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Industrious as Pasts: Armenian-American Poetics and *Capillarity*

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A thesis submitted in the Faculty of Music, Humanities and Media at the University of Huddersfield, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
April, 2018.

Declaration: this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted in any form for the award of a higher degree at any other educational institution.

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Acknowledgements

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Thank you to my mother, my family, and all my friends who never stopped cheering me on.

For Roubina, always.

Abstract

The driving force of *Capillarity* (Vaun, 2009) is the metaphorical aspect of diasporic, exilic consciousness. Metaphorical because I am neither an immigrant with first-hand knowledge of what that entails, nor an American untethered by a complex, bilingual, traumatized other identity—my experience of half of my psyche is in large part second-hand, filtered over many years by generations whose lived memories I carry. Thus, it is as if I was born an expat, somehow exiled from both cultural halves that make me whole. As Edward Said (1996) points out, “Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others” (p. 53). The structural and thematic strands in *Capillarity* attempt to transform the inbetweenness of competing languages and histories into a poetics of becoming; a fragmented meditation on the kinetic energy of being bicultural, rather than the sentimentality and mythologizing it has induced in much Armenian-American and ethnic poetry to date. The motivation was, in many ways, to rid myself not of the Armenian language or culture but of the limitations that conventional definitions of Armenian identity impose. It is a motivation to reckon with the “twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one's own life” (Hobsbawm, 1989, p. 3). *Capillarity*, with its distinctive perspective and approach, also joins the wider poetic activity of contemporary bicultural poets who are, in their own ways, translating and re-translating cultural and linguistic parts of themselves, with the common goal of redefining and reimagining what it means to be a human and a citizen of the world.

Introduction

This thesis will explore *Capillarity's* (Vaun, 2009) distinctiveness by highlighting its themes and structure within two contexts: the Armenian-American poetic tradition and the larger field of contemporary bicultural American poets. The source of *Capillarity's* different approach is in the fact that, as a native-born American brought up in an Armenian-speaking household, I am nearly as fluent in Armenian as I am in English. My poetic bearings are partly in the vein of American poets like Whitman, Merwin, Berryman, and Jorie Graham, while also partly in the bicultural mode of poets such as Vahe Oshagan, Leonardo Alishan, and non-Armenian bicultural poets such as Kaveh Akbar and Ocean Vuong. Thus, my identity is cleaved rather than simply hyphenated, which both informs and problematizes the poetic process in ways similar to, but mostly different from the other Armenian and non-Armenian poets that will be discussed. Through an analysis of the relevant cultural and historical context, as well as drawing on comparisons with Armenian-American and other bicultural American poets, I will highlight the unique contribution that *Capillarity* has made in the Armenian-American poetic tradition and the wider American tradition as a whole.

In the relatively little-known current of Armenian-American poetry, *Capillarity* strives to disrupt and reimagine the hitherto dominant focus on ethnocentric themes, inherited nostalgia and trauma. It also largely eschews the more conventional Armenian poetic forms that have generally been used in that tradition. In contrast to the work of other established late twentieth-century poets such as Peter Balakian (2001), Diana Der Hovanessian (1994), and Gregory Djanikian

(1989), my attempt is to destabilize, not reinforce the traditional modes of ethnic poetry (for example, searching for and reconnecting to ancestral roots). *Capillarity* does not seek to reclaim something which was lost, whether it is a mythologized Armenian homeland or mystified Armenian language; nor does it make assertions regarding the perceived components of Armenian identity or culture. Instead, *Capillarity* inverts these outdated themes, replacing them with a long poem that is built on fragmentation, where language itself is both the location and dislocation of memory, identity, and history. Language serves as the main engine that drives a long-form meditation on death, grief, unbelonging, diasporic anxiety, and the reinvention of the self. And the fuel is primarily a loss both abstract (of a coherent, rooted linguistic-cultural identity) and concrete (early death of family members and trauma-induced anxiety).

Chapter one will explore the cultural and historical context that has fed Armenian-American poetry and signal *Capillarity's* distinctiveness in that context. The Armenian-American poetic tradition, which is a transnational, diasporic one, contains conscious and unconscious traces of imagery and themes from Armenian poetry of the early twentieth-century: love, loss, Christian symbolism, mourning, cultural customs, and nationalist yearning. The source of this transference is the Armenian Genocide of 1915, which effectively stunted any modernization in Armenian poetry and augmented the already existing Armenian diaspora by millions.¹ The absence of a modernist movement in Armenian and diasporic poetry has automatically placed all the subsequent poets in that tradition at a disadvantage—we must accept early on, more than poets in mainstream ethnic traditions, that if our poems do not work to further the Armenian “cause”

¹ The philosopher and literary scholar Marc Nichanian (*Writers of Disaster*, 2002), refers to the Genocide as the Catastrophe. I will use the terms interchangeably.

through traditional themes and images, we will be further marginalized. *Capillarity* is partly born from the Catastrophe's anti-modernist ghettoizing ripple effects and works to deflect the poetic pitfalls that arise from trauma/immigrant narratives, especially when the poet is a second-hand witness and not the victim. The speaker in *Capillarity* is vigilant to avoid cultural appropriation and over-identification with either halves of his identity (a visceral and earnest impersonality that is ultimately an American trait).

During the 1970s a few Armenian-American poets began to receive acclaim from mainstream literary circles. The second chapter will examine and problematize how these poets (Diana Der Hovanessian, Gregory Djanikian, and Peter Balakian) fit into the 'ethnic-American' poetry canon by utilizing themes and poetic structures common to more well-known ethnic poetries (for example, Jewish-American, Hispanic, Asian-American). These poets spoke little to no Armenian and their poems inhabit an American identity while exploring a distant, mystified heritage. At the same time, Vahe Oshagan (1983) and Leonardo Alishan (2010), both immigrants, produced poetry (the former in Armenian, the latter in English, though they both spoke both languages fluently) that reflects a profound attention to language and open forms as a way to loosen tradition. I will show how *Capillarity* has more in common with the latter group than the former due to its connection to language and desacralization of national myths, yet is set apart from them in its American topsoil and orientation.

In recent years, more bicultural American poets carving poetic paths through the complexity of multilingualism and transnationalism have emerged. These poets are highly conscious of form as

an important component of poetic expression, an equal partner to content in making meaning. They often approach their biculturalism sideways (if at all) instead of naming and defining it in the conventional sense of most ethnic poetry. That is, questions of identity or markers of ethnicity are allowed to surface by focusing on the structure and language of the poems rather than simply the main themes around which the poem is made. In the final chapter, I will draw from the work of some of these poets, such as Ocean Vuong (2015) and Kaveh Akbar (2016), in order to place *Capillarity* in perspective within the wider scope of American poetry, as a work that is both aware of its lineage but remakes the tradition it comes from.

Chapter 1: *Capillarity* in the wider context of Armenian and Armenian-American poetry

One day, an American poet born in Cambridge, Massachusetts sits down to organize his thoughts and put them to paper. The chair creaks, cars buzz by, no words come. Or rather, they come in such configurations, assortments, and at such a pace that they either crackle and spark or cancel each other out. Parallel torrents run in his mind, one in English, one in western Armenian. He has grown up next to the waters of one (English) and across the shores of the other (Armenian), but they both flow through him. Sometimes he drowns, sometimes he swims. The water of one language (Armenian) fills his mind as he wrestles to write poetry with the other, “native” one (English). This *other nativeness* and *native otherness* is the driving concept of *Capillarity*.

But what is meant by *other nativeness* and *native otherness*? Each denotes a liminality involving the half-lit corridors between language, culture, identity, and ultimately, poetry. Armenian is *nearly* my native language—I learned it before English and it was all we spoke at home (to this day) even though I was born in the United States. I had an English tutor until the fourth grade. While speaking a language proficiently is enough for most things, it is usually not enough to write poetry in any masterful, thought-out fashion. But it is there nonetheless, a little-known Indo-European language weaving in and out of my English-language thoughts during the creative process, a sort of short-circuiting that can be both disorienting and inspiring—a poetic burden that leads to an other nativeness; a sense of almost completely belonging to a language and culture (American-English) while inhabiting a transnational, hybrid identity (Armenian-

American). At the same time, the host or native language and culture (English) becomes a native otherness; a cultural, linguistic space that one owns by birth, yet sometimes feels disowned by. Thus, one is inhabited almost in equal measure by two cultural identities strongly tied to language while often feeling estranged by both. The word *capillarity* (the interaction between contacting surfaces of a liquid and solid that distorts the liquid surface) exemplifies this disoriented state. It is a fitting title in its exactitude, highlighting how an essence can be both the same and different, depending on the context. The word itself contains a sense of defamiliarization and musicality.

This is not a new phenomenon in the realm of diasporan, transnational poetics. However, in my case it is the secondary language that adds a unique complexity outside the poetic traditions or literary analysis often discussed. Armenian is an ancient and unique language; one of the only Indo-European languages that has no off-shoots. It is spoken by approximately nine million people globally, but since Armenians are a transnational people who have lived mostly outside Armenia for at least 100 years (since the Genocide), there is a tendency for many not to use Armenian as their primary language, and thus in diasporic Armenian communities use of the language often atrophies as the host language is adopted and becomes dominant. Despite this, few, if any *established* Armenian-American poets have published work that arises from and addresses this very specific cognitive and cultural duality.² Thus, I have had a schizophrenic poetic apprenticeship, feeling both part of the American poetic tradition while having to forge

² As of yet, there are no studies on if there are any other contemporary Armenian-American poets who have the same issue with bilingualism, and specifically with the lesser spoken dialect of western Armenian.

my own way in order to make sense of the extra linguistic and cultural baggage I have inherited. This contributes significantly to the distinctiveness of *Capillarity*.

The central question of diasporan Armenian poetry is how to reconcile with the fact that it had no modernist period as other national poetries did in the early twentieth-century. It is a stunted poetics, always looking to a past full of injustice and loss, or grandiose national myths, and thus unable to fully revive and reassert itself as a contemporary force. For example, in Peter Balakian's "Road to Aleppo, 1915" the theme of trauma and ethnic cleansing is the centerpiece (2001, p. 128):

Even when the sun dropped,

the ground was heat and bayonets,

and in the Turkish wind

the throats of boys

kept ringing in your ears.

There is no formal or thematic challenge here—clearly, the poem's purpose is to point out a historical and ethnic moment; the poem is almost secondary to its thematic objective.

Indeed, the pre-existing tradition of Armenian-American poetry has been shaped by three factors: 1) a conservative tradition relating to an ancient, unique language, history and culture, which was dominated by Christianity; 2) the hangover of Romanticism (and the previously signalled lack of any native equivalent to Modernism to invigorate and modernize a stagnating,

oppressed culture); and, 3) the collective trauma of the 1915 Catastrophe. This troubled legacy unwittingly left a void where otherwise there could have been a more cohesive poetic tradition from which following generations might build innovative poetry. Instead, much of diasporan Armenian poetry is beguiled and paralyzed by the past. *Capillarity* asserts its distinctiveness against this often claustrophobic socio-historical context.

The profound rupture in the potential modernization of Armenian literature which occurred around 1915 is one from which Armenian poetry has not recovered. Collective trauma dislocates and disorients the historical cohesiveness of a culture's sense of linearity. And when that trauma is doubled by genocide denial, revisionism, and mass exile, cultural production (in this case, poetry) it becomes reflective of a people's disassociation from their own past, frozen in time, an artefact rather than a living, forward-moving process. In section XLV of *Capillarity* (p. 56) for example, an immigrant family's difficult past is calcified in their child's American present, in which he can only muster the second person as a way to cope:

In kitchens mothers and fathers practice the most complicated

American love, or widowed, count rooms

With empty hands—parents, mumbly and stuck

In what seems like winter, they talk about money, rattling—

You listen as hurt gathers around the beige table

Without pageantry—1985

And we're broke, middle class, in the middle

Of walking and falling down

Twentieth century Armenian poetry became, like many Armenians themselves, stuck in an unresolved space between pre-Genocide nationalism and post-Genocide grief and trauma—a space that at least scabbed over in other cases, for example the Holocaust, where there was a reckoning, full acknowledgment, and reparations. Adorno's notion that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (*Prisms*, p. 34), is especially applicable to the Catastrophe of 1915. There was no intervention on behalf of other nations to stop the Genocide. And in the aftermath there was not only a lack of reparations but an active revisionist campaign of denial from Turkey, an act that is itself a continuation of the Genocide's barbarism. This triggered a paralysis in poetic innovation, an inability by Armenian poets to look beyond a blatant and visceral injustice for which there has been no sense of closure, as with the Holocaust. How could one take risks in poetry when the first victims of a genocide being denied and ignored were poets? Thus, much of twentieth-century Armenian poetry remained in a nineteenth-century mode, a nationalist holding pattern paying homage to the great poets who were cut down, lest they be totally forgotten in the further whitewashing and denial of the collective trauma.

Serious poets (most of whom were just starting to integrate hints of Modernism into their work) like Bedros Tourian, Siamanto, and Daniel Varoujan produced few works because they (like other artists in their generation) died young, either in the Genocide or by way of disease. This accentuated the particular pathos that formed the distinctive brand of Romanticism that dominated Armenian poetry at that time. As Vahe Oshagan (1984) writes:

There exists thus an Armenian brand of Romanticism that has a very peculiar and limited character, whose moral inspiration is so pervasive that it represses almost totally the spirit of revolt and adventure that are so typical of much Romantic writing and posturing in Europe. (p. 32)

In Siamanto's "A Handful of Ash" (1979) there is a hyper-vigilant, Romanticized focus on the collective wound inflicted by the Turks that leaves little room for poetic disruption or imaginative transcendence:

O my homeland, promise that after my death

A handful of your holy ashes

Will come to rest, like an exiled turtledove,

To chant its song of sorrow and tears. (p. 227)

Poets like Siamanto and Varoujan had slowly been absorbing modern trends in European poetry, but unfortunately, any potential momentum was cut-off at the knees by WWI (and the Armenian Genocide), the Young Turk revolt, and the Russian Revolution. Armenians, caught in the cross hairs of these traumatic events, and already a small, dispersed people, were permanently uprooted and scattered around the world after 1915 (that is, those who survived a genocide and war). These traumatic events were also a fatal blow to the blossoming literature and arts that would have surely ushered in an Armenian form of modernism. Instead, on April 24, 1915 the first thing the Young Turks did was to capture and kill most of the Armenian artists, thinkers, and leaders throughout Turkey, among them Siamanto, Varoujan, and a host of other poets. As though a blueprint for Hitler's Holocaust, the Turks systematically severed the great minds of Armenian culture, resulting in the stunted growth of the surviving generations.

With the ossification of Armenian poetics came a nearly obsessive focus on the sacredness of the Armenian language as a place-holder of Armenian traditions and values rather than an evolving marker of cultural progress. This issue of language, key to *Capillarity*, is an important element in the troubled trajectory of Armenian poetry during the years leading to the Genocide, and ever since. Marc Nichanian (2002) points out what he calls a “double dichotomy inscribed in Armenian intellectual life and literature, first between language and cultural traditions, then between historical circumstances” (p. 3). There are two dialects of Armenian; western and eastern. Until the mid-nineteenth-century, the language of Armenians everywhere (especially the language of culture) was western Armenian. The eastern variant was spoken but usually not written. But as the Armenians of the west (Ottoman subjects) and those of the east (first the subjects of Persia and then Russia) were further separated by war, the Genocide, revolutions, and new national boundaries, eastern Armenian became a more codified strain by the early 1900s, and thereafter the two dialects rarely overlapped or engaged one another, though they are in many ways twins (p. 3).

Today, eastern Armenian is the official language of Armenia, and while western Armenian is still spoken by hundreds of thousands, it is becoming more and more endangered. I speak both western and eastern Armenian because my family is composed of both territorial halves, the Ottoman and Russian, but western Armenian is my dominant dialect. I inhabit the double dichotomy, strangely, so many years and so far removed from the actual events and spaces of its history. *Capillarity* springs from the cognitive dissonance that arises from such linguistic-cultural fragmentation and fluidity—a contemporary American poet trying to give form and voice to an

internal choir singing different melodies in different languages at once, without a coherent, consistent Armenian or Armenian-American tradition to draw from. Section XLV (p. 56) ends with the speaker both earnestly and skeptically resorting to American movies as a way to cancel each of his cultural halves out in order to achieve a sense of wholeness:

If you could reach out like the walnut tree, like the past,

If you could run out of your burning home, singing,

If you could embrace your parents, all parents at once

And cry it out together the way they do in the movies,

And laugh about it as the credits roll

While the years surrounding WWI cemented the prolific era of modernism in Europe, it left Armenian poetry in a stagnant, dark well from which it has yet to truly emerge. How is it that modernism was never fully absorbed into the Armenian literary scene? Certainly, there were writers and poets right after the Genocide who tried to grapple with what had happened. But why was their work not as potent as the group right before them, and not even close to the post-war writers in places like England, France, and Italy? One reason has to do with modernity and tradition. Western European countries, though horribly damaged and dizzy with loss after WWI, nonetheless already had long-established governments, cultural continuity, and literary traditions. So, poets like Wilfred Owen, Apollinaire, Isaac Rosenberg, and Edward Thomas, whether psychically or physically wounded, could at least count on returning to a cultural bedrock that

never wavered and could absorb many shocks. There was no such thing for Armenians, who were already a people on a tightrope without a net below.

If the Armenian poets cut down during the Genocide were on the cusp of harnessing the possibilities of modernism, what then of Armenian poets born in the diaspora decades after the Catastrophe? The former were firmly rooted on ancestral lands, with at least 2,000 years of cultural, geopolitical continuity, although existing in subjection to their Roman, Byzantine, and Persian neighbors whose empires the Armenians always had to contend with, usually in a submissive mode. Post-WW1 diasporic Armenian poets are products of the trauma of the break in that continuity—a break that dispersed the surviving Armenian population around the world. More precisely, they are products of the aftermath of that trauma, shaped by the echo of an event they themselves did not witness. It is an inherited trauma, passed down from generations who carried a profound mourning and anger accentuated by the denial and revisionism that followed, thus providing no closure or healing. Consequently, from the start, there is something liminal within diasporan Armenian identity formation, caught between continuity and dislocation, both physical and psychic. Leon Serabian Herald, the first Armenian-American poet whose work was published in mainstream publications, set the first template for the paradox and stagnation within the Armenian-American tradition. For example, in “Home” (1925, p.7) he writes:

The sound of “Home”

Is like the footsteps

Of a belated mother

Making the hungry child

Within me cry the more [...]

The sound of “Home”

Come like the footsteps

Of Mother passing by;

Only making the child in me

Cry and cry.

First-generation Armenian-American poets born decades removed from the 1915 Catastrophe have had to grapple with a number of complications. They are aware of both an individual and collective wound that has not been addressed in any meaningful or practical way so as to begin creating in the present rather than being created by the past. Like other immigrant groups that assimilated into mainstream society, many Armenian families tried to straddle the impossible middle of taking advantage of the opportunities in the U.S. while not letting go of their language and culture, much of it wrapped up in the frozen moment of the Genocide. The Armenian-American experience has not, for the most part, taken advantage of the “clean slate” that America affords. Rather, to this day, many Armenian-Americans use the word *odar* (foreigner) when talking about other Americans. This is highly symbolic of the multilayered tensions, delusions, and nuances within Armenian-American life.

The complexities of Armenian and Armenian-American expression have contributed to the fact that no dominant or even cohesive poetic movements have emerged from the Armenian-American poetic tradition. Unlike the Armenian poets in the homeland, Armenian-American poets’ work is reflective of more insulated, fractured selves trying to make sense of

being/becoming an American while at the same time consciously or unconsciously lugging around this strange, historical, linguistic, cultural baggage, little-known not only to others but to themselves. Rubina Peeromian (2012) writes:

The contemporary Armenian literature in response to [the] Genocide—narrative in prose or in verse, memoirs, fiction, poetry—is crafted from a distance of time and space, without direct experience of the Catastrophe, bearing the influence of different cultural, social, political, and religious environments, and with different levels of skill in the understanding of the poetics of genocide. It displays a variety of thrust and motivations. It may seek catharsis, a therapeutic effect, in order to relieve the transgenerational pain. It may strive to provide further evidence to challenge the denialists with a family story or a less-discussed fact or phenomenon. It may display unabated rage and frustration vis-à-vis the continuing injustice and the conspiracy of Turkey’s allies to silence the struggle. The literary work may not even treat the Genocide as a theme but still be permeated with the psychology of the survivor of a colossal catastrophe. (p. 5)

Since 1915, only a handful of Armenian-American poets—Peter Balakian, Gregory Djanikian and Diana Der Hovannesian—have gained the attention of the mainstream American poetry audience for any sustained period.³ Peter Balakian, who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 2016, is so far, the one who has come closest to being taken in to the wider American poetic canon.

³ Balakian, P. (2001). *June-tree: New and selected poems, 1974-2000*. New York, NY: Perennial.; Balakian, P. (2015). *Ozone journal*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.; Djanikian, G. (1995). *About distance: Poems*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon Univ. Press.; Djanikian, G. (2011). *Falling deeply into America: Poems*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University Press.; Hovannessian, D. D. (1997). *Selected poems*. Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: Sheep Meadow Press.

In the following chapter, I will show how this broad cultural and historical context gave rise to the concept and structure of *Capillarity*, especially in relation to the Armenian-American poets mentioned above, as well as to two poets of exile who were more on the margins of conventional Armenian diasporan society, Vahe Oshagan and Leonardo Alishan.

Chapter 2: *Capillarity* in relation to Armenian-American & diasporic poetry

Capillarity considers the influence of the Armenian language, and the vibrancy and complexity arising from the intersection of Americanness with the inherited memories of a distant but still pulsating trauma of genocide and exile. It attempts a depersonalized, de-ethnicized poetics adequate to deal with the problems of faux nostalgia, faux witnessing, and temporality—much of which is handed down by parents and grandparents who are the traumatized exiles and survivors, and not the direct experience of the poet. This point is key: much Armenian-American poetry is written from the point of view of the victim or witness by people who were not victims or witnesses —cultural appropriation is rampant. *Capillarity* seeks to problematize the notion of exilic, diasporic literature and point out the difficulties of mining family narratives and histories that one is privy to through language, but removed from in most other ways. It does so in contrast and in dialogue with the work of established Armenian-American and diasporic poets, including Peter Balakian, Vahe Oshagan, and Diana Der Hovanessian.

In the American poetic tradition, there is much written about the various ‘ethnic’ contributions to modern American poetry. ‘Ethnic’ is a problematic term and concept. First, there is the troubling

(mis)use of ethnic as a descriptive category. To label some American poetry as ethnic is to set it against other American poetry that must, by default, be ‘not-ethnic’, that is, more normatively American. Growing up as a bicultural, multilingual American, it took me quite a long time to question the idea that the American poets I was learning from (Eliot, Merwin, Berryman, Wright) were somehow outside my own American reality in which I was fully American outside the home but raised to feel like an immigrant inside. I had the naïve perception that they were ‘purer’ and more authentic in their Americanness. The total command of place, history, and voice in their work failed to emerge from my early poems, which were often confused by the fog of bilingualism and biculturalism. If these poets represented the core tradition of American poetry and I was writing from the messy margins of hybridity and transnationalism, then what exactly was I learning from them or, more exactly, what space could I call my own in the American poetic tradition? More than anything, their work ended up instilling a confidence in me which I have subsequently (and ironically) drawn from to inhabit a space somewhere between the American and ethnic poetic traditions. That is, what the American poetic canon gave me, with its scope and openness, is the ability and imagination to think beyond ethnicity and historical rigidity.

My apprenticeship was one of disorientation, like looking in a mirror and seeing what seemed to be my reflection, familiar but not fixed. What I gained from works like *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (Eliot, 1915) and *The Dream Songs* (Berryman, 1969)—new ways to explore what the English language can do to reckon with modernity’s anxieties—was also what added to my particular anxieties as a first-generation Armenian-American. I learned how to make poems in the American tradition but then had to re-make them taking into account a whole other

tradition that would not easily concede to English. Poets like Eliot, Berryman, Wright, and Merwin had the luxury of total focus because they could fully own their place in the English and American poetic tradition as white Americans. Although it certainly might not have been an assumption on their part or uppermost in their consciousness, it did not need to be—there was not another more foreign cultural or linguistic force tugging at them. Even though I too was a young white American, both my whiteness and Americanness were not nearly as straightforward nor as easy to categorize. Multilingual, multicultural American poets do not have the same historic, foundational factors from which to build poetic confidence from a young age or in a consistent trajectory. By definition, transnational poetics is one of fragmentation and patchwork.

The second problem of ethnic as a label within modern poetry has to do with language and cultural proportions in the United States. There is an irony in that ethnic American poetry has itself developed a canonicity. For example, one automatically thinks of African-American, Latino, Jewish, and Asian-American poets (for example, Hughes, Baraka, Ginsberg, Rich, Espada, Anzaldua). In this context, ‘non-mainstream’ ethnicities such as Armenians, Palestinians, and Assyrians are further marginalized and the wider cultural context of individual poets working in self-fashioned poetic modes is not recognized. The interest in and canonization of more mainstream ethnic traditions becomes its own hegemony, making it difficult for other groups to be heard or published in the mainstream. A living and vibrant language like western Armenian that is nonetheless obscure and alien to most people has little to no place in this sub-canon. Although written in English, *Capillarity* challenges this canon by avoiding direct ethnic and historical references while still evoking a past that is multi-geographic and multicultural.

A third and especially complex issue surrounding the ethnic label can be found in the few Armenian-American poets who have, to varying degrees, been accepted more widely within American poetry circles in the last 40 years. Peter Balakian, Gregory Djanikian and Diana Der Hovanessian are not fluent Armenian speakers and like most mainstream ethnic American poets, mine their ancestors' cultures and histories not from within but from without; that is, they explore a cultural past that they inhabit second-hand rather than as a daily part of their subjectivity and identity. Der Hovanessian's "From Ruin to Ruin" (1990, p. 47) is emblematic of this:

Even when invaders came
we welcomed them until
we learned they were a fury;
they were a scourge and storm.

We loved the little piece of land
left to us, and our tongue.

The confidence with which a non-Armenian speaker who was born in the U.S. is adopting an intimately "Armenian" first-person perspective is problematic and not atypical among Armenian-American poets. In "Harpert, Revisited", Peter Balakian (2001, p. 24) transforms a visit to his ancestral village in present-day Turkey into a lesson on the Genocide:

Your father slipped through
just north of Harpert on Lake Goljuk

on his way to the Dersim.

Hackberry, hawthorn, terebinth.

When I say each name, each sound

goes nowhere into the dead Turkish air.

Such Armenian-American poets are much closer to the more dominant American poetic tradition than not because they fully own their Americanness through the distance that language (or the lack thereof) provides; American English is part of their poetic and cultural DNA while Armenian is an artefact they are drawn to exactly because they do not know it intimately. Through a more carefully curated appropriation of a distant non-American past that does not belong to them per se, they are welcomed into the hegemony of ‘accepted Others’ within American literature. Readers and publishers recognize in their work a diction, structure, and thematic elements found in well-known ethnic poets like Brodsky, Blanco, and Harjo, for example. This does not mean the poems are similar; only that with the canonization of ethnic poetry there comes a set of commonalities and conventions, as with any sort of canonization in the arts.

For the poets like myself who grow up speaking a very “minor” little-known language almost as fluently as English, there is often no such welcoming space. They/we are the other others without a *there* there, meaning we are both insiders and outsiders within the American cultural and literary current, always in the process of being native and foreign. By making poems in a liminal

state, such poets are twice-removed from the mainstream discourse of American poetry. In this way, my poetry, though shot through with the fire and openness of American poetics that English's plasticity provides, is both native and other, and never sure which is which. For example, the speaker in *Capillarity* is both an *I* and a *we*, a fragmented voice and a plurality in the tradition of both Whitman and Armenian mystic poets like Gregory of Narek.⁴ It is often a disembodied voice trying to sort out its coordinates. In section XIII (p. 22), the poem turns into an interrogation, testimony, and judgement, although the lines between witness, judge, and defendant are blurred.

Witness: Yes, I saw him beating a stack of illuminated manuscripts

with the branch from an apricot tree, cussing

Judge: In the middle of Watertown?

Witness: Well I'm no expert, but maybe it's in that middle where the aimless

lightning hits and sparks the battle of pasts and tongues

Judge: Yes or no?

Witness: Yes

There is a dissonance in the narrative; no firm footing in terms of references. They are seemingly disparate associations, related in a diction both other-worldly and colloquial, with elements of

⁴ 10th century Armenian poet who wrote one of the first and important Armenian mystical religious epics, *Book of Lamentations* (most recent translation, 2001, Thomas Samuelian)

American vernacular in a defamiliarized context born from the images and locales that juxtapose the Armenian with the American, without directly naming the former. There is both the literal violence of beating ancient manuscripts that contain an unnamed language and the linguistic violence of cussing—a revelation of a schizophrenic desire for some kind of wholeness or return from one fragmented sense of self to another.

While the Armenian-American poets mentioned above have sporadically dealt with the issues of trauma, the Genocide, and migration in their work (especially Balakian), they often fail to directly address the issue of language, due to their lack of fluency. They are poets mostly in the vein of other more assimilated, hyphenated American poets, and thus part of a mainstream ethnic tradition in American poetry. For example, in “Two Armenians Walking on Sunday”, Der Hovannessian (1994, p.7) writes:

Laughing with an Armenian

is different

from laughing with anyone

else.

You know

you're laughing because

you've survived.

There is an element of appropriation here that can grate once one is aware that the poet is far removed culturally and linguistically from the genocidal threat the poem alludes to. Who is the

you who has survived? Not the poet, who is writing from the comfort and distance of a fully immersed American identity. A similar example of cannibalizing and compartmentalizing oversimplified notions of Armenian culture can be found in two poems by Djanikian (“Grandmother’s Rugs”) and Balakian (“The Oriental Rug”). In Djanikian’s poem (1989, p. 16), which takes place in a home in Egypt, a child overhears the father and grandmother talking as they unroll carpets.

My grandmother was talking.

“Vacuum cleaners,” she was saying,

“They have them in America.

I’ve seen squirrels too. Snow.

Electric irons, the land

Is full of electricity.”

Although more sumptuous in diction and imagery, Balakian’s poem (2001, p.47) only extends the clichés and limited perception in Djanikian.

I napped in the pile

in the brushed and bruised

Kashan on our living room floor

an eight-year-old sleeping

in vegetable dyes—

roots and berries,

tubers, shafts, dry leaves

the prongy soil

of my grandparents' world:

eastern Turkey, once Armenia.

By deploying a central conceit (an oriental rug) which is a predictable symbol that reinforces the cliché of Armenians as carpet dealers, these poems engage in the conventions of mainstream ethnic poetry—exoticization of perceived ethnic characteristics, exploring ancestral roots, and a yearning or grappling with America that is narrow in scope. It is telling that both poems specifically mention Kashan rugs, which are Persian, not Armenian. This sort of misplaced detail, coupled with the conventional tropes mentioned above, infuses these kinds of Armenian-American poems with a disingenuous quality.

This sort of ethnicization is something I am aware of and careful to avoid in my work; it is a vigilance that informs my approach to the poetics in *Capillarity*. Because of my fluency in Armenian and the closeness to the culture that this brings, I am suspicious of poetry that mines Armenianness without real knowledge of the tones, rhythms, and syntax of the language that built it. The fact that Armenian fully informs my daily life nearly as much as English allows me to avoid the cliché of the American writer looking for his roots. Instead, I choose to explore language itself, embracing and utilizing the duality and resonance between both languages. This

is a key element of the distinctiveness of my work in the context of the Armenian-American tradition.

Capillarity seeks to de-exoticize Armenianness, the Genocide, and migration. The openness of the lines, sparse punctuation, intimacy, and constant self-awareness of the voice all work to both name the trauma and events of the past while pointing out the helplessness, desire for change, and two-mindedness of the speaker. For example, from section XLVI (p. 57):

Mother, it's so late in the North Sea air—your son's body

Is lit by faint city light, slouched against the past, soft-lipped

Look how his leg twitches, wants to get going, reach

The word family again, as though such a thing ever was

Migration doesn't allow you to fathom these words

And that has been our ocean, spread silver between us

For years we have been fighting language, tidal

Wave after tidal wave punching sounds [...]

Pummeled by history and unbelonging—

I want to say you shouldn't be afraid

Though the water is endless and loud

Though it scatters us

You shouldn't be afraid

I can see you from here

In this way, my work is closer to Whitman, C.K. Williams, Jorie Graham, and W.S. Merwin than to most Armenian-American poets, and yet retains its distinctively Armenian tenor due to my fluency and habitation of Armenian. Graham and Merwin, for example, work at chiseling and rattling language to get beyond any ethno-specific space. In Merwin's "The Nails" (1993), loss and dislocation are rendered in a way that refuses to pinpoint any ethnic or historical reference, thus allowing the exactitude of the language itself to serve as the amplifier.

I gave you sorrow to hang on your wall

Like a calendar in one color.

I wear a torn place on my sleeve.

It isn't as simple as that.

Between no place of mine and no place of yours

You'd have thought I'd know the way by now

Just from thinking it over.

Oh I know

I've no excuse to be stuck here turning

Like a mirror on a string,

Except it's hardly credible how

It all keeps changing.

Loss has a wider choice of directions

Than the other thing.

The choice of form and technique serves another purpose. By using a style and form in the tradition of Whitman, Ginsberg, and Merwin, the book is infused with an American voice and energy while covering a wide swath of unfamiliar spiritual and historical terrain on the other side of the planet. The poem begins with a direct address (p. 9) that states its purpose—to create a poetics that is in contrast to the themes in conventional Armenian-American poetry:

America, now I will try it this way:

All my years, after all, are bursting yellow-blue on this day

And I am walking as we all have walked on pavement and roads

Treading on each other's struggling skin-souls

Trampling without knowing any better

Our towns are forgetful and we are only human though we have built

And burned down—we toss and turn in our sleep and wake up grumpy

There is no mention of anything Armenian here, and no mention of a non-American geographic location for the first 20 pages of the poem, even though the language hints at otherness. The lines are driven by a restlessness and self-awareness that is American to the core in that the focus is on the forward momentum of the language itself. Whitman speaks to a newfound American openness in his preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855, p. 10).

“The American bard shall delineate no class of persons nor one or two out of the strata of interests nor love most nor truth most nor the soul most nor the body most . . . and not be for the eastern states more than the western or the northern states more than the southern.”

The American poetic idiom, whose energy springs from the adaptability and flexibility of English (and the non-ethnocentric element of American English specifically), allows the speaker in *Capillarity* to explore a cleaved sense of self, both rooted in America and forced to navigate ghosts of a remote past that comes to life in the writing process itself, where the act of self-translation from Armenian thinking into English writing explores and problematizes notions of home, identity, and history at once. In section V (p. 13), there is a cinematic temporal sweep from 1920s Soviet Armenia to present-day Boston, a conflation of selves and pasts:

Now, sometimes when I walk into the future I think about how gone he is—

How gone, my father, grandfather, uncle, aunt, friends, lovers—

Perhaps I recognize my dead and wounded in strangers who wait for the bus with me

Perhaps I feel them in my sleep, dark-winged and sour

Perhaps they gaze at me when I am shaming myself

Or perhaps they could care less and are rumors I am hording

Who will answer for the chatter and stares that outline our paths

Who will speak in tongues to rattle the coma in this land

In contrast to the three more established Armenian-American poets mentioned above whose ethnic poetics *Capillarity* challenges, there are two with whom it is more closely in dialogue and debate, though in different ways—Vahe Oshagan and Leonardo Alishan; two poets (both died in the early 2000s) who moved to the United States as adults and for whom English and Armenian were almost interchangeable. Their work, in its immigrant, exilic, cultural confidence and bilingual fluidity, provided two different perspectives as I assembled *Capillarity*.

Alishan, an Armenian-Iranian who mostly wrote in English, takes the slightly more contrived ancestral explorations of Balakian, Der Hovanessian, and Djanikian and magnifies them in two ways. First, he is not a removed bystander exploring a traumatized, distant culture, but a victim of displacement, loss, and migration (due to the 1979 Iranian Revolution during which his family

was among several thousands of Armenians who fled in fear to the West). He fully inhabits the Armenian customs and culture that rise like phantoms in poem after poem. Indeed, his poetics is one of obsession with his and his Armenian family's narrative that is fragmented and weighed down by transnational realities. This obsession is compounded by his bilingual bind. His is the opposite of my dilemma—English is the secondary language, which injects an awkwardness or clumsiness into his diction and structure but also acts as an intensifier of grief.

Alishan's visceral obsession not just with his family's tragic past but with the Armenian Genocide's collective impact leads him to suggest that

Armenian poets go on raging like passionate adolescents and forfeit attempting more universal, innovative poetry because if they do not, it would mean this bone [the Genocide] can be swallowed. (1985, p. 50)

This single-minded display of grief is something which, although I partly admire, informed my choices while writing *Capillarity*. There is a stylized but intense display of grief and loss, as in section III (p. 11):

Who will put out their hand

So that we can be pulled along when we are tired—

There is a reckoning, so they say,

But I am not convinced since everywhere the living are spiteful toward the dead

Whose silvery litter is molecular

Whose names are scrambled codes beyond spelling

Whose love and hate hug the hug of reconciled siblings

Whose stillness is the stillness of a mute river in winter

Whose bones whimper and gossip only in our telling

Whose judgment is in the mirror as we walk by

They are industrious as pasts

The use of repetition and refusal to pinpoint the source of grief serves to universalize and demystify narrow notions of ethnic narratives, thus both drawing from but also challenging Alishan's approach.

In "Regression" (2010), a visceral, unruly pain is highlighted by a raw, non-native English syntax. The poem focuses on Alishan's mother at his brother's grave (p. 106).

Old Armenian woman breaks

over her son's grave in Utah

into a lamentation

more ancient than her youth.

[...]

Old Armenian woman
has forgotten where she is,
and only remembers
her son,
her home,
and who she used to be.

The slightly disorienting diction of the first line of these stanzas, along with the jarring image of an immigrant mother burying her son in a quintessentially white American state, allows for a depth and complexity missing in the more established poets mentioned above. The poem has a directness of tone that can only come from within the source of the pain, loss, and culture that drives it. Alishan's poems often lack poeticization; he does not need to further stylize the lines because they are a testimony of his actual survival, not an exploration of his distant ancestors'. In this regard, his lack of style becomes a style itself, reinforcing his commitment to "go on raging" instead of focusing on poetic innovation.

Alishan's approach assisted me in avoiding idealizations of Armenianness and America while writing *Capillarity*. I decided that instead of explicitly exploring my Armenian and American heritage, I would focus on the anxieties, liminality, and indefinability that are propelled by both. In section VII (p. 15), the speaker senses that all that he can do is helplessly witness his family's hand-me-down traumatic diasporic narrative:

My kin, I decided to listen to you, to look at what happened to you

To make you coiled in yourselves, restless mutes and ambitious cripples

To make you pick away at your futures until there were scabs everywhere

To make you hold your kids almost in contempt for being open as oceans

To make you slap with one hand and embrace with the other everything about you

Until your children were the ones bruising, dizzy

Although the speaker acts in the sense that he “decides to listen”, and his kin are “made” to behave in certain ways, the anaphora and imagery reinforce an impossibility inherent in their unarticulated past. The speaker listens but what he hears is left out of the poem. There is no assumption of being able to authentically connect to an Armenian past.

In a four-line poem titled “Heretic” (p. 117), Alishan writes:

Like a question mark

on the margin

of an ancient theological manuscript

I do not know who put me here.

The Armenia-related image in the third line is the most obtrusive, with its scholarly, reverential “ancient theological manuscripts”—perhaps as a way to accentuate the graceful melancholy of the question mark questioning itself on the margin. This is Alishan’s ability to excavate the unspeakability of diasporic trauma while not over-explaining. In section of LV of *Capillarity* (p.

66), the image of the question mark goes further, becoming a verb, turning history and trauma into acceptance.

A story, a river, a naked foot—

Once, you knew the weight of these

You knew the spot in the photograph

Where everything present could not be contained

Like a warm arm question-marked under a body

Waiting for a movement, being okay without one

Perhaps more than any of the Armenian and Armenian-American poets mentioned thus far, the one *Capillarity* has the greatest affinity with is, ironically, the one who wrote in western Armenian. Vahe Oshagan was born in Bulgaria, raised in the Middle East, studied in Paris, and taught for many years in the U.S. and Australia. In stark contrast with the rest of the Armenian poetic tradition discussed above, Oshagan's prolific output stands alone in its constant drive to desacralize the Armenian language and strip away the formalities and conventions weighing down Armenian poetry. Oddly enough, he does so by employing a Whitmanesque openness and referential omission that truly universalizes, for the first time, Armenian poetry, rather than keeping it insulated in the nationalist, romanticized mode. Thus, while at odds with the mode exemplified by Balakian, Der Hovanesian, and Djanikian, and only in a peripheral dialogue

with Alishan, *Capillarity* is directly related in motive and approach to that of Oshagan. Although he wrote in western Armenian, his poems are often book-length, avoid direct ethnic references, and use long lines with sparse punctuation. It is an affinity that I became fully aware of while working on this thesis.

In “Toward Life” (1983), one of his few poems translated into English, Armenian is disassociated from its usual poetic themes and form, coming at the reader in a torrent of unpunctuated colloquialisms.

My life is the light
plastered wastefully on the eye of the world
poured freely for the famine-crazed wild multitudes
gigantic bribe for the hiding atoms to come out and look at me
perhaps we will recognize each other have something to say
at the exit of the same womb we too have crouched seated for centuries
our eyes on the empty white walls we smile like idiots

There is nothing explicitly Armenian in this poem because the language itself is Armenian, infused with the cultural DNA of Armenian culture. Thus, there is no need to declare itself as such—the core of the poem is human before anything else. The voice is disembodied and dislocated, making meaning from the language itself rather than any cultural signifiers.

There is a similar attempt in *Capillarity* to use disorientating syntax and imagery to desacralize the conventions of Armenian-American poetry and thus get closer to the essence of bicultural liminality.

Some call it the past an ember

There it is a hot song on your palm

No matter how you look at it it looks

Away

I should not have left

What choice did I have what

Other steps could I take all the lights were on

In the house but not in my father's body (p. 72)

Through a diffused use of pronouns, absence of ethnic markers, and enjambment without punctuation, there is a heightened disconnect between the speaker, an opaque past, and the intimacy of losing a parent.

Oshagan was in certain ways a double exile. Although his name was known and respected throughout the diasporic Armenian world, it was mostly because of his articles and essays in the Armenian press, not because people actually read his poetry (when they did, most Armenians disliked it for its abrasive challenge to traditional notions of Armenian poetry and identity). He

was thus physically in exile while also being on the margins of the already small community able to read his poetry. There is an effortless, chaotic honesty in “Toward Life” that both bemoans and rejoices in the speaker’s marginality:

whom to tell the story how to tell it no one believes it anymore
that what happened was not an accident and the fairy tale has no end
a thrust cork floats on eternity’s surface and bottom
there was no escape when they lay the trap.

I will go toward life
to the stairs of the future there a duplicate standing naked
to the impossible appointment when is it where is it oh my god before they lock up the
coffee shop
to the sidewalks of midnight to wander a famished shadow
I am and I am not we will live in the multitude of the covered market
I sell memories . . . I sell memories . . . who will buy them . . . come take them . . .
I offer them for free
I am made of crumbs fallen to the ground around the potter’s chair
given shape in a hurry in the dark incomplete
placed at the center breathless to endure until I reach some place

Little research has been conducted into Oshagan's work even though he is recognized as one of the most important Armenian figures of the twentieth-century (Keshishyan, p. 72). At the same time, although I am younger and not as established as Oshagan, I have also become somewhat known in the Armenian-American community as an intellectual and poet, but am little read and certainly not held in the same esteem as Balakian or Der Hovanessian, whose poetry is more accessibly ethnic and familiar. In that way, like Oshagan, I am an anomaly in the diasporic Armenian poetic tradition, both inside and outside its confines. By not pandering to a regressive, backward-looking definition of identity and avoiding broad-brush Armenian tropes (Orientalism, genocide, carpets, food) my work, though known, is not as marketable within the ethnic canon, nor does it fit diasporan Armenians' understandings of Armenian-American poetry. I am alienated from the very community I am potentially speaking to and for due to its continued conservatism, nationalism, and obsession with the Genocide.

Ultimately, *Capillarity* is at home among the growing number of bicultural, multilingual American poets whose works and context will be discussed in the next chapter. I, along with such poets as Kaveh Akbar and Ocean Vuong, have a renewed desire to reimagine the past and replace ethnic poetry with a new strand of American poetry that places language at the forefront of its poetics rather than conventional symbols and themes. My poetics is vigilant about avoiding the sentimentality, appropriation, and stereotypical imagery found in much Armenian-American poetry. *Capillarity* begins with a farewell to conventional Armenian-American poetry and turns towards a broader American bicultural mode.

Chapter 3: *Capillarity*, bicultural poetics, and contemporary poetry

The task of *Capillarity* is to question and reimagine the conventions and themes of most previous Armenian-American poetry and ‘ethnic’ poetry in general; a task required in order to address my particular linguistic bind and cultural liminality. To accomplish this, the book is structured as a book-length poem which utilizes the following: a fragmented narrative of long lines that slowly loses all punctuation by the poem’s end; referential omission (a conscious avoidance of specific ethnic, national, cultural markers); and a disembodied central voice that is both an intimate and pluralistic *I/you/we*. In this chapter, I will discuss how these components function within the book, and how this informs *Capillarity*’s place in contemporary bicultural poetry and the wider American tradition as a whole.

Bilingualism and a Culturally Insulated Upbringing

Capillarity strives to question and reimagine a deep-rooted, unconscious desire to fit into certain received notions of Armenian and American identity. Though my family resided in the Boston area, my parents raised me as though I had migrated with them from Aleppo and Soviet Armenia. It was as though I too was an immigrant rather than an American like any other. Thus, inside the home, my native-born American identity was offset and shadowed by an equally powerful and more complex Armenian identity. When I took up poetry seriously as a teenager, my literary apprenticeship was a dueling, destabilizing experience. On the one hand, there was the American and British poetic canon; on the other, there was an Armenian tradition that seemed passionate and familiar, but came to me indirectly and opaquely.

Helen Vendler (1995) explores the ways in which poets master and are mastered by their “givens”—their fates or obsessions—whether they be John Berryman’s manic depression, alcoholism and tortuous id, Robert Lowell’s prominent New England pedigree and the force of history, or Jorie Graham’s multilingualism and the problem of translating thought into language. Each of these important American poets was handed a fate, of sorts, and each used poetry as a way to remake the language of obsession into the language of survival and renewal. Through formal and thematic innovation, their poems seek to clear a path through the seemingly immovable obstacles life places before them.

In *Dream Songs* (1969), Berryman concocts Henry, an alter ego who speaks in syntactically surprising, almost orgasmic tones. In ‘Dream Song 14’, the disarming use of diction and juxtaposition of syntax disrupts whatever an average reader might be expecting (p. 16).

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatedly) ‘Ever to confess you’re bored
means you have no

Inner Resources.’ I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.

Berryman's jarring diction and syntax, which is both direct and disruptive, reframes the burden of depression and alcoholism into a new poetic space, and thus a new perspective (Vendler, pp. 34-35). The act of inventing Henry's voice allows Berryman to live with and through his givens.

My own givens are the dueling forces of my American identity and an inherited lingual and cultural Armenian past that shadows my work. As a feverish long poem that slowly sheds punctuation, *Capillarity* attempts to reside within the poetic process itself, directly facing this paradox of fate and will. Section XXIX (p. 19) finds the speaker acknowledging as much:

Breathless, I am out in the sun undone by all the pulses

Testing me inside, not letting me sleep well

I fight with my address—the lion and gazelle, or two rams having it out

The predator's gaze is the look of exile

On this street then I will finish this line, this lie

Bilingualism plays a large role in creating such a paradox. Among Anglophone writers of Armenian heritage there are a rare few who are bi or trilingual to the point of being nearly fluent—that is where my challenge hinges. When it comes to one's literary language, 'nearly fluent' is not enough for poetic innovation. This linguistic challenge can become especially debilitating and limiting within the traditional parameters of Armenian identity that tend to favor conformity, self-censorship, and conservative values. This linguistic *almost-ness* has been

my given – my fate. A few poets in the diaspora, like myself, may know conversational Armenian very well, to the point of seeming fluent, but when it comes to having literary mastery, we find ourselves tongue-tied. We try to manifest our Armeno-English thoughts on the page only to get tangled up in the realization that our proficiency in Armenian lacks enough mastery to create poetry with confidence. Consequently, we struggle to render the messiness and complexity of our fluid, hybrid identities in the more dominant host language, which by default dilutes a whole set of ideas and realities, absorbing and morphing them into an Anglicized perspective of sorts. In section XII (p. 21) there is a hint of this:

The road from Lincoln to Watertown in the muggy May dark
Tickles your throat until you cough

Your mother, aunt, and grandmother go
From being scared of coyotes and the ocean
To hysterical laughter about grandma's English

As the infrequent oncoming headlights scan over you
There is something in that car
Both familiar and awful—you think you see it
Watching you from the woods as you pass
And it will be at home when you get there

Their past—a fever

This particular poem is drawn directly from raw, colloquial Armenian thoughts that I reframed in English, using sparse and direct diction. It captures the foreignness and underlying anxieties, but loses the humor and rawness of the Armenian, revealing the doubly challenging task of attempting innovative poetry while thinking in two polar opposite languages.

Vendler also looks at the example of Jorie Graham, who grew up speaking a number of languages (p. 108). Graham's languages are all Romance or Germanic languages (French, Italian, English). This is a critical point. As much as Graham's multilingualism is her given, challenging the ways in which her reality is perceived and expressed, it is still within the realm of easily recognizable mainstream Western academic and poetic languages. Thus, her obsession with how language connects to reality is safer than it appears, providing at least the semi-comfort (and let's face it, marketability) of being within a cultural and linguistic world shared by millions of others who can at least recognize that the words she uses are somehow familiar, even if in another language. Multilingual poets whose other languages are little-known and even use different letters must, whether they like it or not, grapple constantly with difficult editorial and structural choices.

I would argue that Graham's 'First World givens' have a privileged quality. This does not mean her obsession with language is trivial or less valid. It just contextualizes it a bit more in order to highlight the blurry, marginal status of writers who linger between English and non-Germanic or Romance languages. After all, what of those of us whose other language(s) render us unable to simply switch from one word to another in our books? We typically avoid this issue by favoring English. While the work and purpose of the poet is foremost to make poems that come

closest to an essence or truth within a particular moment, the realities and complexities of publishing and readership are factors often hard to ignore completely.

In the early stages of writing *Capillarity*, there was a moment when the words suddenly seemed strange, removed, and inauthentic. Perhaps more disturbingly, the poems did not *sound* right, and sound, perhaps more than anything, is the main ingredient of powerful, innovative poetry. The issue was that I was writing a long poem in English that is focused heavily on a family's foreign trajectory, culture, identity, and history without fully taking into account that many of the memories that had shaped me to that moment were infused with Armenian, not English. Although I was a Boston native, the work I was creating as an American poet in American English was resistant to being fully realized without making space for the other core component of my own identity. In section XXII (p. 32) the speaker is caught in an overwhelming uncertainty, again in the role of self-interrogator, witness, and defendant all at once:

[My kin] are limp stalks of grain

In the middle of nowhere—they are in my sleep and clothes

See how they are beguiled by their own damage

Clerks and magistrates have marveled at my awkward slurring

That is the only way I can explain how I am still here

Go home the jury finally said (silly jurors)

The manuscript of restless poems stayed in my laptop, mostly untouched, until I moved to Glasgow to study with Michael Schmidt. Being so far removed from my American and Armenian comfort zones in Boston, I came face to face with a truth I had perhaps intuitively known but somehow side-stepped all my life: that is, my inner voice exists in Armenian and English simultaneously, almost interchangeably; however, I had not considered writing in Armenian, or combining the two languages. The reason my manuscript seemed inauthentic and distant was because it was written by a compartmentalized part of myself (“it’s me, not you”). For years, I had reasoned that English was my dominant host language. Perhaps it was a way to balance or resist the obsessive identity control of my Armenian upbringing and the community’s group-think. Thus, questions arose. If a poet writes in English about the Armenian experience and happens to know (almost) the same or similar words in Armenian, which words should be written? Which are truer? Or are both partly true? After initial attempts at individual shorter poems, I realized the form had to open up to expose and embrace these questions rather than trying to contain them.

The matter of language manifests itself in the ways in which yearning for a half-known past (a distant Armenian history that lingers within the home) and native-known present (American consciousness when outside the home) are conflated. There is a constant shift in time, space, and perspective, as in *Capillarity XLI* (p. 52):

One day you will arrive at the door
Crusted pale with mud, dry, noiseless
The cough in your heart will tangle itself
Like the fingers of your father at his wake

Tangled the way cells build us then go

The familial merges with the cosmic and molecular as another mode of exploring the nature of history and identity. The forward momentum of the language springs from the messy, vibrant, groping-in-the-dark quality of transforming Armenian language thoughts into English language poetry. Later in the same section:

Oh, how shall we explain it—

There is an elegant difficulty in breath

Just as a heavy airplane flying makes little sense

Or just as the silverback at the zoo gazes and gazes

We are falling so fast it feels still as sandstone

Rather than language being a solution or a retreat into ethnic nationalism or exoticization, there is an embrace of the volatility and melancholic joy possible within the speaker's dilemma. He is not looking for healing or a kind of return to some essence of ethnic identity or history. There is a sense that history itself is slippery and perhaps as confused itself as individuals who try to penetrate its ways.

One of the questions that arises when writing a long poem, especially in the 21st century, is how to reconcile the personal lyric voice with the long poem's epic scope and attempt to speak to and for a collective, a people. *Capillarity* uses the long poem in terms of historical scope, at a macro level, while the lyric becomes the zoom lens that integrates the personal into the larger narrative. In this way, the totality is more of an anti-epic, as all modern epics must be to some extent. The "I" (and pronouns in general) is suspect, as is the quest. Though there is constant motion, the speaker seems to be still, and the quest is, in the end, internal. The narrative, aware

of its own traps, is non-linear and full of contradictions. The self-inquisition is also developed in section XV (p. 25), in which non-sequitur questions lead to a blank non-answer (which is a sort of answer that *Capillarity* offers throughout).

Q: Are you expecting a call?

A: The splintered shield mocks the sweaty palm

Q: Who is lying down on the carpet in Virginia, aged 8?

A: Late bloomer, your heart is two

Q: Will you straighten your back at least?

A: There is bravery on the outskirts of the town

Q: Who will testify?

A:

In *The Tale of the Tribe* (1980), Michael Bernstein discusses how “[Ezra] Pound wanted to give his epic a ‘grounding’ in a system that was more than purely individual and intuitive”. *The*

Cantos (1970) is a machinery of wide swerves and meticulous data that aims for a kind of containment of history. It is somewhat novelistic in that sense. Indeed, Bernstein points out Pound's unwillingness to "[surrender] the analytic element of 'the prose tradition' which he intended to recapture for verse" (p. 30). In this sense, Pound's modern epic is striving for something intellectual as much as aesthetic, as in this example from Canto IV:

Beneath it, beneath it
Not a ray, not a slivver, not a spare disc of sunlight
Flaking the black, soft water;
Bathing the body of nymphs, of nymphs, and Diana,
Nymphs, white-gathered about her, and the air, air,
Shaking, air alight with the goddess
fanning their hair in the dark,
Lifting, lifting and waffing:
Ivory dipping in silver,
Shadow'd, o'ershadow'd

Whether he succeeded in such an ambitious project or not is still hotly debated, of course. But one cannot approach the writing of contemporary long form poetry without wrestling with Pound's influence (Bernstein, p. 30).

Before Pound lost himself in the unending composition of *The Cantos*, he had made a tenuous peace with Whitman. In 1916's "A Pact", he begrudgingly addresses his poetic step-father: "It was you that broke the new wood/Now is a time for carving." But by the time of *The Cantos*,

Pound's tentative reconciliation with Whitman had been left behind in the rearview of his ambition for poetry to contain politics, economics, and history on a much larger, comprehensive scale, without the earnestness and unabashed "I" found in *Leaves of Grass*. For example, part 52 from *Song of Myself* (1892):

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,

I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,

But I shall be good health to you nevertheless

The fluid, all-encompassing use of pronouns is one way that *Capillarity* is purposefully constructed at the edges of Whitman's (and Ginsberg's) ripple effect rather than Pound's. Compared to *The Cantos*, there is a relatively stable speaker in *Capillarity*, one who lacks or refutes the desire for a mammoth containment of history. Instead, the pronouns themselves are what is mammoth and compressed, far-reaching and close up. *Capillarity* disregards the specific data of history (and pronouns) and instead evokes the ways in which that history inhabits the minds and spirits of those it sweeps up in its wake. In section LII, for example:

Do you remember all the fog crowded in your head like cotton?

Geography had nothing to offer but distance

And distance had even less

We are wherever we are and can know ourselves only
As a leaf knows its truth; changing, letting
Go, turning into everything else, turning
Into this spot on your shoulder
Where my arm rests now—

I am telling you this because no one told me— (p. 63)

The long poem form, with its expansiveness, each section taking its own shape while connected to the whole, allowed for my Armenian thoughts to merge and express themselves in a more rhythmically and syntactically open poetic space. This structural choice then allowed a number of related themes to surface.

Cultural Liminality, Generational Trauma, and Memory

Along with the problems and nuances of bilingualism, *Capillarity* also grapples with the inheritance of collective trauma, dislocation of identity, and witnessing. At the same time, it is suspicious of these concepts that so often lead to more rigid themes and imagery. The fragmented nature of the narrative, referential omission, and gradual loss of punctuation is another strategy to deflect this concern and let those themes reveal themselves in a nuanced, dynamic way, as in section LVIII (p. 69).

The family looks at the river in another new city

The river bends away and hugs mud whispers in frost

The cold is a testament is the gospel of them standing there

The feet under them are tired want more dream-song

The melody stutters from geography becomes oak

The documents in their pockets are barely true anymore

The truth is the braid of the youngest daughter's hair

The 1960s snap them upon the shore a stick-figure family

Clichés or stereotypes of immigration and foreignness are elided by the disjointed imagery and objective tone. The voice in the poem is as cold as the weather described, avoiding sentimentality or simplification.

In the past few years, the complexities and questions addressed in *Capillarity* have been surfacing in the works of other bicultural American poets (though none discussed here have written a book-length poem). Cathy Park Hong, who “grew up speaking two languages [English and Korean], both of them mangled,” (2011) often creates a Creole in her poems. “—Ah Ketty-San, why so mori? Maybe you need upgrade / of person? // History shat on every household.” (2015) Her contrasting diction is jarring and effective in pinpointing the confusion that being bicultural can elicit. There is also a dry, impersonal tone that verges on sarcasm in regards to the aloofness of history, also found in *Capillarity*.

America, your homeless are not the beggars and street people—

They are the hop-scotching peasants whose nations are anxious myths now

The crowd asks

What did you expect going out alone like that—

History wears pantyhose over its head and gets away with murder every time (p. 19)

Ocean Vuong, a Vietnamese-American poet, employs a similarly removed tone and diction in his poem about his family's experience during the Vietnam War. In "Tell Me Something Good" (2015) he writes:

You are standing in the minefield again.

Someone who is dead now

told you it is where you will learn

to dance. Snow on your lips like a salted

cut, you leap between your deaths, black as god's

periods. Your arms cleaving little wounds

in the wind. You are something made. The made

to survive, which means you are somebody's

son.

The *you* here is both one and many at once. This ability of pronouns to morph between close-up and wide-angle perspectives is an element that the lyric provides—a useful mechanism for

bicultural poets to expose and observe the intricacies of hybrid identities and inherited cultural memory.

Capillarity employs the lyric within the long poem for added dimensionality and scope. Jahan Ramazani claims, “with its deep formal and allusive memory, lyric both locates and dislocates the speaker” (Ramazani, p. 5). The song (in this case, a long, fragmented song) itself is the reality, the point of departure and return, where the *I* of *Capillarity* is both one and many, fractured and whole, American and Armenian, fact and fiction. The lyrical long poem allows for various masks to be worn and ripped off, and all are the real face of the speaker. This is reflected in *Capillarity* XIV (p. 24):

I am making a mask to put over my face

Slow, deliberate

Like dreamscape erosion

I am constructing it on the dining room table

It is not for hiding or becoming someone else

(I’ve tried both and failed)

Modernity’s globalizing drive inherently makes modern and especially contemporary poetry’s participation in its processes self-evident (2009, p.6). Because the lyric often demands compression, utilizing it within a long poem allows for a counterpoint between intense intimacy and cinematic sweeps. It is also a way to highlight a lack of fixity within diasporic identity.

In “The New World” (2016), Kaveh Akbar, an Iranian-American poet, both articulates and questions the authenticity of his cultural inheritance.

The soul is a thirsty
antelope nervously lapping up
water from a pool
in the hunter’s backyard.

Or so I’ve been told. Sometimes
when I listen to old Persian music
I get so sad I can actually smell rose water.

This is a Real Thing That Happens.

Bicultural liminality is embraced here, the speaker comfortable and confident in the second-hand, fluid nature of his Persian identity. Indeed, all the poets mentioned in this chapter approach their fragmented identities with a globalized, 21st century clear-sightedness that demands a poetic language devoid of simplification and recycled imagery.

In Fady Joudah and Golan Haji’s “After Wine” (2018), a conversation between friends is transformed into a frenetic prose poem. A Palestinian-American, bilingual poet, Joudah sometimes self-translates.

Over dinner we spoke of the game of recurrence dissolving into an old dog’s tail,
loquacious desire far from the borders of the body, yet is the body’s. What’s inside and
never makes it out to skin or what’s outside and doesn’t touch us. Victims, we told

ourselves, will inherit the future one day, but souls will linger distant from redemption. Don't follow the signage and keep your eyes on the phrase. News of the explosion will hang around. The hell of pictures on the web. Faces of the dead on Facebook will wait for your walk home. A woman who awakened your first lust when you were a kid was killed in the morning while talking to her sister on the phone. First a blast then stillness.

The tone combines a matter-of-fact quality with phrases that have hints of self-translation (“souls will linger distant from redemption”; “a woman who awakened your first lust”). The lines, complete thoughts in themselves, have a pulsating quality, a narrative voice barely holding its psyche together although it is at a breaking point.

Capillarity XXXIX (p. 49) is partly written as a prose poem to accentuate the velocity and simultaneity inherent in bicultural identity.

O let me sleep an unbroken fence around the home our bodies do not fit inside weighed
down weeping sailors we are quarrelsome with our voices and touch our faces sometimes
in disgust at what it feels like I swear to you I am unseamed and songly just notice the
bright air and trembling of your dreams that barely caress your scalp before turning to
sweat and nonsense I see something on the horizon as they say so why should I too not
say it I see something

Ultimately, contemporary bicultural American poets are defiant, playful, and aware of their 21st century distance from twentieth-century ethnic rigidity, stereotypes, and poetic conventions. There is a revelatory and ecstatic element within the complexities and questions, as in section XXIII (p. 33).

We are crippled but shall lie together in the horizon and hum at what comes

We are meandering and lost but shall meet up at the corner and know it as right

If we say *mother* it shall not taste of coal

If we say *father* our loneliness shall not make a scene

The streets shall find themselves covered with our population's grief and ecstasy [...]

Those who doubt and squirm in abjection shall drown in their own spittle

Those who do not relinquish petty ammunitions or bitter thoughts shall continue blind

Tummy aches shall perish this afternoon

This afternoon we will come out of hiding and the hiding will come out of us

Witnesses everywhere, cup your hands

While slowly shedding all punctuation in a book-length lyrical poem, *Capillarity* embraces diasporic melancholy as necessary in order to be in a constant state of becoming, rather than just

being, American. It is the first book-length Armenian-American poem pushing that tradition to shed its conventions and participate in the wider American and global poetic discourse.

Conclusion

In an interview (in Armenian) with Hrayr Eulmessekian (*Vahe Oshagan: Between Acts*, 2016), Vahe Oshagan contrasts his poetic quest to give shape to life's chaos and absurdity, with the historic expectations put on Armenian poets to create work in the service of the nation.

Oshagan asserts that the Armenian writer's role is not to educate or ennoble the Armenian people. The purpose of his own poetry is to use the Armenian language itself to understand what it means to be alive, what it means to be human. *Capillarity* takes up Oshagan's perspective and ambition, but in English rather than Armenian. It is the first book-length poem of the 21st century that seeks to disrupt the conservative Armenian-American tradition.

The driving force of *Capillarity* is the metaphorical aspect of diasporic, exilic consciousness.

Metaphorical because I am neither an immigrant with first-hand knowledge of what that entails, nor an American untethered by a complex, bilingual, traumatized other identity—my experience of half of my psyche is in large part second-hand, filtered over many years by generations whose lived memories I carry. Thus, it is as if I was born an expat, somehow exiled from both cultural halves that make me whole. As Edward Said (1996) points out, “Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others” (p. 53).

The structural and thematic strands in *Capillarity* attempt to transform the inbetweenness of competing languages and histories into a poetics of becoming; a fragmented meditation on the kinetic energy of being bicultural, rather than the sentimentality and mythologizing it has induced in much Armenian-American and ethnic poetry to date. The motivation was, in many ways, to rid myself not of the Armenian language or culture but of the limitations that conventional definitions of Armenian identity impose. It is a motivation to reckon with the “twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one's own life” (Hobsbawm, 1989, p. 3).

Capillarity, with its distinctive perspective and approach, also joins the wider poetic activity of contemporary bicultural poets who are, in their own ways, translating and re-translating cultural and linguistic parts of themselves, with the common goal of redefining and reimagining what it means to be a human and a citizen of the world.

In *The Bilingual Text* (2016, p. 13), Hokenson and Munson define various categories of literary self-translators. One such category is the ambient translingual.

An ambient translingual has been exposed to two or more languages in different settings, which may be either within a single social milieu (such as home and school) or across different milieus or even borders (such as through migration, exile, or travel). Ambient translinguals have different

degrees of competency in these languages, may write in some, but usually only speak and write one language well.

Although I do not perfectly fit into this definition, I choose to, if only for the word *ambient*.

Ambient: surrounding on all sides. From the French and Latin meaning encircling, going round.

This, it seems to me, captures the quest of the bilingual, bicultural poet, consciously deconstructing and transforming the doorway between languages and worlds into a whole house, a whole neighborhood, a whole terrain held together by an ambient identity, willfully harmonious and dissonant at once.

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