

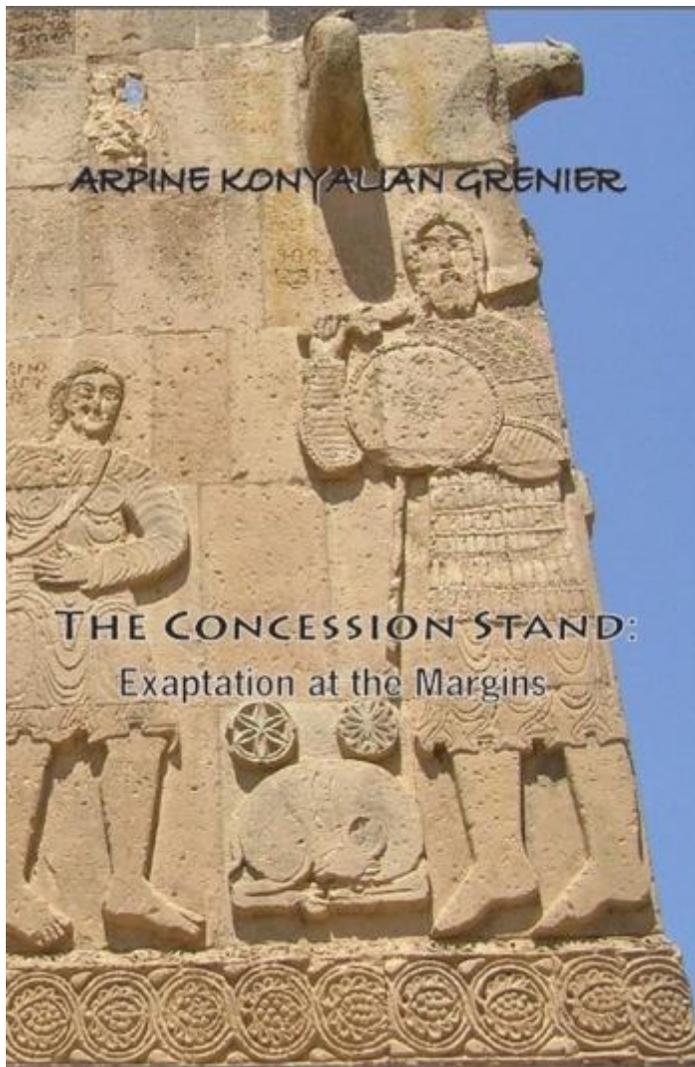
Critics' Forum

Literature

**Confronting the Limits of Culture and Identity in Arpine Konyalian Grenier's *The Concession Stand: Exaptation at the Margins***

By Talar Chahinian

In her 2011 publication, *The Concession Stand: Exaptation at the Margins*, Arpine Konyalian Grenier sets out to puncture rigid formulations of identity that would classify her as an Armenian-American poet. As an Armenian born in Lebanon and living and producing in the United States, Grenier seeks to dismantle reductive formulations of hyphenated identity.



The Cover of Grenier's *Concession Stand* (Otoliths (March 15, 2011))

*The Concession Stand* consists of eight poetic essays. The collection develops a technique of ‘over-writing,’ in order to highlight the under-written – the hidden and unacknowledged – nature of cultural memory and the over-simplified identities it designates. In Grenier’s case, over-writing means fusing words with overlapping referents and reformulating phrases as slight variants. The over-written nature of the collection draws attention to the unacknowledged elements of cultural memory by critiquing the language that produces and reproduces it, on two levels: broadly, her essays problematize language as a system by which we ascribe meaning to the world around us; more specifically, her use of language problematizes the possibility of a “mother tongue” in a transnational, post-modern context. This two-tier critique undermines rigid conceptualizations of identity in the Armenian diasporic context, particularly ones built around cultural memory and its primary vehicle and repository, the Armenian language.

In order to properly acknowledge the foundational role of language in culture, Grenier’s poetic essays do not simply describe or recount events; particularly in Part 1 of the Book, her essays comprise a lyrical event, somehow ‘taking place’ on the page. By pushing her language toward self-reflexivity – to where the word meets itself – Grenier attempts to recreate the moment before the word is uttered and, according to her, destroyed in the utterance. Hinting at this writing process, Grenier writes:

Words projected unto themselves no longer refer to themselves but to a sect of meaning and feeling more essential to language. Consequently, commitments based on the logo-centric and the conventional enslave. So then, weary of or lacking a conscious desire to attain, one goes after the unattainable. Cross, chunk, classify, parse, erase, include and exclude. The poem knows more than I do. At some point, however, we collide to purge, we change course, adapt. (21)

Grenier rejects the futile attempt to trace in language the relationship between words and their prescribed meanings in a supposedly stable and objective world. The attempt enslaves, because even recognizing the futility of the search paradoxically drives both poet and reader more powerfully toward it. Grenier’s poetic experimentations draw attention to just that futile search, recreating it in its own contorted struggles, enacting a chase that leads the word back to itself.

As the excerpt above suggests, Grenier also takes pains to distinguish the poem from the poet, in order to suggest that each works as a self-directed actor, carrying out the quest for meaning independently of the other. But rather than metaphorically killing off the author as a source for meaning in a post-structuralist vein, Grenier reconfigures the relationship between author and text as multi-directional, endowing each with the ability to make the other adapt and evolve. Ultimately, Grenier suggests that language as a system of meaning-making is not structurally self-sustaining, and the author, as a person constructing language through the poem, is not a sole proprietor of meaning and creation. Instead, what we are left with is the simultaneous exchange between poem and poet, in language, in the form of the lyrical ‘event’ we see on the page.

Writing about the poet's role in acknowledging the limits of language and participating in its lyric performance, Grenier suggests, "Syntax of language breaks at the extremes of experience... Accordingly, language happens" (30). This juxtaposition of language's structural insufficiency, its inability to exist or mean on its own, with its involuntary performance or production highlights Grenier's interest in how what comes before the word is uttered and destroyed by the confinements its utterance in language imposes on it. Her strategy of over-writing allows her to free the word from structural or syntactical demands. By defying the demands of speech, grammar and utterance, if only momentarily, Grenier's poetic essays seek to express "a sect of meaning and feeling more essential to language."

This attempt to exceed the self-imposed bounds of language and expression helps Grenier's writing cross commonly prescribed categories. It thus breaks the barriers between prose and verse, moves back and forth across languages - infusing English speech with French, Turkish, Arabic, Armenian, and Latin words or phrases - blends dicta and meditations, mingles textual references and autobiographical memories, and most cleverly, creates countless instances of word play. The overabundance of allusions and cross-references overwhelms and exposes the reader's futile desire for interpretive closure. But in the process, the reader also gains authority as a third actor alongside author and text, another meaning-maker in the lyric event that is Grenier's poetry. By placing us, the readers, at the intersection of language and meaning, Grenier's over-writing makes us profoundly aware of both the limits and the fluidity of language.

By contrast, the essays in the second half of the book are more concretely autobiographical, focusing on themes of exile, genocide, witnessing, mourning, and the Armenian diaspora's use of identity discourse. Ironically, it is precisely through such 'subtractions' that Grenier brings the under-written nature of Armenian diasporic cultural memory into even sharper focus. For instance, she refers to herself at one point as the "messed up offspring of a messed up offspring of a messed up survivor" (51). Even in the apparently more conventional narratives in the second half of the volume, therefore, Grenier traces the trans-generational transference of trauma and her family's exilic past to suggest the impossibility of locating a pure form of cultural identity, defined by rigid markers such as a mother tongue or a singular narrative that ignores cultural contact and exchange. She writes:

I have no mother tongue as my mother tongue has lost me. I implode within this loss, seeking the chaos sustaining the world of languages with a voice that has the body and place of an absent body, after a derivative of the past whereby the new would occur, time and history abolished because of what escapes or survives the disintegration of experience. (43)

Grenier describes her lack of a mother tongue as a "loss," ascribing her search for a speaking voice with the remnant of a lost and disintegrated experience. As a third-generation survivor, she casts her loss as one without origin, an originary traumatic experience that has disintegrated over the years. As a result, Grenier experiences all attempts to locate her sense of self as more than a cultural loss but as a profound, a more

fundamental, absence. In another stark contrast, Grenier juxtaposes this vague sense of absence with the culturally rigid sense of loss, suggesting that cultural experiences and constructions are a product of dynamic exchange rather than isolated construction.

Grenier's personal quest to embrace a more dynamic cultural identity leads her, in the second half of the book, to Turkey. Not surprisingly, the land is marked for Grenier by its contradictory identity as both the land of her ancestors and the country Armenian cultural memory vilifies. In her most linearly narrated essay, "A Place in the Sun, *Malgre Sangre*," Grenier recounts her experience traveling to Turkey and finding proximity and a history of exchange and borrowings between the two cultures, Armenian and Turkish. She concludes the essay by declaring, "I developed, moving from unknowingly being Armenian Turkishly to knowingly becoming American, Armenianly" (68). In coming face to face with Turkish culture, she's able to embrace its influence over her understanding of Armenian culture. That recognition of Armenian culture as historically multi-faceted and dynamic in turn allows her to configure her current American cultural coordinates under the influence of her Armenian heritage.

It is through this both personal and lyrical journey that Grenier resists the pressures of a different assimilation, reducing her cultural identity to presumptive formulations; through the experimental writings and explorations in *The Concession Stand*, Arpine Konyalian Grenier rejects an under-written, hyphenated existence, embracing instead an over-written, multiple identity.

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*Talar Chahinian* holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from UCLA and lectures in the Department of Comparative World Literature at Cal State Long Beach.

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