

Critics' Forum

Literature

Toward an Expanded Notion of the Witness: The Promise of Armenian Oral History Collections

By Talar Chahinian

This spring marks the end of renowned historian Richard Hovannisian's time at UCLA, where he has been a member of the faculty since 1962 and the first holder of the Armenian Education Foundation (AEF) Chair in Modern Armenian History since 1987. Those who are familiar with Hovannisian's prolific record as a writer, editor, lecturer, organizer, and professor, might endow the news of his retirement with a hint of euphemism. In fact, during the recent event, "Forever our Professor," organized in Hovannisian's honor by his recent and former students, the beloved professor announced that he would return to the UCLA campus the following year to teach a course in Comparative Genocide Studies. But although the announcement of his retirement is recognized as marking a *transition in* rather than putting *an end to* his scholarly contribution, it nevertheless solicits a retrospective glance at the legacy Hovannisian leaves behind.

Hovannisian's tenure at UCLA, which extends over five decades, has witnessed many changes in American academia, both institutional and social. Having come to Armenian history at a time when Area Studies programs were burgeoning as a result of state-sponsored security efforts during the Cold War, Hovannisian has been among the pioneers who forged Armenian Studies into a discipline. Having seen the rising waves of multiculturalism, with its celebration of diversity, and of post-colonial studies, with its persistent interrogation of national boundaries, Hovannisian has also helped ensure the inclusion of Armenian genocide history within comparative genocide studies discourse, and the Turkish liberal perspective within Armenian genocide studies discourse. Finally, having experienced information technology's shift towards the digital domain of the Internet and towards what I would call an "accelerated" history, he has diligently pursued academic reincarnations of the network model, through the numerous conferences and symposia that he has organized. In other words, credentials, charisma, and publications aside, what has sustained Hovannisian's relevance and influence over the many decades has been his effort to secure the possibility of new research and new debates in Armenian Studies.

One such endeavor is the UCLA Armenian oral histories project, consisting of 800 now-digitized and translated interviews with survivors of 1915. This collection of testimonies that Hovannisian has been building since the 1980s has contributed to the estimated 5,000 existing Armenian survivor interviews worldwide and was the topic of a conference on oral histories held at UCLA in April of this year, under Hovannisian's direction. While the conference stressed the critical importance of the interviews by focusing on the need for indexing, digitizing, preserving, and archiving, I would like to highlight the merits of UCLA's collection in light of my earlier claim. Hovannisian's foresight in organizing interviews prior to the survivor generation's passing may have been founded on a

historian's compulsion towards proof, but it also suggests his own consistently unconventional efforts in the field, providing future scholars the possibility of expanding its scope well beyond conventional historical debates. In that regard, placing a spotlight on Hovannisian's contribution to Armenian Studies reveals the untapped potential of resources of the oral histories collection, specifically with regard to the figure of the witness.

The witness is a beloved figure in Armenian cultural narratives, which hold the 1915 Catastrophe as a central identity-defining moment. But as a fertile category for theoretical inquiry, the witness remains under-examined in the Armenian context. I would like to examine this immense potential by challenging the existing use of the category of witness within Armenian genocide studies, which seeks to understand witnessing and testimony strictly from a social science perspective. My call for an expansion of this category is not intended to undermine the importance of sociological or historical interpretations of the witness's archive. It is meant rather to argue that the archive cannot be complete without the inclusion of theoretical debates that problematize a singular understanding of catastrophe, as both a traumatic experience and a historical event.

The political approach to the concept of witnessing focuses on the "outside witness," or in the journalistic sense, the "eyewitness." Outside witnesses are those who are close enough to the calamity to observe it, without being directly involved in it. The narrative of the Armenian genocide, because it posits itself against denialist propaganda, privileges the voice of the outside witness, whose un-biased perspective serves as objective proof for the occurrence of the event. Within various representations of this narrative, bystanders, such as the American ambassador to Turkey at the time, Henry Morgenthau, or other German, American or Swiss political dignitaries and missionaries provide the central testimonies around which the catastrophic events are recreated. Cast as "outside" the event, their nationality excluding them from both the victim and perpetrator groups, these witnesses and their testimonies are granted authority as keepers of the truth in literary and filmic representations such as Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*, Eric Friedler's recent documentary *Aghet: A Genocide*, and Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate*.

The historical approach to the concept of witnessing, while also relying on accounts of the outside witness, focuses primarily instead on the "inside witness," whose archive it seeks to reconstruct. Here, inside witnesses are understood as those who are directly targeted in the calamity and survive to tell about it. The pressures of denial and historical revisionism play a role in heightening the privileging of the inside witness, not so much as a keeper of truth but as the carrier of meaning making. The historical narrative of the Armenian genocide relies on the oral testimonies of the inside witness in order to construct a coherent account of an otherwise incomprehensible event. History seeks to explain, and the inside witness, speaking with the authority granted by direct experience, serves as the mediator between the Catastrophe, an event that by its nature defies meaning, and language, a system that creates it. It is precisely within this explicatory

character of the inside witness's testimony that historians like Hovannisian grant value to oral history collections.

While in politically motivated narratives the appropriation of the 'outside witness' as guardian of truth lends itself well to legal debates about the criminality of the Catastrophe as genocide, the historical narrative's appropriation of the 'inside witness' as a carrier of meaning making adds insight to sociological debates about responses to trauma. Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller's *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (1993) is a testament to this latter line of inquiry. Through their analysis of survivor interviews, they expand our understanding of the inside witness, by providing a psychological assessment of processes of coping and bearing witness in the aftermath. Their project, for instance, identifies patterns in survivor response, which they classify according to the following six categories: 1) avoidance and repression; 2) outrage and anger; 3) revenge and restitution; 4) reconciliation and forgiveness; 5) explanation and rationalization.

In concert with the disciplinary objectives of history – the parent department of all social sciences – the Millers' strict categories seek to *explain* rather than *complicate*, a task that theoretical inquiry could effectively carry out. Whether it is due to nationalism's demands to safeguard a grand narrative or the recognition of high political stakes, scholars, intellectuals, and artists who work under the umbrella of Armenian genocide studies seldom venture to complicate the category of the witness. Yet the extensive corpus of oral histories, like those collected by Hovannisian at UCLA, call out for examination and study from various perspectives, particularly if there is a desire to situate the Armenian case within the existing literature of trauma studies. In order to participate in interdisciplinary debates on trauma, memory, and aftermath experiences, Armenian genocide scholarship will need to arrive at a more expansive understanding of the concept of witnessing. Here, comprehensiveness is not the goal; the goal is rather to cultivate the willingness to invite a nuanced interrogation from the humanities and the hard sciences perspective, in addition to the social sciences approach. And in the Armenian case, this means an interrogation that is free from the fear of damaging genocide recognition efforts, because in the end, the ownership of a multi-faceted understanding of the Catastrophe is what can empower a victim group and place the paradigms of its case in comparative discourse.

Let us take a look, for example, at some alternative discussions of witnessing within the Holocaust, which is the primary point of departure for the growing field of trauma studies. In *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), a seminal work within the field, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub examine testimonies of Holocaust survivors and conclude by negating the position of the 'inside witness' during the Holocaust. They argue that the Holocaust was an event without a witness, since bystanders failed to respond and those inside the event, due to the inherent nature of the event, could not "step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed" (Daub and

Felman 81). In other words, the Holocaust's traumatic and catastrophic nature in part lies in the fact that it is an event that makes witnessing impossible for the survivor.

Adhering to the definition of the Holocaust as an event without an inside witness, the Italian political philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1998), examines the question of how survivors can bear witness to something that is impossible to bear witness to. According to Agamben, testimony always contains a lacuna, or gap: those who really witness the genocidal intent to kill do not survive, meaning, the complete witness is the dead victim. Subsequently, he concludes that survivors are only pseudo-witnesses, who can bear witness to nothing but a missing testimony.

The theories of Agamben, as well as Felman and Laub, go beyond traditional conceptualizations of witnessing. While not stripping the witness's voice of its significance, they situate the meaning of testimony within the complicated relationship among trauma, survival, speech, language, and memory. Ultimately, they guide us towards an understanding of catastrophe that is much more horrific and traumatic than the historical representation of the event can explain. By pointing out the complete rupture of all human sense-making mechanisms, theorists and psychoanalysts like Agamben, Felman, and Laub propose a path to healing that must encompass the recognition of trauma as a crisis of witnessing and, thereby, a crisis of history. Within this dual recognition and the shock produced by the confrontation with their respective crises lies the horrendous reality of genocide, untamed by interpretation.

Within the Armenian context, with the exception of a small handful of literary critics, such as Marc Nichanian, no one has dared regard oral histories through the lens of impossible or missing testimony. Yet these theoretical discussions, which puncture, complicate, and expand our understanding of the category of the witness, and by extension our understanding of traumatic events, present the kinds of possibilities that will allow the Armenian case to enter into the comparative discourse of trauma theory, adding to the existing theoretical perspectives that guide human knowledge and inquiry. The willingness of Armenian genocide studies to expand its strictly historical narratives and understandings of victims and witnesses will ultimately allow it to enter into the wider paradigms that define modernity, the social and historical condition we find ourselves in.

In *The Historiographic Perversion*, first published in French in 2006 (English translation by Gil Anidjar, now available by Columbia University Press), Nichanian not only describes the Armenian genocide as an event that produced no witnesses, he argues that the 1915 event was catastrophic insofar as it destroyed its own archive – he criticizes *the historicization of testimony* and *the adoption of its function as proof* for producing surviving generations locked in a compulsion to prove their own destruction. For Nichanian “The monument has always already been corrupted by the document” (123).

While Nichanian's theoretical explorations recognize witnessing as the attempt to produce impossible testimony, his sources consist of literary representations of the

Catastrophe and philosophical discussions of theoretical concepts. The depth and complexity of Nichanian's analysis parallels the wealth of materials Hovannisian has pieced together in the oral history archive. Those roughly 5,000 oral histories can serve as an untapped resource in expanding the discourse of the witness in the Armenian case, including and beyond Nichanian's observations.

Such a suggestion recognizes the immense philosophical and scholarly distance between Nichanian's approach and Hovannisian's. But Hovannisian's own ground-breaking career has accomplished similarly unconventional goals within historical scholarship. Additionally, the immense potential of Hovannisian's contribution to the collection itself supersedes its own purpose towards document and proof. Therein lies the true potency of Hovannisian's influence.

Our times are increasingly characterized as a hyper-modern moment, wherein events gain historicity simultaneously with or immediately after their occurrence. Amidst this sense of accelerated history, propelled by the advances of information technology, the foresight of Hovannisian's endeavors continue to ground us in extended historical memory, while continuously making progressive research possible. With regard to the figure of the witness in genocide studies, progressive research means that the reigning historical understanding should not be elevated to the level of singularity, at the expense of all other perspectives. Armenian genocide scholarship's claim to its witness archive is founded on its ownership of the archives' multiple meanings, even if that multiplicity entails a disturbing paradox: the paradox of the witness, marked by the survivor's need to tell coupled with the ultimate incapacity to do so; and as a result, the paradox of literature and history, themselves marked by the need to represent, coupled with as similar inability to do so.

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