Collective meant for them in general — What now? Did it spur them on in other directions? Do they look at issues differently now? What happens to our circle now that the fieldwork is over? Did the Collective play a significant role in their lives? What effect will it have for them beyond my own PhD journey?

And after the meeting — a very anticlimactic sense. I suppose I expected something else tonight, a true sense of closure, a discussion session to focus on our reflections from this experience, maybe some last-minute questions about the process of the self-portraits... And none of it happened. It was a joyful encounter though, with much laughter and sharing of yet more stories, of identity and of language and of diasporan predicament... In many ways it felt like we were midway in our journeys and not at the end. Maybe what Nané said and all the rest confirmed, of not being able to reflect yet on the experience, is true. She is right that the reflection will come long after the real closure, which will be when they hand in the self-portraits. Maybe I am asking this at the wrong time. Certainly there is still the last solitary act of reflection for them now of the actual writing of their self-portraits.
I keep thinking that even with all my free flow with these discussions, all the "unstructured structure" the Collective kept commenting and joking about, here I was today, somehow feeling frustrated with the free flow, since my expectations of how I envisaged a closure did not happen... That realization is funny in a sense.

Most probably though, as time passes and I listen to and transcribe the tape, I will probably find quite a few closure cues. Also, the fact that they kept reverting back to what I call the "mid journey" is very telling and symbolic. Maybe there can never be closure to these issues of identity and language we struggle with. Certainly these issues stir deep passions in us. And then there is March 8th, when we'll gather once more around a table laden with food, share our stories and laugh. Yeraz said, "there won't be any tape recorders that day" and I agreed. We all need closure in that sense. However, I can't help but think that that day will probably be one of our most precious encounters. Well, we'll have to live with the memory of it. It would be a fitting closure! I will make sure to snap some photos for posterity though.

Both Nané and Anais reminded me during that last meeting that reflecting on the process of our fieldwork was still too early, since it was an ongoing experience (Collective discussion 10.2.05). I came to see this insight much later both as a participant and a researcher, only when the necessary detachment set in with the passing of time. I had diligently prepared for our last meeting with a set of questions and was intent on guiding the Collective gently towards a reflective session on our encounters. However, we seemed to talk about everything except closure. After some time, I interrupted one of the conversations abruptly. "Ok, I'm just going to bring... I think we came here for closure today and we're talking about everything but closure," I blurted out impatiently, eliciting a lot of laughter (Collective discussion 10.2.05).
Obviously, at that moment, I was not ready to see that the way the Collective chose to bring closure was not necessarily what the researcher in me, looking for outcomes, had in mind.

After many jokes about my question of "reflecting on our experiences," Nané pointed out that in reality it was too early to answer that question at that particular point. Even though the meeting was the last one in discussions spanning a year and a half, they would only be able to process the experience once they finished their work on their narrative frames and self-portraits, and enough time had elapsed to create a necessary detachment from the process.

Nané: I think it's, I mean... I think your question is a pertinent one, but I think it's too early to answer that.

Anais: (agreeing) Hmm.

Nané: For me anyways.

Yeraz: I think...

Nané: I don't know, I don't know what this has been for me, until I actually go through the final stage of it and see what comes out. Right now it's been very interesting, I mean I've really enjoyed the discussions and it's made me think about certain things. I mean even what we just talked about which you said, "oh it's just identity," but... I mean, even when we sidetrack

Anais: Hmmm

Nané: It's still makes you think about I don't know, certain issues I guess. But to tell you... I wouldn't be able to answer that right now. I don't know if that makes sense, but

Anais: Absolutely.

Nané: You know, it's like... the journey hasn't finished yet (laughs mischievously.) (Collective discussion 10.2.05)

Comforting me that even the tangential discussions had their place, Nané emphasized again the flow element, which I had neglected. Reading through the transcript over time, I felt that driven by my need
of expectations of a closure, I kept insisting on a reflective conclusion. The Collective meanwhile kept gently reminding me until the very last minutes of our fieldwork that I needed to trust the suspension of any conclusions and had to be tolerant of the ambiguity that pervaded our last meeting. Through this humbling episode I learned importantly to listen to the participants and how they felt about the journey of the research we—as researcher and participants—had embarked on together. It was incredible, how in the last recorded minutes of the fieldwork, I had completely discarded my participant hat and worn only the researcher one, acting as a "taskmaster", "scared" all of a sudden, and wanting frantically to make sure that all the "research points" were covered. Thus, the Collective pointed out to me none other than my own guiding principle for our collaborative research inquiry—to trust the flow one last time and to resist drawing conclusions on an experience that was far from being over. We had come a long way from our first encounter to the last. In this intriguing reversal of roles boundaries between researcher and participant blurred.

Anais further commented on my concerns with an "outcome crisis" by rightfully pointing out that the impact of our experiences would only be known once the research was completed and the dissertation written.

Anais: Closure will be when I....I think the full effect of this, I think a lot of it is gonna come when I read how you make, take this above what each of us have contributed and really create something with it.

Hourig: Oh my god, you're putting the onus on me.

Mara: But puhledear you...

Anais: No that's not what I meant Hourig. I just mean that this is, that all of this is for a purpose. We're not doing this, you know it's for a purpose and

Mara: (teasing) You think we have been doing this for a purpose?
Hourig: (laughing) Yeah...

Anais: You know, there is a purpose to this, there is an objective and that's fine... I guess I'm saying this because when I read a couple of the stuff that you had sent, it was like this whole other layer that came, kind of made everything more connected for me.

Hourig: Hmm

Anais: So I think when I read, or whatever comes out in terms of creating a metanarrative after that, and even maybe in 10 years, 12 years, I don't know, I think it's going to be a whole other process of finding it, you know discovering to what level all this information and all these experiences, I think it's gonna be engrained in different levels of my consciousness personally and my unconscious, that's for sure, which will unravel through time I think. And you guys are cool, so it's been fun hanging around. (Collective discussion 10.2.05)

Her comment acknowledged that despite the collaborative nature of the research process, it was my responsibility as the researcher/interpreter to weave the stories together into a coherent whole. At the same time, the reflective process of such a journey would be an ongoing life-long one for the participants, because what was told, exchanged, reconstructed, written, brought together, would in all probability continue to reverberate beyond the research process and impact our lives.

At the close of that meeting, we all agreed to come together to celebrate our Collective on March 8, this time however without any voice or video recorders. In subsequent emails to the group, Yeraz and Anais suggested that this become an annual event for us to gather around the circular dining table that had witnessed many of our conversations and dialogues (Collective log 7.3.05). I could not have found a better ending to the unfolding story of our lifelines, an ending that became a new beginning.
UNRAVELLING THROUGH TIME — FRAMING OUR PORTRAITS

Anais' assertion of the Collective's experience "unravelling through time" also echoed how we all felt about framing our self-portraits. In trusting the unfolding of the stories we followed an intuitive wisdom to let the research design define itself collaboratively at each phase. Naturally, we redrew the definitions of what and how to frame at the very end of our fieldwork together, once we had reflected upon and internalized all the stories we retold for each other. This methodological process, which relied on the double pillars of dialogue and trust, became another component of the metanarrative we wove together.

In our penultimate Collective meeting, Nané finally talked openly about her dilemmas on the solitary journey of writing her self-portrait. Immediately, a very heated discussion followed, concentrating on the act of telling in contrast to writing our stories.

Nané: I've written [in my journal] I think once and I never even finished the entry. I think for me, I don't know what it is, but (pause) oh god... I think it's easier to talk about things, when we're sitting like this, but when you have to sit down and write, there are things you really don't want to think about, at least for me, because every time I sit down, let's say I pick up a picture or something and so you start thinking and of course when you think, it goes super fast... And it takes me to a point and I'm like whew... I don't want these, I don't want to get there, so I just put it away and it's because I'm thinking identity, Armenian, ok and you know it's whatever... So I never write, I never write. And I see [this scrapbook] a lot and it has a very special place on my desk, you know, it has its spot, but I can't bring myself to write anything....
Anais: Everything you just said is your journal. The fact that you can’t visit there is your journal. So it’s not about how many pages you fill in.

Nané: Yeah, I know that, I know... but...

Anais: *This* is your journal, you just have...

Mara: That’s what you...

Anais: That’s where you are.

Mara: I have one entry too.... and I think what scares me the most is I don’t know where I’m gonna go with it. Like what if I get somewhere where I can’t deal with it by myself? Because I’m sitting here with this journal by myself. And I think it’s also, it’s part of the identity seriously, part of the identity issues that I don’t have anyone to go back to, unless I call Hourig and start you know, telling her about this and dealing with it with her. So that’s another area: where do I want to tap into a subject that is so obviously important to me, because I’m sitting here today, yet I can’t share it pretty much today with anyone else outside this circle in my life? And that’s a very scary place to go and that’s why I only have one entry and maybe even half of one entry [in my journal]. So it’s also like you need to be in a special place...

Anais: (agreeing) Uhum... (Collective discussion 13.1.05)

We all shared Nané’s insight that retelling the stories was infinitely easier than writing and reflecting on them. Writing implied a finality and actualized the story in ways too close to comfort. Mara’s concern sprang from the solitary nature of the writing and the absence of the safety net of the Collective in that act. Mara also brought up the notion of a “special place” that enhanced the telling of stories, helped deal with the vulnerabilities we faced. This spatial dimension she mentioned was also reflected in the conversations of the other Collective members. Meeting at my place over the course of those two years, around my dining room table and the physical circle we had created, had become part of the Collective ritual and a natural condition for the stories to flow. Anais even mentioned that being away from home, while pursuing her graduate studies in Europe, writing in her journal or on the Web forum,
became a link to that trusted space. Even though she was alone with her writing she argued, but her act of writing was a ritual of communicating with the Collective by evoking the feelings of trust and support we had created in our circle, around the table (Collective discussion 13.1.05).

Anais' and Mara's thoughts on the ritual of linking to that "special place" reflected a discussion on the same issue about a year earlier in the forum. At that time Nané had shared her dilemma of her reluctance to deal with the flood of memories while trying to write about them on the forum. Anais had already acknowledged those same feelings in her post, while Mara in her plea to Nané to continue writing, had talked about her strategy to evoke the presence of the Collective, to carry those emotions into her own personal space.

Anais

Web post, Thursday, April 1, 2004 7:17am
I know I have to force myself to open this website, because it is more than just a mere read, a mere writing up, it is placing myself at the core of all these stories, our stories, that I have "entered" ...

Mara

Web post, Sunday, April 18, 2004 7:59 PM
I am not sure if this is going to sound ... make sense, or how you will understand it, all of you, but one point Hourik made, many times, or at least I think she did, is that it is good to be spontaneous. So I am trying to be true to it and I will write what I feel...regardless. You see, every time I feel lost about this project I think of you guys, and each one of you, your face, that day around the table is one picture that stays with me as soon as I log in to WebCT, it's like a cue, or a symbol, may be a light, collection of lights, each one of you evokes certain emotions,
thoughts, feelings, memories, like triggers which awaken all different emotions.

Anais

Web post, Wednesday, April 21, 2004 9:39 AM

I completely agree with Mara djan. Sometimes what others 'need' from you, what you can contribute to others, is to just be yourself, and start from yourself, with your story, with all of its values and all of its splendor and magical moments. I feel when I read an entry or remember the feeling I got around the table of pure synchronicity in complete diversity, I live other’s experience in the Collectivity. And that is just sheer life!

As Anais pointed out, hearing and living through each other's stories vicariously, in turn helped retell and reinterpret our own. Carrying that feeling forward into the intimacy of one's solitude, helped shape the eventual writing. As our fieldwork progressed and we resumed our meetings, Nané overcame her anxiety over writing through the open discussions she led on the fluid orality of the stories in contrast to the solidity writing afforded. Another important factor that helped Nané finally resolve her difficulties was that at the very late stage of the fieldwork, she became pregnant with her first child. It was then that she came face to face with the tangible reality of desiring to pass on her family memories and narratives to her children. She felt then, that she was writing with a redefined purpose.

Despite all our negotiations, Nané was not alone in her dilemma. In the end, Yeraz was never able to write what she told us in the intimacy of the circle about her great grandmother Nouritza. Anais on the other hand, admitted that the writing was tearing her apart and she needed to give me her journal by our penultimate meeting so she could find some
detachment from it (Collective discussion 13.1.05). Nane and Mara chose
to do their writing only after a very long time had passed since the last
meeting. There were reverberations of the same pattern in the way each
member of the Collective dealt with the issue of framing the stories.
Certainly I saw a similar trend in my relationship with my own writing
process of this text. We had no trouble sharing our innermost secrets and
voicing the stories in the healing circle of the Collective. In our solitary
journeys though, we tried hard to avoid at all costs dealing with the
inevitable demons unleashed through the writing of the narratives.

Our most important redefinition of framing our self-portraits emerged
towards the end of our penultimate meeting, in the form of a
synchronous dialogue among the Collective.

Nané: I was just thinking about what would those frames be
and I guess part of it is also nñ.../that... I don't know, oh I'm
gonna frame myself and this is gonna be me and it feels sooo, I
know it’s not, pwijg/but it feels very like, "ok I'm gonna take
myself now, analyze it, dissect myself and put myself in a box
for someone else to.."

Anais: Analyze

Nané: "see and understand," and (Anais laughs) it’s like oh
god... (laughter), how do I do this? And not that just...

Hourig: And "do I want to do this?" Is it?

Nané: Muummm... it's putting it down on something material. I
could talk about it. I'm more comfortable talking about it, but
putting it down, it’s almost like, it’s like I'm gonna look at it
and I’m gonna see my bones...

Anais: Or you can go back to what you wrote, but you don’t go
back to what you say.

Nané: I said it, it's out there and utpmwugwu, I finished, you
know. I made that decision at that moment to say it.

Hourig: Because...

Nané: Actually I can't take it back but it's ok.

Hourig: Yeah, because...

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Nané: You know, I told it all and forgot about it.

Hourig: Because the written word also has a finality to it.

Nané: Yeah, but it's also that it comes back to you, whereas I talk and it just goes out, it doesn't really come back to me.

Mara: It makes it real, it makes it...

Nané: And you have it...

Mara: When you rank it, it makes it real.

Nané: When you write it or draw it, anything...

Mara: it's extreme, but...

Nané: When you make it physical...

Mara: Yeah.

Nané: ....But you know, I'm thinking there is a certain thing that I could write, present part of my images of my self and my identity whatever, accept that, but there are things that are part of my identity, are part of me, but I don't want them to be. So I don't want to put them in that frame and then, it's like oh, but am I being truthful if I don't put it in? Do you understand what I'm saying? I go through these dilemmas and that's why [I don't write]. (laughs)

Hourig: And at the same time I understand, I mean I really totally agree with you, that when you sit in front of the journal, there is that very individual and lonely part and you know, we'll talk about that as well.

Yeraz: Yeah.

Hourig: And some of it will have to be.

Yeraz: But we have to know...

Hourig: (laughing) Some of it will have to be lonely, I have to say.

Mara: No, there's nothing wrong with it.

Hourig: Yeah, yeah.

Mara: I think that one of the things that can be... the other thing I've told myself at the beginning was that, what I write here, is not... It's me today, it's not...

Hourig: Absolutely.
Mara: It's not me tomorrow.
Hourig: Absolutely.
Mara: So it's ok, whatever it is.
Hourig: Yeah.
Mara: It's me today and I don't have to, after doing that, I don't have to read it and say, oh my god this is ME...
Yeraz: A "slice of me."
Hourig: It is very much a slice. (Collective discussion 13.1.05)

This exchange was probably one of the most profound and honest dialogues we had about our own process. Nane's apprehensive "oh, I'm gonna frame myself" was more a rhetorical question of whether framing our self-portraits suddenly meant locking our fluid identities in a rigid form. After having talked for a long time, that we felt most uncomfortable with essentialized perspectives of who we were, she was rightfully concerned for our own "framing" process not to do that. How could we select what to frame? How could we frame the unframeable we had discovered time and again about ourselves? What would others see and interpret in those frames that would not necessarily reflect who we were? The act of framing felt like a clinical dissection. How were the readers to know the complexities, the emotions, the upheavals, the dilemmas, and the profundity of our dialogues that went into the ultimate creation of these narrative frames? At the same time, choosing what to frame and what to leave out, how honest were we being with ourselves? Nane's questions thus went to the heart of the matter and brought us back to the question of telling vs. writing our stories. The orality in this case suggested a possibility for change, for differing perspectives, for flexibility that might otherwise not be present in a written form. Somehow, the act of writing carried a sense of immutability.
In this ongoing negotiation Mara's insight untangled the meanings of what composing a frame came to be. She pointed out that the self-portraits were contextualized temporally. They were representations of who we were and how we thought in the context of today, the present, the now. These frames as Yeraz put it were only a "slice of me." In our last discussion, reflecting on the same issue, Anais defined the portraits as "moments of representation" or frames that were "momentarily localized" (Collective discussion 10.2.05). We had finally arrived.

PEELING OF THE SELF

To write vulnerably is to open a Pandora's box. (Behar, 1996, p. 19)

In an earlier Web post, Yeraz had described the process of reconstructing our narratives and self-portraits as "peeling of the self," and of "exposing the innards" (Web post 20.2.04). She was responding to the other members of the Collective who had voiced their concerns that sometimes they felt they had shared too many intimate details, leaving them with feelings of vulnerability. In two subsequent postings, Yeraz made a crucial assessment of how and why we chose to tell our stories in the circle of the Collective.

Yeraz

Web post, Friday, February 20, 2004 8:55 AM

Almost two years ago I had a dream which I still remember very very vividly. In it we were in college, Hourig and I, and were registering for a course with our favorite professor, for which we had to present/bring out our internal organs... And so we had our organs in a bowl of translucent liquid, and our livers and hearts and stomachs were floating in there, but they were absolutely gorgeous, beautiful, looked like jelly fish really, with the most amazing shapes and colours, swimming in a
primordial liquid of creation. I want to remind you, most of all you, Hourig jan, of the beauty in there as well. It is only when we have stripped our souls and exposed ourselves in our most vulnerable ways that we truly bond, and that bond, thin and fragile as it may be like the threads in the spider's web, is the strongest of all bonds, and the most exquisitely beautiful one on top of it all too.

Web post, Sunday, February 22, 2004 11:50 PM

Happiness is transient, it doesn't grow roots in your soul that spread out and possess you. Happiness is deliciously sweet and doesn't cry out to be shared. Loss and longing pervade your being and hold you captive. We share, simply trying to ease the pain. In some part through sharing, but mostly through articulation, we provide those roots with a life-giving sap, with life. Perhaps most importantly we are sharing these stories of sadness and loss and anguish not with one another, but primarily with our OWN selves. Isn't that the harshest of all, to bare your soul under your own scrutinizing gaze?

Yeraz's observation linked together the methodological and epistemological perspectives at the basis of my research framework. Agreeing with Kamanos Gamelin that "the travel through self-study taught me that vulnerability is the 'place', the stance from which I write and teach" (2005, p. 185), I deeply believe that our process of unravelling our stories to each other, became a transformative experience. Through the trust we shared and most importantly by learning to make the subject object, we engaged in an autobiographical inquiry premised by interpretive self-reflexivity and healing. This process allowed us to reclaim our vulnerabilities as sources of inner strength. The final weaving of the self-portraits embraced this understanding of vulnerability as the locus of writing.
The next section presents our self-portraits in our own "momentarily localized" words. I end the chapter with a final reflection on our narrative frames and on process.

**YERAZ**

*Excerpt from an email to a friend, circa 2004*

Your email came at the end of a week of deliberations over something quite insignificant, perhaps, and it brought to a head all my frustration. I recently finished writing an article/book review and sent it for posting to an Armenian online network. The administrator of the site wrote back asking for a short bio to be posted at the end of the article.

Write a bio... a short description of who you are. Turn your gaze inward, then look back, evaluate, assess, and come up with that bit of history about yourself worth sharing. Catalogue your achievements, list your degrees, say why you matter... I contemplated my past and evaluated my present, and an infinite void stared back at me... I looked in the mirror and couldn't recognize the person I had become... complacent and content... too comfortable to care...

What have you done with yourself, not who you are and what you love... I could tell these worthy strangers who will bravely read to the end of the article or simply scroll down the page that I adore poppies and Mozart's music brings me to tears, that I worship the sun, and love the sound of my own voice reading poetry... no, not who you are, but what you have done with yourself... which letters of the alphabet can you tag behind your name...

*Can I tell these people that I am slightly pregnant with ideas? Can I say I never wanted anything bad enough? Can I say I had an abortion to go to graduate school only to abandon it in a year's time anyway? Can I say...*
that I am a defector, a deserter? That I walked away not from one but from two graduate programs because I didn't know what I really wanted and so am left with no nametags now? That I groped and fumbled in the dark and couldn't find what impassioned me so I stuck to reading Marquez and Saramago and Maalouf and Galeano and whiled away my time, and that other people's ambition found me in its wake and swept me away with it?

Does it matter that I read to my children every night before they went to bed and never knew for sure what it was that I wanted to do for me? That I lost my dreams while dreaming for others? That ambition sunk slowly through my veins and I was too lazy to reach out, to hang on? That I am in a daze and soon I will shake myself and wake up... into another world in which accomplishments won't matter? No... Because we reevaluate and always come up short... and our insides get knotty and knottier, and we become naughtier... to ourselves, in the end... sorry for all this gloom. I will sleep and it will pass... tomorrow the sun will shine, and I'll write my bio... maybe...

May the light of the goddess guide your life decisions.

Love,
Yeraz

Short bio:
Yeraz lives in Montreal and is somewhat involved in the local Armenian community. She works on research dealing with issues of survivor memory and cross-generational transmission of trauma, especially as it affects women.
Circa today
Worldly, cosmopolitan and somewhat sophisticated. That’s how I like to come across. And yet I cannot lay claim to that most basic element of sophistication; the hyphenated identity.

I am not a Lebanese-Armenian, or a Canadian-Armenian, or a Lebanese-Canadian. A hyphen indicates a balance, a steady equilibrium, a logical coexistence, some mutual understanding. But when I throw myself in the balance, the Armenian side of the equation always tilts the untroubled existence of a harmonious identity.

My daughters, unframed and unbound, are Canadians of Armenian heritage. Canadian-Armenians. They have a well placed hyphen, or so I like to believe. It will be for them to discover that balance and negotiate the left and the right of their identity with grace and equanimity.
My roots go back to no land; to no place. My roots go back to memories only, to stories and experiences.

My refuge is my language; the past at times my present; history sometimes my story. (Yeraz, reflexive log)

Figure 29: Nané — Four generations of women

FOUR GENERATIONS AND ONE MORE TO COME

I was a child in that picture. The only picture I know of that has the four generations of women sitting together.

Now I am myself about to add to this line.
I do not know yet if I will be bringing a little girl or a boy into this world, but I know that, with this little being I will be entering a new chapter of my life, one where I will have to take on the heavy responsibility of ensuring the continuity of our family's Armenian identity.

During the past months, I have been faced with issues of preservation of culture and language. Questions in my mind, that never seem to come to a definite answer or a comforting solution. How will I make sure that my child learns Armenian? How will I create that special environment? How will I expose my child to the literature that is so foreign to me to begin with? Will I have to send my child to Armenian school to ensure some kind of transmission of language and culture? If I do, how will I make sure that my child doesn't feel like an outsider in the wider society? How will my choices affect this child's construction of identity?

I have realised that the answers to these questions, I will find as time goes by. Meanwhile, all I can do is try to immerse myself into the language, by making an effort to express myself in Armenian and also by starting to read and write in Armenian much more often than I do.

I will first have to be an example for my child. (Nané, reflexive log)
Earrings — Armenia — $10 after much negotiation and realization that it is most probably made in Turkey.

Red Ribbon Bracelet — Canada — when Talar came in Feb 04 to London, mom sent Easter gift for me, chocolates, wrapped in red ribbon which I wore from Sept 04 as motivation for exam and symbol of return home took off on day of exam Oct 20 04 now reminds me of conflicted (conflict of me not her) and deep and intense relationship I have with mom all this without communication.
Pink shawl – Italy – bought by mama for 5 Euros on trip in May 04 with yours truly

Gaze – towards my one and only Paul free (if I don’t count his hard work in our relationship)

Shirt – gift from Nonnina from last (and maybe last ever) trip to Rome to her heart to her soul to her essence and gist of who she is yet also what she has chosen to become by marriage

![Figure 31: Anais' representation of self](image-url)

Moving on now to the left tit, well kinda like me being woman WOMAN? No a child and a girl I had to grow up the genocide badge too idea that this is how my collectivity is affected by this and sadly breathes only through this why is our Armenian present life animated ONLY by death and my odd negotiation with my parents’ and grandparents’ birthplace
Ethiopia the coaster was given (is it cultural commodification of our link to Ethiopia? Reduced to symbolism???) at one of my mom's cousin's wedding bla bla never got along with them

And the Lire — no longer exists like me before this year no longer exists so in perpetual/transformation questioning how I care about my cultural identity and wondering WHY WHY WHY I can't deal with it any better at the end of the day is part of who I am not what I am Anais — from Ottoman Empire, Izmir, ṭu /Bolis/ [Istanbul], Greece Shhhh, Italy, France Italy Italy Ethiopia. I mean Egypt first, then Ethiopia Armenian Armenian everywhere Canada Italy oh yeah Armenia since I've been there and it is intense but I am my Armenia and I am my Italy because my family is now Canadian but...

so fuck territory

Ah yes; yes.

Of course (Anais, reflexive log)
Finding the balance between you in the past and you in the present, searching for purpose — explaining the "why"s to yourself more than to others. Your past is your base; the stronger your base, the stronger you are. At times your past is created for you by generations before you and at other times you create your past and it can be just as strong, just as valid, just as you. There is a past that was created for me, and then there is the present that I walk through. With each step you must look into your present "you," but remember your past.

Choices, paths, decisions... Cultures, traditions, values...
Choices... Emotions...
My Armenian roots, my Russian non-formal education, my Canadian formal-education... this is my "I," a canvas, disorganized at times, coherent at others... (Mara, reflexive log)
I had an intriguing dream that felt more like an allegory. In a few successive "tableau vivants," I lived all my life, my angst, my dreams compressed into ephemeral waves of the unconscious.

In the first scene, I was a little girl again, walking down the streets of Beirut, holding my father's hand. The streets of Beirut were not really Beirut of course, but that hazy landscape we interpret as the real one in our dream worlds. The streets were lined with row after row of chairs. White wooden chairs with woven straw seats. It was a beautiful surreal scene of an empty street with the chairs standing guard over maybe my own childhood memories, who knows. There was a slightly palpable wave of happiness around us.

Cut to the next tableau — I am inside a house with my father. He is showing me around. It is a new house, still under construction, the way
houses are built in the Middle East with a lot of raw cement everywhere. The walls have just been covered with a preliminary plaster before a first whitewash. My father opens a door and shows me a luminous room. It is the bathroom or the shower room. It is huge. I walk in the door.

Cut. I'm inside and I am a grown woman all of a sudden. There is a big window opening, a լուսամուտ/lousamout\(^1\) (window) I would like to think it was, and a warm glowing light flows in from there. I am standing next to it and water is flowing over me from above. I look towards the door. It is open, just as my father gently pushed it, and I can see the frame of the door still in construction. The wooden frame, set in a gray cement framework. There is some writing on the wall and on the edges of the door frame, but I cannot decipher it. I turn around and look out the opening, while the water still gently flows down my body. There is a tall building outside, also under construction. I feel it is going to be a beautiful building when completed. I gaze at it as I would watch a deep sunset. I feel a warm presence around me.

Cut. It is the last frame. I am standing and gazing down at two beautiful twin baby girls that I know have come out of me. They have a much darker complexion than me. I look at them curiously and think, "They are darker, like Tigran." All I remember after that is a sense of deep happiness and inner calm pervading me even in my waking hour.

I have been thinking about this dream, trying to unravel its mystery. Apart from all the unspoken inherited family memories in it (twins feature prominently in my mother’s family), the promise of a flowing creativity, of new beginnings I am longing for so much is hard to ignore. That symbolic crossing of the threshold, the little girl growing into the

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\(^1\) In Armenian there is a slight nuance between the words պատուհան and լուսամուտ, both signifying "window." Պատուհան implies an opening that is made by taking a part out of the wall, while լուսամուտ refers to an aperture that allows light to come in.
woman, the naked woman facing the writing on the wall, looking outside to be able to look inside – What clearer signs do I need, I ask myself?
Yes, watching the liver, the heart and the stomach swimming in that translucent primordial liquid of creation, is a beautiful experience.

EPILOGUE

Each of Yeraz’s narrative frames was a beginning, a glance into the window of her soul, yet each also had a hidden shutter, keeping the reader off, safely away from probing more. As a writer she is careful with her words, to the point of being minimalist sometimes. With her frames, the minimalism became a deliberate defense mechanism. The last two paragraphs of her self-portrait tore at my heart. How did she do it? How did she frame those emotions and word them?

Even before I started reading Nané’s narrative frames, I knew they started right at the end, at the beginning of the new life that was inside her. I knew this was a family history written for that child mostly. Everything in her family album converged on that last self-portrait, which brought back so forcefully the living presence of her grandparents in her life. Armenian, which was the language she identified with her grandparents, was also returning centrally and tangibly in her life, with the birth of her child. It was a beautiful affirmation of the cycle of life. I read about the touch of Nané’s medzmayrig’s hands and I saw my medzmama’s hands in mine. I remembered their shape, their whiteness, the tautness of the skin and the very last time I squeezed them in mine, not wanting to let go, not knowing how I would come to terms with leaving her behind. The last time I saw her hands was when I turned one final time from the doorway of her hospital room to say goodbye. Her hands were resting on the white blanket, somewhat limp and oh so tired.
The image is stuck in my mind. White over white. Who could have thought that I would have found her in Nané's narratives?

Anais' self-portrait was the appropriate end piece to her narratives. It was the completion of a cycle and a signal to a beginning. The Italian lire attached by a safety pin to the navel in her painting felt like a "manifesto" of proclaiming a nascent identity. The genocide pin became a reminder of the absence-presence of a pervasive and invasive theme in Anais' life. In her "tableau vivant" that pin looked like an inverted "nourishing breast," a reminder of the pain that is suckled in with mother's milk. Who is being watched at any given time when looking at Anais' frame? Is she looking out and returning my/our gaze? Are "we" framing her, or is she "framing" us? She, who is courageously in the nude, baring her insides out, her skin made flesh. She who forces us to bare our souls to ourselves.

Mara's first narrative frame contained only Victoria tatik's words. Mara contrasted a delicate landscape there with the fragile memories of a past living in her. Then came a pensive stare in a sketched self-portrait, juxtaposed with her great grandmother's face. Words are scarce in these frames, words are there just when they are needed, words and images fuse, words pierce through the heart. It is poetry — powerful, soulful, true. And then back to the beginning, to "her I," to the cycle of life on her canvas, to the beauty of that disorganization and the chaos of coherence. The brushes, the paint, the little urn — almost like a signature, and the bright colours of life, fire, earth. All "untitled."

My dream was indeed multilayered. Memories re-constructed, dark sites re-visited, wanting to move forward but being held back, longing for light to shine through, re-building our selves and giving voice to what we had tried to suppress — all these symbolized a major crossing of a
threshold. The dream then became a metaphor for the Collective, of coming to terms with that writing on the wall and taking in the light. The recurring "re"-s we experienced became revealing. The reflexivity the "re" imposed in looking back at our lived experiences was sometimes brutal. Yet, the re-living and re-visiting, at times with all the force of the original events, also implied seeing issues from a different perspective.

I learned through my long journey plagued with doubts, unleashed sadness and haunting questions that I had to write back to propel forward and that my place of belonging was defined by locating my voice through my writing.

I never imagined that I would live my quest this realistically with all its seemingly impossible twists and tests. In this long story with no ending, the more I think about these twists the more I feel the pulling force of characters in wise folk tales. I feel I finally understand what it means to experience impossible hurdles, to find answers to riddles, to make decisions at forked paths, to descend into dark places and come up into light again. As in all Armenian folk tales, here too three apples fall from the sky — one for the narrator, one for the listener and the last one for all the possibilities this story engenders.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX 1:

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
APPENDIX 2:

TRANSLITERATION TABLE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Armenian Alphabet</th>
<th>WA pronunciation</th>
<th>EA pronunciation</th>
<th>Phonetic Transliteration</th>
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<td>b</td>
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<td>g</td>
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<td>d</td>
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<td>e</td>
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<td>EA pronunciation</td>
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<td>eo</td>
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APPENDIX 3:
ENDNOTES
1. Below are the entries in various Armenian dictionaries on the etymology of the word ուղինէ [spiurk].

Աղետ - գ. գրերաճիրեղի, ասպարակածիրեղ, բիզալ;
Գումավու, Զ. Թ. (1938). Բանարագի-գանարագի ուղինէ բացի. Գումավո, Սամարենիս. Պար. Պար.:

Վեջեփ - վա. վեջեփ, վեջեփ, վկերովով, վեջեփ;
Վեջեփ - հ. վեջեփ ավերարա, ապերուբ վեջեփարի վեջ;
Վեջեփ - գ. 1. Սերսասանի պատմանակեղ դրդա գրություն; 2. Սամարենիս. Սերսասանի պատմանակեղ դրդա գրություն համարվել կարճերի արձանագրականի; 3. լուս. վեջեթերաշիրեղի:
Գումավո, Զ. Թ. (1976). Պատմանակեղ պատմանակեղ պատմաս. Պար., Սամարես. Պատմանակեղի:

Վեջեփ է (փոքր էս) Վեջեփ - 1. վա. վեջեփ, վեջեփ, վեջեփ;
2. ռու. վեջեփ, վեջեփ, վեջեփ, վեջեփ;
3. գ. Վեջեփ,
Վեջեփ, վեջեփ, վեջեփ: Վեջեփային գիտե է ավերար է վեջեփ, է վեջեփ օտտորն, 
ավերար է, ավերար:
Գումավոս, Ս. (1956). Պատմանակեղ պատմանակեղ պատմաս. Պար., Սամարենիս. Պար.:

Վեջեփ է Վեջեփ - Ապար, դիմարւս ((ապարի) էս. վեջեփ, վեջեփ).
Վեջեփ, գիտ է աս. ասարերու. գիտարշավ. համազարման.
Վեջեփ է Վեջեփ - Դիմարւս գ. Վեջեփ. ասարերու. ասարերու. գիտարշավ.
Վեջեփ է Վեջեփ - Ապար գիտ. ասարերու. ասարերու. գիտարշավ.
2. The following poem by Vahan Tekeyan (1878-1945) is a classic example of this trend.

Suiri Swjbptli Lbqmhl Lbq, ^LUJ Lbqh'* , L|Q uppbd upqiuuiniubp JQ bQdwb...
LTbp hwjpblih LL|LULLULnbli, LL|LupLnbqljbpbli dQbwgnpry n-WLLupwqbri nmb ujnLpuj'L|, np ri|-iuujgwp riwpbpni.

1913
Tekeyan (1978, p. 126)
The Armenian Language

The Armenian language is an orchard where I walk under green trees growing in the shadow of the past. The words are clustered fruit I pick one by one.

My Armenian language is a garden I love, that grows beside a ruined palace; heavy boughs alive with the flow of sap and sun.

I walk the shade of fruit trees and admire their arching branches, their wide roots amazed how they weathered the storms that felled the vast countryside.

I hold rounded words, fruits both tart and sweet with juices uncounted suns made ripe; words that anoint the lips, bless the palate and give comfort to the heart.

1913
Translated by Diana Der Hovhanessian & Marzbed Margossian (1978, p. 180-181)