

Sabbatical Report:

Main Accomplishments:

- May 2011 to December 2011 - Completion of a monograph currently under review by Fordham.
- January 2012 to July 2012 – Progress on a long term book project concerning the question of identity in the light of genocide and diaspora, from a postmodern, structuralist perspective, and focused on the case study of the Armenians.
- August 2012 – Development of a syllabus reflecting the Armenian project for PHL 349 (DSP/WP) The Holocaust: A Case Study.

Monograph - Milk of My Tears: Variations on a Secular Theology of Language

Outline:

In this work, a “desire for a thinking that does not disappoint” realizes its constitutive limitations – that no such thinking exists as such, that thinking, per force, disappoints in its necessary discriminating indifference: we can’t love all, so too, we can’t see all, and in seeing we so often are the victims of Francis Bacon’s idols, from the cave and the tribe to the market place and the theater. The task of a theological desire to no end, of a rebellious desire to no end, is therefore, to rebel against the penchant to accept unaware the normative status, the regulative power, or the political and ideological function of some of our concepts, and how these, once internalized, can render us docile or politically inactive, for instance.

Just as Albert Camus would say that the absurd hero lives a meaningless existence out of spite, theological thinking, as a desiring to no end, is a meditative act of rebellion against indifference, ordinariness and the status quo. There is no way out of this world, but the rebellious desire of a wholly secular theological thinking is a better way in.

Each chapter offers a variation on the theme of a secular theology of language; each chapter is centered on or prompted by a specific question or problem.

This work does not offer a systematic program for a theology of language. It is meditative and aphoristic instead of argumentative. It offers an original and constructive engagement with seminal issues such as indifference, belief, madness, and love.

There are nine chapters and a short introduction, totaling an approximate 54,230 words. The work builds on articles and presentations written over the past several years, includes an entirely new introduction, orienting chapter, and conclusion.

The monograph has been sent out for review to Fordham University Press. Expected reading reports are due back this fall.

Long Term Book Project - “Remember the poor starving Armenians”

Initial Project:

“Remember the poor starving Armenians”—A baby boomer friend recalls her parents’ oft repeated admonition to finish her supper. Anchored in her memory is an identity of mythic proportions but only for the childhood mystery it once was.

And so, in the main, is born the premise for my forthcoming project—Armenian, as the name to name an identity constituted by a necessary erasure—an identity under erasure. We can mention one of the biblical archetypes of this (non)identity: Noah’s Ark and Mount Ararat: the heart of Armenia which is no longer land of Armenia. Foremost, though, it is the re-writing of history through Turkey’s official denial of its genocidal past that instantiates this oxymoron of a proper name without a referent, or otherwise put, what it means to be an Armenian.

It was not so long ago that children who did not finish their dinners were exhorted by their parents to think of all the “poor starving Armenians,” and yet, today, even after the current President of the United States promised during his 2008 campaign to have the United States Congress recognize the Armenian genocide, geopolitical and economic interests with Turkey have forestalled any such recognition. The fundamental issue at heart, however, is not whether or not the United States publicly denounces the atrocities perpetrated against the Armenians first at the end of the nineteenth century, and again between 1915 and 1917; it is instead the questions of the Armenian identity in the light of the flagrant denial, and in fact, of the disavowal of this genocide by the Turkish government.

While there is a country of Armenia, it is a shrunken residue of the land which once entailed Mount Ararat and which was the first country to recognize Christianity as its state religion in 301 AD. At its greatest extent under Tigranes the Great and between 95-66BC, the Armenian Empire extended from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Seas, over parts of the Caucasus and what is now eastern and central Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and northwestern Iran. Most diaspora Armenians come from Eastern Anatolia, that is, from Turkey, and in fact the birth certificates of those who escaped the genocide often list Asia Minor as their birth place for obvious political reasons.

What is of particular interest to me is the concept of an identity that is, as it were, under erasure. Imagine what it would mean to be a Jew if Germany—not some lunatic Iranian President or some neo-Nazi pseudo-paramilitary organization—denied the Holocaust? What if German history books omitted that ghastly, unthinkable, and embarrassing part of its history? What if the United-States, refuge and country of asylum to many persecuted Jews, tacitly or not, but for fear of jeopardizing its economic interests and its geo-political power, failed to pressure the German government to recognize its genocidal past and failed to officially condemn this past? What would be the meaning of anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism? How would this omission from history—from historical discourse, from public official records—affect Jewish identity: the meaning of being a Jew? What would it mean to be a camp survivor? But, the larger response would probably be that this couldn’t happen. There have been too many testimonies, too many witnesses, too many accounts. One could go further with this analogy, but what I wish to convey with this poor example is that as history proves a shoddy witness of the oppressed, the forgotten, and the obliterated—those whose land is gone, whose story is denied—those people nevertheless survive, their full identities revealing perhaps the presence of an absence of recognition: an identity under erasure.

Outline of Research in Progress: A selective and annotated bibliography follows each main theme and/or idea

- On the question of identity and what it might mean to be an Armenian (or an “Armenian under erasure”)
 1. Boghos Levon Zekiyan, “Christianity to Modernity” in Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchian. *The Armenians: Past and Present in the Making of national Identity* (Routledge, 2005).

While records of the Armenian language can be traced back to 600 B. C., the Armenian alphabet was invented by the monk, Mesrop Mashtots in the 5th century A.D. Zekiyán's interesting point is that the Armenian alphabet (which is its own) does more than preserve its people against their history of incursions, it is a way of opening up the community in a profoundly secular way. Zekiyán, here, is mainly highlighting what has been argued to be the legacy of Mesrop's famous interpreter, Movses Khorenatsi. If language is a fundamental marker of identity, this means that there is no pagan and no Christian, there are only Armenians united in "their common feelings and values, common struggles and hopes." (59) Thus, even while Armenia can boast to be the first Christian state (301A.D.), and even though the Armenian Church (Orientalist, Apostolic: its own Church, neither belonging to Orthodox nor to Roman Christianity), as precisely its own Church, having resisted pressures from the Roman and the Byzantine empires, this oft emphasized marker of a traditional Armenian religious identity belies the (potentially) secular openness of this religious identity. After all, it is the monk who, by way of the written word, unites the pagan and the Christian. The second point of interest is the clear distinction between this latter notion of cultural affinity described as a form of *cultural romanticism* and the kind of nationalism endemic of 19th century Europe, and which for the Armenians and most minorities under the Ottoman Empire leads to a more revolutionary and political type of secular nationalistic movement. We have, historically, therefore, a clear evolution of the Armenian identity from a cultural, religious and inspirational identity to a properly national notion and aspiration towards an identity synonymous with a viable nation-state. [As an aside, but pertinent comment, today, this distinction is still valid and appears to correspond to a real cleavage between the diaspora and the people of the republic of Armenia]

2. Eliza Slavet. *Racial Fever: Freud and the Jewish Question* (Fordham, 2009). Slavet aptly underscores the tensions in Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. If Freud took much heat for claiming that Moses was an Egyptian and for surmising that memory traces are phylogenetically inherited – that something acquired can be passed down, this clearly points to a tension in what it means to be Jewish for a secular, non-practicing Jew. Here it is not that one's blood is Jewish, nor that one practices the Jewish religion, nor one's cultural inheritance that makes one a Jew but, and more relevant to the Armenian case, it is some elusive, mythic, almost Jungian archetype-like memory-trace, a feeling pointing to an experience or an event of mythic proportion.
3. Anny Balakian. *Armenian American: From Being to Feeling Armenian* (Transaction Publishers, 1991). For Balakian, however, there is nothing unconscious about being a Diaspora Armenian – at odds, then, with Slavet. To the contrary, because the diaspora Armenian faces inevitable assimilation, one is not born an Armenian, one feels Armenian out of will. Identity is in this way voluntary and rational. Thus one might here be free of any of the traditional ethnic markers of identity. Perhaps I am not misunderstanding her when I compare her position to that of the morally conscious politician or public intellectual who exclaims "Today, I am a Jew," or "Today, we are all Bosnians." So we move from an unconscious, irrational, emotional force – a memory trace of an ancient crime and the guilt that ensues as the marker of "Jewishness" – to a rational will to "feel" Armenian in spite of having little in common with the traditional markers of identity (religion, language, history, land).

4. Daniel Boyarin. *Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (University of California Press, 1994). Boyarin uses the term “diaspora identity” to define this conundrum, which is the elusiveness, the intangibility, and also the mobility of the proper markers of Jewish identity. In some ways, it might be hard to fathom how the Israeli Zionist has an identity in common with, say, Freud or Lemkin, that is, with secular, non-practicing Jews for whom being a Jew is not a nationality, and yet, Boyarin argues that this “diasporic” nature in some sense does belong, does make, does mark “Jewishness.” This, I would elaborate, is not humanism, or the humanism of Christianity tending towards the universal, this, for Boyarin, is a “disaggregated identity,” and how a minoritarian identity predicated on difference can offer resistance against a hegemonic universalism for which difference is what is stamped out and oppressed.
 5. In my own journey to Armenia, this stark difference between a. the native Armenian of now a post-soviet country where land, language, religion, genocide, communism, and war all collude in the understanding of the Armenian Identity; b. the diaspora Armenian who belongs to a tight-knit diasporic community, who attends an Armenian school, belongs to the Armenian Church, feast on “Armenian” food, and remembers the genocide; and c. the assimilated Armenian without any of the traditional markers left, but who carries an awareness, the ghost of a survivor-complex, and perhaps at times the unspeakable and incomprehensible wound that afflicts the generations who came after that which survived, lived, witnessed massacres; this stark difference points to a tension. On the one hand, it is inevitable that genocide is completed as the succeeding generations of the Diaspora inevitably assimilate. On the other, this assimilation, or the idea thereof, only holds when identity is understood as predicated on the traditional-types of markers heretofore mentioned.
- On denialism and revisionism.
 1. Israel Charny. “The Psychological Satisfaction of Denials of the Holocaust or Other Genocides by Non-Extremists or Bigots, and Even Known Scholars.” In *IDEA*, 2001, Vol.6, no.1. Charny uncovers what I would argue is the most insidious form of denial, a type of denial unaware, or even in good scholarly conscience. For in recent years, denial of the Armenian Genocide has become much more sophisticated. This article is most relevant to my project in that it touches on the use of language, equivocation. Charny speaks of “innocent denial,” as both a form of denial *malevolently* made to appear innocent and therefore seemingly legitimate, and as a form of denial adopted unaware by those who simply want to be open-minded and hear *both sides of a story*, or by the average public who is naturally incredulous in the face of reports that seem too ghastly to be possible. Lastly, his analysis reveals the deniers’ Machiavellian manipulations of common and all-too-human public opinions (“we should be concerned with the future and let bygones be bygones”).
 2. Clive Foss. “The Turkish View of Armenian History: A Vanishing Nation.” In *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). Foss gives an overview of especially the Kemalist state’s commissioned revisionist scholarship aimed at minimizing the importance of the historical, cultural, intellectual, and overall Armenian presence in Anatolia to better agree with the erroneous belief (and wishful thinking for a Nation humiliated by the Imperialist powers who’d coined the dwindling Ottoman Empire “the sick man of Europe”) in Turkish historical precedence in the region, nay, in the factitious “sun theory” advancing an Anatolian Turkish origin- a Turkish Anatolia as cradle of all civilization. To this end,

Armenians were referred to as tribal or nomadic peoples (they were agrarian, mercantile, built fine architecture, etc...) who never had their own nation and whose language is a compilation of several languages as a result of their supposed nomadic itinerancy. In short, this Kemalist policy of revisionist history shows how a cultural memory is intentionally purged. It is not just that people forget or don't know what happened, they don't know because of a systematic effort to ensure their ignorance. One can deduce, therefore, that this last stage of Genocide stands precisely as the condition of possibility of a new Turkish identity. This latter point is the basis of Taner Akçam's argument in the book below.

3. Taner Akçam. *From Empire to Republic* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
Akçam's Turkish perspective or, as he himself emphasizes, his perspective from a perpetrator's standpoint, helps illuminate, not why genocide, but Turkey's policy of denial, as the correlate to the *resolution* of an identity crisis that had begun with Ottomanism, then ventured into pan-Islamism, but that eventuated with Kemal Ataturk's pan-Turkism. When Ataturk came to power, Turkey ensured its sovereignty by redefining itself as a nation bound within shrunken territorial borders, but with impunity, that is, refusing the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which would *punish* Turkey for massacres by parceling out its territory among Allied imperial powers thirsty for economic interests. Such *punishment* under false pretense would simply not be tolerated by Ataturk. But as a result, sovereignty came to be seen as necessitating denial of the Genocide. To retain its sovereignty, Turkey would have to deny the genocide. In this way one can see Turkey's denial and revisionism as part and parcel of Ataturk's creation of a new Turkish identity – a new alphabet, a new future predicated on a mythic, fabulated Turanian origin.
 4. Samantha Power. *A Problem from Hell* (HarperCollins, 2003).
Power's book is significant in that she aptly shows how successive U.S. administrations have *succeeded* in avoiding intervention to effectively prevent genocide. Her basic point is that global genocide prevention is failing precisely because the U.S. government works to that end. This work is relevant in that it points to how denialism, revisionism, and willful ignorance are *instrumental* to U.S. foreign policy. Perhaps the most blatant example of this is the forty years it took the U.S. to ratify the Genocide Convention, and it did so with a caveat that no international court proceedings could ever be launched against the U.S. unless the U.S. agreed to the legitimacy of that international court! (Again and reminiscent of Turkey, this in the name of retaining absolute sovereignty)
- On the moralism and the exceptionalism at the heart of the supposed first order discourse that is philosophy.
 1. François Laruelle. *Théorie générale des victimes* (Fayard/Mille et une nuits, 2012).
In this dense philosophical work, Laruelle proposes to understand the victim not as the Jew, or the Armenian, or the sinner, or the anomaly and the minority, but, as he states in his epigraph, as the cornerstone of humanity. The victim is not merely to be memorialized and in this way neatly forgotten. The victim is first and foremost always human, and thus, and more hauntingly, always "to come." His is an effort to rally behind victims without explaining them or their situation away, but also without succumbing to the temptation to turn the unthinkable into an absolute exception, and thus, for example, to reduce the victim of the Holocaust to the Jew. The victim is neither Jew, nor Greek. The victim is always and "in the last instance," human.

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While I have offered a sketch of a work in progress, I have therefore not given an exhaustive report. It goes without saying that I have read historical accounts, and that I have spent a good bit of my sabbatical time trying to explain the unexplainable that is genocide. It is not merely that History offers only “sides,” or that time inevitably erodes memory, it is also that remembering is always a refashioning.

Finally, even by just focusing on the sketch provided, I think the case can be made that I have moved beyond my initial question and thesis. In the loosely paraphrased words of a Genocide Museum employee in Yerevan: Genocide is not a Jewish or an Armenian phenomenon; it is a human tragedy. I would add that “identity” under all its guises is never far from that tragedy.