Preface: the language of the “Destroyer”

On the 6th of April 2003 I witnessed a heated debate during the end of my first ethnographic research. This debate took place at the Foundation Ararat in the Netherlands, and even though I watched a fair share of discussions, this debate was quite hostile, both in body language and in the words that were used.

At that point I had transcribed approximately thirty in-depth interviews, eight life-histories and had hours and hours of informal conversations. The aim of my research was to try to get a better understanding of the long term cultural and social consequences of the Armenian genocide in the Dutch and English Diaspora communities and how this collective experience was engrained in the identity of my informants.

Even though at this point I already knew that there was a lot of contention within the Dutch Armenian Diaspora community, it was never this openly portrayed. As a matter of fact my informants went to great lengths to show me the unity of the Armenian people.

Another reason why this argument surprised me, was because the actors involved were both active in the community and advocates of the recognition of the Armenian genocide. One actor, which I will call Arshile, came from Turkey and had come to the Netherlands in his early twenties. The other actor, which I will call Manoug, came from Syria and was in his thirties when he had fled to the Netherlands. They both spoke Dutch and they both were, at that time, prominent members of the Ararat Foundation. Even though I knew that they sometimes disagreed, this argument was particularly heated.

The base of their discussion was the importance of the Armenian language. When I followed the discussion more closely however, I came to the conclusion, that the discussion wasn’t about language alone, but more importantly about how Armenianness was being experienced and how the Armenian identity was defined.

Manoug accused Arshile of not being a “true” Armenian. He didn’t speak the Armenian language, wasn’t interested – at least to Manoug – about the Armenian history or even the Armenian genocide. Arshile became venomous. He was insulted, mainly because he was quite politically active about the Armenian cause even before he came to the Netherlands. He had fled Turkey partly for this reason. “The Armenian language is not functional to me,” Arshile explained. “I live in The Netherlands, I work in the Netherlands and all my friends either speak Turkish or Dutch… Why should I learn the Armenian language?” “Because it is the language of your mother, your country,” Manoug answered, “What language do you speak here at the foundation? How do you make yourself understandable towards other Armenians? Shall I tell you? You speak Dutch or Turkish; you speak the language of your destroyer.”

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1 This was near the end of my research that resulted in my Dutch book “In het gesteente van Ararat” (loosely translated as “The Rocks of Ararat”), which was published in 2009. I have since then done further research. I have collected in total now forty-six in-depth interviews, twelve life-histories and have done extensive research on Armenian literature, Armenian art etc.

2 Due to the many schisms in the Armenian community the Ararat Foundation no longer exists in this format.
This phrase caught my attention, because I had heard it before, but not yet in these hostile terms. When I was in London another informant had warned me about these “fake” Armenians living in the Netherlands. “They are much more prominent there,” he had said. “They don’t speak the language, they don’t take the time to learn. In essence they are not true Armenians.”

To anthropologists, who are per definition interested in “othering”, these comments are of great importance. They give us an insight on the discourse that the informants use and also how they interpret their world around them. In this sense, as a student but also as a researcher, I was always inspired by Geertz (1973):

...man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (ibid.:5).

Here I saw the webs at work. I saw how both Arshile and Manoug gave interpretations about their identity. According to Manoug, Arshile wasn’t a “true” Armenian. According to Arshile, Manoug was not validating his political and communal work. His response to Manoug was for me therefore quite puzzling. He didn’t try to defend himself and emphasize his accomplishments, like I suspected he would, but answered Manoug by giving him a different definition of the Armenian identity. “It is true,” he said, “I don’t speak the Armenian language. But I suffered. I know what true suffering means...” To me this answer was quite unsatisfactory for at this point in my research I didn’t know the meaning of “suffering” and what he was culturally referring to. It was only after I analyzed all my data (which also included literary studies, direct and indirect eye witness accounts, contemporary art and participant observation) that I understood the importance of what Arshile had said. He was using a different framework to define his Armenianness and was mirroring this to Manoug.

In order for me to describe the implications of this observation, which may seem superficial and isolated “in time”, it is important for me to first discuss the processes on which identities are made (according to anthropological theory), secondly, to describe the Dutch Armenian community compared to the community in the United Kingdom and also (thirdly) how genocide as a physical and collective experience is encapsulated in the processes of identity making. For without realizing it, I witnessed during this afternoon two separate discourses: a cultural discourse, which can be directly linked to the Armenian genocide and a political discourse, where the Armenian identity is more politicized.

This holds a few important implications. One, that even though we as researchers (sometimes) approach communities as holistic entities, identities within the community can be contested. This implication seems straight forward, but this case-study will show us how hazy and refined the threads of contention and identity-making can actually be. Two, that the contested identities in the Armenian Diaspora communities can be directly linked to the experiences and aim of the Armenian genocide and third, that the arguments as shown in this case-study can actually be vehicles in which collective trauma, not as an scientific abstract, but something that is visible, tangible and yes, even lived, can be transmitted from generation to generation. I will draw these preliminary observations by the data that I collected, but also by the theories of “identity” by Jenkins (1997) and Bauman (1999, 2004) and the concepts of “implicit knowledge” by Van de Port (1998) and “social death” by Card (2003). My main argument will be that the over-focus on identity within the community, which is rooted in the experience of genocide, is a reminder of the acts of violence that the Armenian people, as an ethnical, categorical and collective group, has experienced. It is also a confirmation of the
Armenian “suffering” and the continuation of this “suffering”. This suffering, which is not a metaphor or an abstract, but truly felt by my informants, is – so I will argue – at the center of the Armenian identity and both trans-generational and trans-spatial in nature.

**The Processes of Identity Making**

Identities are, as Libaridian (1979) warns us, always in a state of flux. Baumann (1999) even takes it a step further and states that the aim of researchers should not be identities, but processes of identification (Baumann 1999:145). To him identities are always contextual in nature:

> it must be aware that all identities are identifications in context and that they are thus situational and flexible, imaginative and innovative – even when they do not intend to be (Ibid.:137, 138).

According to Baumann people can shift in identities throughout the day. One individual can for example in one specific context emphasize his religious identity, while in another context he will use his national identity. We can therefore speak of multiple identities that can be used in different settings (ibid.:85). The processes by which this identity-making takes place is by the altering of the “other”, which he considers the “grammar” and “structuring” of the identity. In some instances for example we may use, what Baumann considers, “baby grammar”; binary oppositions of “us” and “them” to position ourselves against the “imaginary” other. Other grammatical structures are “segmentation” and “encompensation” (Baumann 2004). “Segmentation” is based on the process that group identities can fuse together on one abstract level, but can simultaneously divide on another. In the case of my informants for example they portray themselves to me, an outsider (which they also call an odar), as “Armenian”; a strong community with a central and undivided identity (fusion), while among themselves they make sharp distinctions (fission). The context is of extreme importance here\(^3\). My presence as a researcher, especially at the beginning of my research where I had to gain the trust of my informants, influenced the process of “segmentation”.

By “encompensation” Baumann sees another grammatical structure, where groups “encompensate” the other as being “different” but still “one of us”. I think that this form of identification process takes place in the Netherlands where Armenians who are not from Turkey, and speak the Armenian language, “encompensate” the Armenians who are from Turkey and don’t speak the language. The problem with this grammatical structure however is that it is dependent on the point of view taken from the in-group; do the Armenians who are not from Turkey “encompensate” the Armenians who are from Turkey or the other way around?\(^4\).

The strength of Baumann’s argument lies in the fact that he doesn’t see identities as something that exists or is fixed. He emphasizes that individuals create identity through interaction. The typical “identity indicators” (language, religion, political institutions etc.) can only have meaning in the process of interaction, or to phrase it differently: the indicators give weight to the identity that has been contextually created. The weakness in his argument, in my opinion, is that he stretches the contextual nature of identity-making so far, that we can no

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\(^3\) We can for example also see this during soccer matches in Europe. Through “international” championship supporters actually gather behind the national flag as an undivided national identity (fusion). In “national” championships the same supporters, who may have celebrated together during international matches, stand behind their local teams (fission).

\(^4\) Baumann states that hierarchies is at the centre of this process and take the Hindus and Sikhs as an example (Baumann 2004:26). He states that the Hindus “encompensate” the Sikhs as being Hindus but yet different. What he doesn’t analyze however is if the Sikhs themselves experience this “encompensation” the same way.
longer speak of “identities”, even though “identities” do give direction to the lives of our informants (Holslag 2009:202-203). There are margins in which people create their identities. Some of these margins are the macro social and political structure in which we are brought up and in which we live. I consider myself for example “Dutch”, a “European”, a cosmopolitan etc., because I am born and brought up within a specific economic stratum in Twentieth Century Europe. On the other hand these margins are also created by the symbols and social imaginary which are used to define an identity. These symbols are internalized and shapes our way of thinking and therefore also our way of constructing. Due to this internalization identities can never be as “contextualized” as Baumann presumes. As a matter of fact, and as I will show below, I believe that identification processes have more a constraining than a liberating dimension.

To argue this, we have to take a look at the one of the most used and basic identities, especially in the Armenian Diaspora community, namely “ethnicity”. While Armenians may differ based on religious and political affiliation, or even national sentiment, “ethnicity” binds the community together. Ethnic identity is in the argument of Baumann a very problematic one. It is not national, it is not religious; it is a mixture of history, ancestry and imagined biology:

(...) ethnicity appeals, first and foremost, to blood from the past. It invokes biological ancestry and then claims that present-day identities follow from this ancestry (Baumann 1999:20).

The key words here are “invoke” and “appeal”. These words imply that even though “ethnicity” appeals to biology and nature, it is actual a cultural construct. Baumann compares it to “wine” (something that is cultivated) instead of “blood” (ibid.:21). Ethnicity is “imagined” and placed “in the body”.

For Jenkins (1997) “ethnicity” is closely related to culture. Ethnicity to him has “shared meaning”, has to do with cultural differentiation and is the outcome of social interaction (ibid.:13). Ethnicity has therefore to him two different dimensions. Ethnicity is externalized through social interaction on one hand and internalized through self-identification on the other. It is especially the latter that I miss in the theoretical arguments of Baumann.

What binds an “ethnic group” together are the cultural symbols and characteristics that makes, from the point of view of the insiders, the ethnic group “unique” and “different”. These symbols are intertwined with the collective history of a certain ethnic group. The “Dutch” ethnic identity for example is colored and shaped by the eighty-year war against the Habsburg Empire, Protestantism and Calvinism and by the experiences of the Second World War.

Before we analyze the cultural symbols that Armenians use to define their “ethnic” identity, it is important for me to introduce yet another theoretical concept. This concept is drawn from what Turner (1974) considers “basic analogy”:

A man desiring to understand the world looks about for a clue to its comprehension. He pitches upon some area of common-sense fact and tries if he cannot understand other areas in terms of this one. The original area then becomes his basic analogy or root metaphor….a systematic repertoire of ideas by means of which a given thinker describes, by analogical extension, some domain to which those ideas do not immediately and literally apply (Ibid.:26 – emphasis by author).
Van de Port (1998) speaks of “implicit knowledge”. This is knowledge that pre-shapes “explicit knowledge” in dialogue, narratives and conversations. Where “explicit knowledge” is factual, visible and tangible and is often the content of the conversation, implicit knowledge is formless: a “non-discursive, essentially inarticulable and imagic knowing of social relationality and history” (ibid.:97).

It was this implicit knowledge that shaped the conversation between Manoug and Arshile. For me as an outsider it was “invisible”. I didn’t know what Arshile meant when he spoke of his “suffering”. I didn’t interpret the same cultural connotations as Manoug did. Because of this, I didn’t realize how insulting the comments of Arshile actually were.

To understand this, it is important for us to look at the demographic build up of the Dutch Armenian Diaspora community and compare this to the Armenian Diaspora community in the United Kingdom: for there are major differences between the Diaspora communities which enhances, what I consider, the struggle and contention of identity.

A comparative analysis of the Dutch Armenian Diaspora community

Both the Armenian Diaspora community in the Netherlands as in the United Kingdom have a long history of diasporas dating back to the 17th Century, before the Armenian genocide and the “Great Diaspora” (Mouradian 1996; Redgate 1998). These were small diasporas which grew increasingly, both in London5 (which I will mostly focus on) and in the Netherlands, not in the immediate aftermath of the Armenian genocide, but in the decades that followed. As a consequence the communities are therefore mostly built by second generation survivors who came to the Netherlands and London through other countries. This is, as we will see, of extreme importance to understand the community dynamics.

The Diaspora community in London has a similar size as the Diaspora community in the Netherlands. We cannot be specific about the numbers, due to the immigrations laws in both countries. (Many Armenians both in the Netherlands and in the United Kingdom are in the demographic statistics “designated” not as Armenians, but as Iraqis, Iranians, Turkish etc. So my informants in both countries mostly used demographic estimations, building on the number of members in foundations, schools and church-goers.) There are approximately 10 000 - 13 000 Armenians living in London (Sabbagh 1980)6. The Dutch Armenian community is similar in size, approximately 10 000 - 15 0007.

There are however also several differences and these differences have mainly to do with the countries where the Diaspora Armenians come from. The countries of origin in London are Cyprus, India, Lebanon, Iran, Republic of Georgia, Armenia and to a lesser extent Turkey. The largest group Armenians come from Iran (aprox. 50-60% of the total Diaspora), the second largest group comes from Cyprus (aprox. 20-25%). Armenians from Turkey are estimated as 5% or less.

In the Netherlands this has been practically reversed. The countries of origin in the Netherlands are Turkey, Indonesia, Syria, Republic of Georgia, Iraq, Iran and Armenia.

5 I will focus mostly on the Diaspora community in London because it has a similar size and history as the Armenian community in the Netherlands. There is also a Diaspora community in Manchester on which I did a small literature study. I have done fieldwork in London in 2002-2003 and came back to London 2006 and 2009.

6 I gathered this data from my interviews with the pastor Baggassarian in 2003 and the Armenian ambassador, also based in London.

7 The estimation I used in 2003/2004 was somewhere between 10 000 and 13 000 Armenians. This coincides with a study that has been published in 2008 (four years after my fieldwork and a year before my Dutch book was published) by the Dutch Federation of Armenian Organizations (FAON). They estimate the total of Armenians living in the Netherlands somewhere 9 000 and 15 000 (see FAON 2008:42-43), I believe in the statistics however that they exclude many Armenians coming from Turkey. So the Dutch Armenian population may be a bit larger in size.
Especially the latter group has been expendably growing from the mid 90’s onward. The largest group, and the opinion differs on this matter, is Armenians from Armenia (close to 40%), followed by Armenians from Turkey (approx. 35%). The other 25% is made up by Armenians from the Republic of Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Indonesia. Armenians from Iran are considered the third largest group.

Even though these only seem artificial differences. The impact of these differences is enormous. To understand this we have to take a look at the Armenian dialects used in both communities and also the impact of the Taşşnak party in especially the non-based Turkish Diaspora communities that caught the first wave of direct survivors. These are the Diaspora communities in Syria, Republic of Georgia, Iraq, Cyprus, Egypt and to a lesser extent Iran.

The Armenian language exists of two main dialects: West Armenian (that was mostly spoken in the old Ottoman Empire) and East Armenian (which was mostly spoken in old Persia). Even though both dialects can understand each other, there are at the same time many linguistic differences. Some of my informants complained, who had lived in Turkey and had spoken West-Armenian in secret, that they had a very hard time communicating with Armenians from Armenia and Iran; the two other large groups within the Dutch Armenian community.

This makes language in the Netherlands automatically almost a point of contention. It is, with a large percentage of Armenians from Turkey, a weak identity indicator. This contention is enhanced by another process which I call in this paper the “ politicization of ethnicity” in those Diaspora communities where (mostly) the Armenian Taşşnak party is active.

The history of the Taşşnak party is a complicated one. It was established around 1890 and was inspired by nationalistic and Marxist influences. When the temporary Taşşnak government in the Second Armenian Republic of 1919-1920 was overthrown by Russian Bolshevists, the party turned against Soviet-Armenia and considered itself a “government in exile” and felt responsible for all Armenians in the Diaspora. Not only did the Armenians in Turkey need to be liberated, but Armenia as well had to be freed from the Soviet rule. The Taşşnak party started alliances with host governments, made concessions to local organizations and used religious institutions to increase their power over Armenians in the Diaspora. Even today they still have influence in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, France, Republic of Georgia, and the United States. According to their own claims they have reached 50% to 60% of the Armenians populous (Hofmann 1986:298).

The Taşşnak party is also responsible for the largest schism in the Armenian Apostolic Church during the Great Diaspora. When due to the mass killings and deportations the catholicos in Turkey was forced to move from Sis (in Cilicia) to Antelias (in Lebanon), the Taşşnak party seized the opportunity to create a new religious centre. The religious centre of the catholicos resided officially in Estjmiadzin; the catholicos of Sis fell directly under its governance. When the catholicos moved and Estjmiadzin shortly thereafter fell under the Soviet rule, the Taşşnak party started to work closely with the recently relocated catholicos in Antelias and deliberately caused a schism, so that they could gain more influence over the waxing Diaspora communities (Demirdjian 1989:13,14).

My point is that the discourse regarding Armenianess is more politicized and nationalistic in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, France and the other countries who took the first wave of genocide survivors than it is in Turkey. The Armenian identity in Turkey is often a covert identity in which people practice their Armenianess behind closed doors. This is not to say that everyone from Syria, Iran, Iraq, etc. is a member of the Taşşnak party, what I am arguing however is that the discourse about their ethnic identity in those countries, is more politically influenced than the discourse in Turkey. This political discourse is based on ideas
of nation-state building and citizenship. According to this discourse, in order to be an Armenian, you have to speak the Armenian language, know about the Armenian history and be a member of the Armenian Church.

Because more than 50% of Armenians in the Netherlands is influenced by this political discourse, language becomes even more a point of contention where a majority of the Armenians from Turkey do not speak the Armenian language. This makes the community in the Netherlands more divided and contested than in London; where there is only 5% or less Armenians from Turkey.

This is also has other side effects that strengthen the contention. Even though the Armenian foundations in the Netherlands try hard to build an Armenian community—their major goal is *hajahabanoem*; the preservation of the Armenian identity (Demirdjian 1989:21) – there are schisms in the foundations. There were 10 different foundations when I did my primary research in 2003, four of these foundations were dissolved due to internal conflicts. This also has the effect, that there is a bigger cash flow within the Armenian community in London, than the Armenian community in the Netherlands. The British-Armenian community is in comparison more centralized and has more money to organize events and build a sense of community.

The political discourse is thus a cause of contention in the Diaspora communities, but also a cause of schisms in the foundations. Even though Federations as FAON (Federation of Armenian Associations in the Netherlands), try hard in the last few years to be a backbone of the community, this tension around the political discourse has a strengthening effect; foundations and associations get dissolved, fights spark up and less money is available for community building.

Yet, even in the Netherlands, where there is a larger percentage of Armenians from Turkey than there is in London, there is a sense of “ethnicity”, which is not politically based. This sense of “ethnicity” is build on ideas of “suffering” and “inner-strength”. It is this definition of Armenianness (which I consider a cultural discourse) that is implicitly present in discussions, is overarching the political discourse and is, as I will argue, both trans-generational as trans-spational in nature. So where the political discourse is mostly engineered by the Tasjnak party and based on ideas of citizenship and nation-state building, the cultural discourse is more based on classical ideas of ethnicity: blood and body. This discourse is trans-spational because it springs, as I will argue, from a similar source: the Armenian genocide.

*Genocide and Identity Making*

The genocide is the symbolism of our entire history! It shows what has been done to us for centuries, and what is still being done to us. We still have lost everything. We are still being suppressed. The genocide is the ultimate injustice. Informant (the Netherlands).

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8 Even though I have been told many times over and over that Armenians from Turkey are one of the most eminent Armenians to study the Armenian language when they come to the Netherlands, this point of contention comes back over and over again in conversations and was even the cause of an organized debate, where I was invited as a panel member, in 2008. So even though Armenians from Turkey may study the language, it is unclear how well they speak the language.

9 This is not to say, as I have been criticized for, that the Armenian organizations in the Netherlands do not organize events. They do so but, *in comparison*, with limited resources.
In another paper with the title “Within the Acts of Violence”¹⁰, I made the case that we cannot look at the consequences of genocide without taking the acts of violence itself into account. Violence to me is not only a physical act, with the aim of the physical destruction of a specific group, but also as a cultural and symbolic act, where not only the physical existence of the victimized group is attacked and annihilated, but also its cultural and symbolic existence. I here go step further than the original and legal definition of genocide, which Fein (2002) already emphasized, is difficult to operationalize within the social sciences. Genocide to me is the complete destruction of another group’s identity. With “complete” I mean the physical destruction but also the destruction of social, political and religious institutions, language, cultural symbols and other identity indicators. The aim of genocide, and this is also where genocide in my opinion differs from other acts of collective violence, is to destroy and annihilate an “identity” in all its forms.

To me the inscribable acts of violence, which are sexualized and often gruesome, are not meaningless acts, like sometimes in the popular media presumed, but meaningful acts filled with cultural and symbolic meaning; they give us an insight of the cultural modes (Hinton 1998, 2002) and cultural constructions of the perpetrators.

At the core of this process lies, what Staub (1989, 2009) considers, the existential threat of the “self concept”. The perpetrators consider themselves “threatened” by this often imaginary enemy and in order to safeguard their existential and psychological “selves”, the nation-state has to be “cleansed” and “purified” from this foreign element (Sémelin 2007). Üngör (2008) show that during the Armenian genocide there was this firm believe among the Turkish elite that the nation-state could be “social engineered”. That didn’t only lead to the Armenian genocide, but also to genocidal acts on Syriac minorities (Gaunt 2006), the expulsion and killings of Orthodox Greeks and the mass murders of Kurds (Üngör 2008:28-31).

The aim of my paper here is not to discuss the acts of violence itself, even though I believe that they are an intrinsic part of understanding the long term consequences of genocidal violence. My aim here is to point out the cultural remembrance of genocide and how this remembrance is a cause of contention within the current Armenian Diaspora communities. What we have to keep in mind here is that overcoming genocide is more than overcoming brutal and gruesome violent acts, it is also overcoming what Card (2003) considers “social death”:

When a group with its own cultural identity is destroyed, it’s survivors lose their cultural heritage and may even lose their intergenerational connections (…) they may become “socially dead” and their descendants “naturally alienated”, no longer able to pass along and build upon the traditions, cultural developments (including languages), and projects of earlier generations (Ibid.:73).

Where Card however considers “social death” the ultimate aim of genocide, I consider it more the physical and cultural outcome of genocide. (The aim to me is the ultimate destruction of an “identity”.) It is important to understand that the survivors however didn’t only lose their family, but also their land, their possession, their institutions, their political establishments and other identity indicators. (In short they lost their civic, economic and religious identities.)

¹⁰ I also wrote several articles on this, including the articles “Het internalisering van een genocide” [The Internalization of a Genocide] published in Cogiscope, a journal about war and war trauma and my article “Vergeten van een genocide voltooit vernietiging van een volk” [Not Remembering the Genocide Concludes the Destruction of a People], published in the newspaper Reformatorisch Dagblad. I presented my paper Within the Acts of Violence at a conference in Yerevan in December 2010.
New identity markers therefore had to be created, new stories had to be constructed; the collective experience of the genocide had to becocooned as it were in the social imaginary and webs of significance of the victimized group. Where the existential threat of the “self concept” was imaginary in the mind of the perpetrators, it was a real threat to the survivors. The acts of violence as it were got internalized:

I am reality, war says….Experiences obtained in the terrible reality of the war, in which these confrontations with the most brutal violations of the integrity of the human body—violations of what is perhaps the ultimate story we have to tell about ourselves: the story that says that we are more than just skin, bones, blood and brains—seem to bring about an utter alienation (Van de Port 1998).

It is during this alienation that new narratives have to be created and new traditions have to be made (Hobsbawm 1984:4-5). It is in this chaos and upheaval, where new discourses about the existential and psychological “self” and “identity” are created:

The range of these modes of symbolic re-empowerment is infinite—from “imagined communities” that provide a quasi-familial, fantasized sense of collective belonging, through forms of madness in which one imagines that external reality is susceptible to the processes of one’s own thinking, to “techniques of the self” in which consciousness and the body are subject to all manner of symbolic manipulations (Jackson 2002:35).

Even though I do not claim that the Armenians I interviewed had a “quasi-familial, fantasized sense of collective belonging”, I do think that they attached specific symbolic meaning to their genocidal experiences. The Armenians I spoke to felt the weight of their past literally on their shoulders. It was something they had to bear, but which also gave them strength:

We know nothing else than this pain, Tony. We got brought up with it. It is what I feel when I wake up or when I go to bed. Informant (United Kingdom).

Or:

The Germans say, when they raise their glasses, ‘to your health’; but they are not healthy. The Turks say ‘to our honour’, but they are not honourable. The Armenians say ‘to our life’, but they have no life. Informant (the Netherlands).

Some of my informants told me that the poet Toemanian11 expressed the Armenian suffering the best:

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11 Even though this poem is officially written before the Armenian genocide, this does not immediately undermine my argument. Hobsbawm (1984) has shown us that new traditions are often built on old concepts: old concepts get as it were magnified in new circumstances and situations.
The Armenian pain is a great sea and that great black sea, wanders in my soul …. In this great dark sea my soul can find neither bottom, nor the mirror. In this great black sea I suffer eternally… Toemanian.

The importance here is not if this suffering objectively exists, even though I believe that my informants truly feel this suffering – to them it is not a metaphor, it is a physical pain – what is important, is that the suffering in these stories makes the Armenian “Armenian”; it is the weight of the suffering that gives the Armenian “strength”.

I knew a girl once who had an Armenian father and an English mother. The father was “strong”, the mother was weak, so when he died and the daughter married, she was giving her children an Armenian upbringing; to pass the strength along… It was in her blood, you see… Informant (the Netherlands).

The suffering is imagined to be in the body. It is physical. It is in the blood. It is important here to remember that the “body” was for many survivors, who had lost loved ones and family members, the only “institution” where cultural meaning could be inscribed. It is therefore very interesting, from an anthropological perspective, that this cultural discourse of Armeniannes is quite consistent over time. I heard second and third generations speak about this suffering with the same dignity and emotion as some of the younger members of the Armenian Diaspora community. What is also interesting is that this cultural discourse is not only present in the Dutch Armenian Diaspora and in the Armenian Diaspora in the United Kingdom, but that it is also trans-spational, meaning that it is present in different Diaspora communities as the following quotes of American Armenian authors show:

The Turks took something from them, the ones that survived, something more than life – dignity, purpose – something humans aren’t meant to do without. That lack just keeps on perpetuating through the generations. A terrific sadness, I suppose, that keeps getting passed down in the blood (Edgarian 1994:299).

Or:

Safety and numbing were inseparable in my family’s pathology. The United States was a free place, that is, a place where Armenians with their ancient culture in a suitcase were free from bodily harm. Free to worship, practice business, raise families, make art. Free to hide from a past that was – in those decades immediately following the Genocide – unutterable. My mother and father in different ways were amnesiac about the past, caught in some twilight of half-acknowledgments. At some place in their minds my parents must have found real issues of being Armenian too hard, too painful, too absurd. As my aunt Gladys had put it, “It was a pill too bitter to swallow, a pain too bad to feel.” In affirming the American present, my parents had done their best to put an end to exile. In the suburbs of New Jersey, they found rootedness, home, belonging. Yet, the past was a shadow that cast its own darkness on us all. The old country. I
realize now that it was an encoded phrase, not meant for children. Spoken by numbed Armenians of the silent generation. It meant lost world, a place left to smoulder in its ashes (Balakian 1997:300).

The silence of the first generation of survivors is a reoccurring theme, both in the literature, but also in the life histories and stories that I heard from my informants. It is a story of non-communication, maybe in some essence even the physical expression of alienation that the experience of violence brings. The experience is so horrendous, so enormous, that no words can describe them, illuminate them, or even give meaning to them. It is in this sphere of non-communication, this formless space, where discourses of suffering are made and where meaning is given. Or to phrase it differently: meaning is given to the silence itself.

This could also be the reason why the discourse of suffering is trans-spatial; it is linked to a common experience before the Great Diaspora: the Armenian genocide.

We do not only see this discourse in the Netherlands, United Kingdom and the United States, but also in Turkey, even though the discourse is there more covert and more hidden in allusions, poetry or imagery. Peroomian (2008) makes the case that due to the suppression in Turkey of Armenians and the prohibition of the recognition of the Armenian genocide, the stories of pain and suffering are put in an international framework, Peroomian calls this the “collective I” (Ibid.:112), where the suffering described is not only the suffering of the Armenians, but the suffering of all human beings. If we read the poetry however there is a strong allegory to the Armenian past.

In a poem by Galustian, with the title “Khaghaghatiun” (Peace), we find the following passage:

My mother had two brothers
she had father
she had mother
they had sisters and brothers
they were all married
they all had children

From them neither this nor that remained
they all – they all
died before I was born (Peroomian 2008:115)

In this passage we see suffering, we also see the silence of suffering. We see as a matter of fact a description of “social death”.

Arpiar Der Markaryan is another example of an Armenian writer and first generation survivor living in Turkey. In his autobiography he skips over the years of the genocide (ibid.:121), but pauses every now and then to compare the “Catastrophe” with his present life. In 1937, when he is a student, he makes the following observation:

(...) a posthumous life, without a smile, without dreams, a life suppressed by the shadow of death (....) We carry the scars of old

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12 In societies where emotions, for a variety of reasons, cannot be expressed, emotions will often find, as Abu-Lughod (1986) demonstrates in her ethnography, indirect ways of expression. In her study on Bedouins in the Western Desert of Egypt she shows how lyric poetry is used to express personal feelings of women and young men.
wounds on our face, and a new wound is cut in our hearts, a deadly wound that can’t be cured (Der Markaryan 2006:19).

Here we also see how the experience of violence is being vocalized, how it is symbolized as a “posthumous life” or a “shadow of death” and that this suffering is in the body, cut in the heart.

This suffering and pain, however, is only one side of the Armenian experience and cultural discourse. This suffering also carries a responsibility for the descendants. This is vocalized in a novel by Hackikyan (2000), in the final scene of his book, when a father and son stand in front of a photograph, and the father remarks:

They’re standing behind us! Our forefathers, my father, his father. You’re the end result of dozens of generations who have created the culture which is your legacy. You must learn about it and enrich it so that it will never die. That way your ancestors can live on (Ibid.:537-538).

Just like “suffering”, this sense of responsibility is trans-spational and trans-generational. I heard it in narratives in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, I read it in books written by American Armenians and Armenians living elsewhere. This responsibility is connected to the social construction of suffering and gives “the Armenian” a certain amount of “inner-strength”. Consider for example the following quote of one of my informants:

I was standing there in front of the mountain Ararat and I had to cry. It is difficult to describe what I felt; I had never seen the mountain before. While I was standing there, I felt the past flowing through me. Noah came from that place. My ancestors came from that place …. And I realised the mountain was still there. Do you understand what I mean? The mountain is made of stone. It is powerful. It stays there. Just as the Armenian people: nobody helped us, but we are still here. Informant (the Netherlands).

In my upcoming book Near the Foot of Mount Ararat I consider the narratives of “suffering” and “inner-strength” as two dialectic ends of the same cultural discourse about the Armenian identity. The “suffering” is a burden that only an Armenian can carry.

This is for example also magnified in the autobiographical book Black Dog of Fate (1997), where the mother of Balakian is approving or disapproving of his girlfriends:

For my mother, a woman had to qualify by being jarbig, which meant she had to have energy, wit, vitality. She had to be achgapatz, open-eyed, so that nothing could get past her, for she was the keeper of the gate, the protector of things sacred: family and husband. If a woman wasn’t jarbig and achgapatz – clearly my mother thought she possessed these qualities in abundance – she wasn’t worthy, she wasn’t, in the existential sense, “Armenian” (ibid.:132).

Balakian does not write: “then she was not in essence a woman”, but that “she was not in essence Armenian”. By doing so, he implies that every Armenian has to posses jarbig and achgapatz. That these character traits make an Armenian “Armenian”; that they are a part of
the inner world of the Armenian identity.

Suffering and resurrection, grief and strength, they are a part of the same story, two ends of the same essential existence. The Christian connotations are patently obvious:

Had the treaty of Sévres passed, it would have said: The civilized world cares about the most ancient Christian nation of the Near East. It would have said: The martyrdom and suffering of Armenians will not go unheeded” (ibid.:215).

The strength and exclusivity of the Armenian identity are rooted in this martyrdom. The Armenians have to carry their history and pain, in some ways like Jesus carried his pain on the cross13.

It is this same concept of identity that has to be preserved, that beyond the borders of the ethnic group this identity is always subjected to possible “destruction”. This is shown in some of the fears expressed by some of my informants, but also stated and re-stated in literature. This fear of disappearance is also trans- spational.

We are going to disappear, Tony, if we don’t take any action. That is why we organize dances; that is why we try hard to keep our identity. Informant (The Netherlands.)

Or in the book Zabelle (1998) by Kricorian where the protagonist looks at her son and makes a startling observation:

Although Moses had stopped speaking Armenian when he was twelve, he had never acted as if he did not understand it when we spoke it, as some children did. He would answer in English and soon Jack had copied the trick. And in this way the Armenians would be destroyed. First they were chased away, then the children were dropping the language and eventually they married odars [outsiders] and raised children that were barely half Armenian” (Ibid.:126).

This fear of disappearance is also shown by the term Jermag Chart14—loosely translated as “white genocide”. White genocide is a process where the Armenian identity is not taken and destroyed by force, but destroyed through the subtle processes of integration and eventually assimilation:

There was total assimilation into the odar world within one generation. We had managed to escape the bloody barbaric charrt of 1915. Now we were both left wounded emotionally by the “White Charrt” – assimilaiton! There is no escape from the “White Charrt”. If allowed, the “White Charrt” will finally achieve the aspirations of the vicious barbaric Turk – our youth must understand this! (Chtijian 2003:331—bold emphasis by original author).

13 This is also expressed and symbolized by title of one of the most descriptive Armenian eye-witness accounts, written by Grigoris Balakian: Armenian Golgotha (2009).

14 I have seen this word spelled in several different ways. I use the spelling here that was common during my fieldwork in the Netherlands.
Here we can also connect the cultural discourse of identity with the experience of genocide. Living in a foreign country, being confronted with other cultures, trying to adapt to foreign and sometimes hostile environments, enhances the feelings of estrangement and echoes in an indirect way the alienation of violence. The Armenian identity is considered “under attack”, the “self concept” is threatened. The fixation on identity of the perpetrators became in a way the fixation on identity for the victimized group. Or as Balakian (1997) describes it: “After the Genocide, the fear of death was different from the fear of mortality” (ibid.:94).

Returning to the Case-Study: Being Armenian and Feeling Armenian

If we return to the argument that I witnessed on the 6th of April 2003, we see many of the above mentioned processes of identity-making at work. First we see the process of what Baumann (2004) considers “encompensation”; within the Dutch Armenian Diaspora community the Armenians who do not directly come from Turkey “encompensate” the Armenians who do come from Turkey. From their perspective the Armenians who are from Turkey are in essence “Armenians”, but they still have to abide to the political discourse of Armenianess. In order to become a “true” Armenian, they have to learn – or at least so is the opinion of some – the Armenian language.

We also see, even though indirectly, the process what Baumann considers “segmentation”. To me – an odar – the Dutch Armenian community always tried to show a unified front of the Armenian identity. They were strong, they were active and they were all fighting for the same cause: the recognition of the Armenian genocide. Even though some cracks were visible, they weren’t as blatantly obvious as this afternoon. Here I saw a process of “fission”; where the identity on one level is unified, it is divided on another level. The segmentation in the Dutch Armenian community is based on the geographical lines of Armenians from Turkey and Armenians from other countries, this is friction is also caused, between the cultural discourse of Armenian identity and the political discourse. This is also where the Dutch community differs from the Armenian Diaspora community in the United Kingdom; there is a higher percentage of Armenians from Turkey in the Netherlands. The friction between political discourse and the cultural discourse of the Armenian identity is therefore sharpened and more conflicted in the Netherlands.

There is also another process of identity making at work here, which is much more important, yet much more subtle (and directly linked to the experiences of the Armenian genocide). This is the process where identity is made through interaction itself and where certain cultural constructs are either confirmed or swept aside. “Implicit knowledge” plays, as I will explain below, a pivotal role.

To return quickly: implicit knowledge is knowledge that shapes the direction of explicit knowledge. It is formless, it is the knowledge in-between-the-lines, the knowledge that is often taken for granted by the in-group, but invisible for the out-group. Implicit knowledge is, even more so than explicit knowledge, culturalized; you have to know the cultural language in order to understand what is actually said. In order to understand this, I will first look at the difference between “being Armenian” and “feeling Armenian”, before I zoom in on the comments Arshile made in his defense about his ethnic identity.

According to Bakalian (1993) there is a difference between “feeling” Armenian and “being” Armenian. Feeling Armenian is an ascribed status, it is an emotional tie that an Armenian might have with the “old country” without investing any time in learning the language or the Armenian history. “Feeling Armenian” coincides with what I consider the cultural discourse of the Armenian identity.

There is also “being” Armenian, this is an achieved status. You can reach this status
by learning the Armenian language and the Armenian history, become a member of the Armenian Church and become active in the community life. This achieved status coincides to what I consider the political discourse of Armenianness.

This is also where the opinion of Arshile and Manoug differed. Manoug was telling Arshile that he was not “truly” an Armenian for he didn’t know the language, didn’t care (according to Manoug at least) about the Armenian history and made no effort to learn the language or the Armenian history. As a matter of fact he spoke the language of the “destroyer”. (Notice that Manoug places Arshile at this instant in the argument in the complete polar opposite of the Armenian identity.) In order words, according to Manoug, Arshile may “feel” like an Armenian, but “wasn’t” an Armenian in essence.

The answer of Arshile was to me (as an outsider) both puzzling and elusive. He stated, and I repeat: “It is true, I don’t speak the Armenian language. But I suffered. I know what true suffering means…” To me this answer was highly unsatisfactory and surprising, until I understood what the implicit knowledge of “suffering” implies. “Suffering” is feeling the consequences of the Armenian genocide; it is the internal pain that the Armenian as an ethnic group has to carry; it is the weight of their collective past. Arshile who had come from Turkey and who had witnessed and experienced the suppression of Armenians first hand, was basically telling Manoug that he was the one who wasn’t a true Armenian, for he obviously didn’t know what true “suffering” meant.

It is also because of this implication, which was unknown to me as an outsider, why Manoug reacted so fiercely. He shouted something to Arshile and eventually walked off.

This case-study, how small it might be, tells us a lot about identity-making in general and how the Armenian genocide is engrained in the Armenian identity. It shows us how important implicit knowledge is in the process of identity-making. It tells us also something else, which is in a way a critique to the contextual approach of identity-making of Baumann. It shows us that ideas and cultural constructs of identities are much more solidified than Baumann presumes and internalized by the in-group. The cultural discourse of suffering is, as I have shown, both trans-generational and trans-spatial in nature. Baumann does not take this into account. To him identities are always identities in context and constructed in specific ways (baby-grammar, encompensation, segmentation) of “othering”. Even though I do not dismiss his contextual approach on identity-making, for I do believe that people re-shape, reconstruct their identity through interaction, I do not believe that this reconstruction is as free as Baumann presumes. As a matter of fact, I believe that the construction of identity is to an enormous extent constraint. It is constraint by the collective experiences of the in-group and constraint by the cultural concepts of the in-group which are, even over generations, internalized. Baumann dismisses these elements of identity making in my opinion too quickly. His theoretical approach leaves no room for particular definitions of identity or of a diachronic approach on how these concepts of identity came into existence. The Armenian identity, even though strong and active, is as the Dutch Armenian Diaspora and the above mentioned case-study shows, also a problematic one. This has to do, in my opinion, with the over-focus on identity in the Diaspora communities, which in itself can be linked to the collective experiences of genocidal violence.

Memory, Remembrance and the Cultural Transmittal of Trauma

Collective experiences can be remembered in several ways. They can be remembered in memorials, in poetry, in literature, in art, but also in day-to-day conversations and in day-to-day narratives. It is the last aspect of remembrance that I mostly focused on in this paper. I have shown that in the day-to-day narratives, but also in poetry and literature, there is a strong cultural discourse of the Armenian identity that can be directly linked to the experiences of
genocide. This discourse is trans-generational, but also trans-spational, it may have nuance differences, but is at the same time quite consistent over space and time. The reason for this, in my opinion, is that this discourse has the same breeding ground; it was created, more or less unconsciously, in the aftermath of the Armenian genocide. Try to imagine what an impact the genocide had for the first generation survivors: loved ones were killed, possession was taken, many had fled their homelands and established themselves in often foreign and sometimes hostile places, where they didn’t speak the language and where they sometimes met other Armenians who didn’t speak the language or spoke it in another dialect. This was in a way the perpetuation of the violence itself. All institutions – an intellectual elite, a Church that used to be a binding factor, established political leaders and parties – were destroyed. Everything that was familiar, known, was uprooted. The world had suddenly become a hostile and unfamiliar place.

It is not strange that in these circumstances a new discourse of the Armenian identity had to be created. It is also not strange that the first generation survivors used old and Christian symbols of suffering to give meaning to their collective experiences; the horrendous acts of violence that were committed and experienced had to be cocooned in new webs of meaning.

This “new” discourse, which was partly made by the first generation, but even more by the second generation – who try to come to grips with their collective history, but also with their personally histories of silences and non-spaces of alienation and estrangement that their parents couldn’t communicate – can be described as a cultural dialectic between “suffering” on one hand and “resurrection”/“inner-strength” on the other. I do not think that this was a conscious process. I believe that the first and second generation just try to make the unspeakable and the most incomprehensible (the gruesome acts of violence, the unnecessary spilling of blood, the mass killings, the deaths, the cruelty) speakable and understandable, if not for themselves, than at least for each other. I also believe that in this process, elements of the genocide and genocidal violence, was unconsciously incorporated in this discourse. The Armenian identity was placed in the body. It was an identity that should be preserved, protected against a possible destruction. (Remember that the Armenian as an ethnic group has suffered this destruction; they had seen the consequences of genocide up close.)

This is where, in my opinion at least, also the cultural transmittal of trauma comes in. If identity is placed in the body it is also open for manipulation and impurifications. Especially in Diaspora communities where younger Armenians come in contact with non-Armenians; this enhances the fear that the Armenian identity will slowly disappear through a process of “white genocide”. This in turn results that Armenian Diaspora communities is in danger of and/or has the tendency of looking inward instead of outward and results in some cases in strict endogamy rules.

It also has a second side effect, as my above case-study show; and that is, that “identity” gets over-emphasized and causes fission instead of fusion within the community. Who is and who isn’t a “real” Armenian are prominent discussions. (Especially in the Dutch Diaspora community.) This causes schisms, friction and in some extreme cases that specific groups within the community get ostracized. In here we see that the over-focus and fixation on identity of the perpetrators became in fact a fixation on identity of the victimized group. Where the threat of the “self concept” of the perpetrators was highly imaginary, the threat of the “self concept” of the Armenians is based on collective experiences. So the over-focus on identity and the fear of losing this identity are understandable, but are stalling the Diaspora communities at the same time.

Here is also where the cultural transmittal of trauma lies. It lies in the scrutinizing and the over fixation on identity in the Diaspora communities and also in the constant fear of
losing this identity through assimilation or *Jermag Charrt*. Both these elements are a constant reminder of what has happened in their collective past, it makes this past lived and tangible, it is in fact a symbolic and even physical perpetuation of genocidal violence and genocidal acts; it is a constant reminder of what collectively “cannot be forgotten”: the Armenian genocide. The loss of an identity.

Anthonie Holslag

**Biography of Anthonie Holslag**

Anthonie Holslag is an anthropologist who has done research on the trans-generational consequences of genocide in Armenian Diaspora communities in both the Netherlands and London. His ethnographic research has been published and well received in 2009 and has been freely translated in the Armenian press as “In the Rocks of Ararat”. The English translation of his work, where he will put more focus on genocidal violence and the consequences of this violence on the reconstruction of the Armenian identity, will be published in 2012. The tentative title of this book is “*Near the foot of Mount Ararat*”.

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FAON (Federatie Armeense Organisaties Nederland)

Fein, H.

Gaunt, D.

Geertz, C.

Hinton, A. L.


Hobsbawm, E. en Ranger, T.

Hofmann, T.

Holslag, A.


Jackson, M.

Jenkins, R.

Kricorian, N.

Libaridian, G. J.

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**Stanton, G. H.**

**Staub, E.**


**Turner, V.**

**Üngör, U. U.**

**Van de Port, M.**