“Accidental” Encounters with the Ottoman Armenians in Contemporary Turkey

Rencontres « accidentelles » avec les Arméniens ottomans dans la Turquie actuelle

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What is the point of appending the news of an earthquake with such information as ‘many of the region’s Armenian residents were massacred and deported during World War I’?"¹ This rhetorical question was posed by a columnist in the Turkish daily Milliyet, as he rebuked the way in which the world-renowned news agency Reuters reported the 2011 Van earthquake in eastern Turkey.² “Had what happened in Van been a political incident or riot,” argued the columnist, Reuters would have been right to “emphasize ethnic backgrounds” and “allude to the contested pages of history;” but the event being reported was only “a natural disaster.”³ However, in 2013 these “pages of history” would once again be referenced in relation to the earthquake, due to reports that mentioned “chapels belonging to Islamized Armenians” being discovered under the rubble in Van.⁴ Indeed, Van is not the first case where an earthquake in eastern Turkey prompted discussions on what happened during World War I to the region’s Armenian population. According to folk wisdom, the havoc wreaked by the 1939 Erzincan earthquake resulted from the persecuted “Armenians’ curse taking effect.”⁵ The 1983 Erzurum-Kars
earthquake has been not only subject to a similar belief but also interpreted as evidence of the extent to which corruption and shoddiness have characterized architecture and construction activity in Turkey following the annihilation of the Ottoman Armenians; many of the buildings that withstood the devastation have been said to bear the latter’s signature.  

What might such cropping up of the past through present-day contingencies imply for the ways in which history and truth are experienced and understood? In what follows, I discuss this question through a number of unexpected encounters with the Ottoman Armenians. In addition to “natural disasters” of the sort mentioned above, the triggers for these encounters also include my doctoral fieldwork on the ways Turkey’s episodes of socio-political violence dating from the second half of the 20th century are remembered through architecture. Although, at the outset, this research was not meant to have anything to do with either the Ottoman period or Armenians, when in the field, the legacy of the Ottoman Armenians kept cropping up in a way not unlike they have done in the accounts and reports mentioned above. In this essay, I discuss these unexpected encounters in light of Rosalind Morris’ notion of “accident,” engaging especially with her proposition to “displace the focus in trauma studies from that of a missed encounter to that of a poorly anticipated one – from that of a wound to that of an accident.” I suggest that considering such encounters as accidents in Morris’ terms requires a radical rethinking of the temporality of history; it implicates the traumatic event as not just a distant, isolated and immutable past but also one which constantly crops up in the present and runs the risk of so doing in the future.

In the second part of this essay, I turn to the multiplicity of the actors involved in the encounters discussed: bones, trees, living people, mountains, stones, buildings, rivers, fault lines, and valleys. Attending to this multiplicity, I suggest that the temporal pervasiveness characteristic of Morris’ notion of accident is in this case coupled by its spatial counter-
part as it stretches above, below, through and across the geography concerned. I finally consider this spatial and temporal pervasiveness through a critical engagement both with Marc Nichanian’s argument regarding the impossibility of conceptualizing genocide as “historical truth”\textsuperscript{8} and with Bruno Latour’s notion of “geostory,” a past whose contemporary significance builds on an entanglement of human and nonhuman forces.\textsuperscript{9} I conclude by arguing that the spatial and temporal pervasiveness of the violent histories encountered in the “accidents” in question is a call to begin to speak of a “geostorical” truth regarding the Ottoman Armenians.

ACCIDENTAL ENCOUNTERS WITH VIOLENT HISTORIES: JUMBLING UP TIME AND TRAVERSING SPACE

In her work on political violence in Southeast Asia, the anthropologist Rosalind Morris discusses a particular sort of ghostliness stemming from violent histories that is “densest in the places where the accidents of modernity are likely to occur.”\textsuperscript{10} She observes that this ghostliness is less about a lack of closure, as in the case of “a matter of improper burial,” than about the blurring of the very distinction between the dead and the living.\textsuperscript{11} Morris then analyses this observation through a critical engagement with Freud’s notion of trauma and its Kantian origins that lie in the German philosopher’s understanding of accident. She finds that, when violent histories become manifest as present-day accidents, the resulting disturbance of causality is noteworthy not just because it complicates the linear experiencing of time. This disturbance is also significant because it differs radically from a cyclical return to an open wound that so often underpins trauma discourse; it repudiates the sequentiality between the past, present and future, and inhibits the localization of violent histories only within the past. Accidental manifestations of violent histories therefore signal “the condition of possibility of a political or ethical opening to the future [...] whose form is not determined \textit{a priori}.”\textsuperscript{12} Morris suggests that accidents as such call for a shift of focus in trauma studies: from irretreivably lost opportunities indicated by the concept of “the wound,” to unexpected encounters that she seeks to capture through her notion of “the accident.”\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{itemize}
\item[8.] M. Nichanian, 2008, p. 3.
\item[9.] B. Latour, 2014.
\item[10.] R.C. Morris, 2008, p. 230.
\item[11.] Ibid., p. 231.
\item[12.] Ibid., p. 236.
\end{itemize}
Morris’ concept of accident has significant resonances with the legacy of the Ottoman Armenians, to which I was first alerted due to a set of unexpected encounters during my doctoral fieldwork. My doctoral thesis concerned the ways in which political atrocities in Turkey dating from the second half of the twentieth century are architecturally commemorated. What motivated this research was the fact that a number of the sites where such atrocities took place have, since the 1990s, been subject to campaigns for transformation into memorial museums. Many of the campaigns have been led by grassroots organizations representing Kurds, Alevi (a faith group whose practices and rituals are different from those observed by the Sunnis, Turkey’s demographically predominant sect of Islam) and/or leftists, who have claimed the legacy of those killed in coup-era torture or hangings in the 1970s and 1980s, and in extrajudicial executions or massacres connived at by the country’s various administrations in the 1990s. In short, at its inception, my doctoral fieldwork was intended to concern neither the Ottoman period nor the Armenians.

What I encountered in the field, however, threw this intention into disarray. Consider my research in the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited city of Diyarbakır, whose sites associated with the torturing and extrajudicial killing of the members of pro-Kurdish and left-wing political movements include its historic Citadel. Having served as Diyarbakır’s administrative center for hundreds of years, the Citadel fell from grace when state institutions were moved northwest to Yenişehir (literally: “the New Town”) in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, the site became infamous as the headquarters of JİTEM (Jandarma İstibbarat ve Terörle Mücadele abbreviated, in English: “Gendarmerie Intelligence and Fight against Terrorism”), the non-official but state-sponsored paramilitary organization then deployed against leftist and pro-Kurdish individuals. In the late noughties a state-sponsored project was launched to restore the Citadel and turn it into a city museum. My fieldwork in 2012 took place as this project was drawing to a close, and concerned, among other questions, if and to what extent the officially sanctioned history presented in the museum would be affected by the Citadel’s more recent and violent past highlighted especially by pro-Kurdish organizations in the city. Then the unexpected encounter

13. For Morris’ further discussion of the concept of accident, see R.C. Morris, 2010.
happened when, in January 2012, during the installation of the new museum’s heating infrastructure, workers came across piles of bones [see figure 1, p. 245]. The discovery initially prompted pro-Kurdish organizations to protest at the Citadel and raise demands of truth and justice regarding the site’s JÎTEM-related past. But, when the state’s Forensic Medicine Institution identified the bones as “at least a hundred years old,” the organizations in question stopped pursuing the case. I observed that, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the limited scope of the forensic analysis and the pro-Kurdish organizations’ sudden abdication, rumors began to spread in Diyarbakır regarding the bones belonging to Armenians killed during the 1894-96 massacres carried out by the Hamidiye Regiments, the predominantly Kurdish armed forces deployed by the Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid II. For many of those to whom I talked, the 1890s and 1990s were not unrelated, either. This was a relation they thought best captured in the Kurdish phrase “Em şûv in, hûn ji paşûv [If we are dinner, then you will be supper],” a context-specific version of the English saying “what goes around comes around” that a local Armenian man allegedly told his executioners a hundred years ago.14 Indeed, this powerful saying echoes Morris’ point that accidents render violent histories temporally pervasive, as they unsettle the future (“supper”) rather than just triggering a return to an unresolved past (“dinner”), and in so doing, conflate these two temporalities otherwise thought distinct and sequential.

What introduces the spatial counterpart to the aforementioned temporal pervasiveness is a second unexpected encounter I had during my research on the built environment’s role in commemorating an arson attack that took place on 2 July 1993, before the eyes of an inactive law enforcement, in the central-eastern city of Sivas. Targeting the participants of a cultural festival being held in the city by an association representing Turkey’s Alevís, the 1993 attack had left thirty-three of the festival’s guests dead. One of the ways in which the arson has been architecturally commemorated comprises a set of memorials in Alevi villages across the Emlek region of rural Sivas whence a number of victims originally hail and where I conducted fieldwork in the summer of 2012.15 During this fieldwork, in order to try and geographically orientate

14. For more on the findings of this fieldwork, see E. Çaylı, 2015.
15. A number of early findings from this fieldwork have been published in E. Çaylı, 2014.
myself, I would ask my interlocutors the names of the land forms surrounding us [see figures 2 and 3, pp. 246-247]. A stream that bordered one of the villages was called Consignment (Sevkiyat). Another one was named Bloody (Kanlı) Stream. But these are the vernacular names, I would be told; they will not show up in official maps. Consignment Stream is where the Armenians from a nearby village were gathered in 1915 and “consigned” eastward. Bloody Stream is where Armenians living in another part of the region were killed en masse; the stream ran blood-red for months. In these accounts, the legacy of violence emerges as engraved into the land, and transmitted via colloquialism. If, in this case, the legacy of violence does not seem imbued with the same sort of temporal pervasiveness that resulted from the encounter with bones in the Diyarbakır Citadel, it has certainly been rendered spatially pervasive, as it traverses the topography, geology, and toponymy of the region – and possibly even beyond, if one considers the mobile nature of streams and words.

Embodying both sorts of pervasiveness presented separately in the above-mentioned encounters is a set of accidents discussed in Adnan Çelik and Namık Kemal Dinç’s recently published field notes on how the Armenian genocide is remembered across contemporary Diyarbakır. Interlocutors talk to the authors about various ways in which “the Armenians’ curse” has taken its toll both on particular individuals involved in the perpetration of the genocide and on the region’s larger population. Indeed, such attribution of the cause of adverse events to “the Armenians’ curse” is not just a contemporary phenomenon in the region; its history stretches as far back to the immediate aftermath of the genocide. See Y. Ternon, 2007, pp. 341-346.

Moreover, some of this folk wisdom features the land forms in question as not just passive backdrops but also forceful actors; the materialization of “the Armenians’ curse” at times takes the form of what one would
normally speak of as merely “natural” events or disasters, such as landslides, floods, and subsidence.

If such “natural accidents” are taken to render nature an active agent in the revealing of truth regarding a violent history that is otherwise thought to only involve humans, what might this imply for how the concept of truth itself is understood and experienced? In the next sections of the essay, I would like to explore this question at the interface of Marc Nichanian’s thoughts on “historical truth” in the case of the Armenian genocide and Bruno Latour’s theses regarding the entanglement of human and nonhuman forces in the making of history.

TRUTH, ARCHIVE, TESTIMONY: FROM “DOCUMENT VERSUS MONUMENT” TO “ENVIRONMENT”

Marc Nichanian’s work can in many ways be defined as a persistent exploration of the intimate link between genocide and modernity, especially in the case of the persecution of the Ottoman Armenians in late 19th and early 20th centuries. According to Nichanian, if what is at stake is the demonstration of the factuality of this persecution, calling it “genocide” will never serve the intended purpose. This is because, he argues, not only is genocide “not a fact” but also “it is the very destruction of the fact, of the notion of fact, of the factuality of fact.” For Nichanian, the logic that underpins genocide, in his words “the genocidal will,” is homologous with that which underpins the modern institution of the archive. He suggests that, insofar as the concept of fact is understood according to this logic, which has limited the factuality of events to the question of their existence in the archive, attempts at revealing historical truth are trapped in a vicious circle governed by a self-referential and self-validating episteme. One way in which Nichanian proposes to break this circle is to develop various other types of truth, namely:

[...] a truth grounded in law, a truth grounded in memory, a truth grounded in artistic representation (and whatever else, God only knows!) [...] [N]ew categories [are] necessary in order to think the “genocides” of the twentieth century.

21. Ibid., p. 201.
22. Ibid., pp. 205-206.
23. For relevant English-language works by Nichanian, see his books The Historiographic Perversion, Writers of Disaster and Mourning Philology, and his essay “Catastrophic Mourning.”
25. Ibid., p. 11.
Nichanian goes on to develop a more concrete example of such a category of truth, by engaging with the concept of (survivor) testimony. He maintains that, while the modern understanding of testimony has sought to challenge official histories undergirded by the institution of the archive, in desiring to establish itself as “fact” according to the archival logic, it has in effect turned out to reproduce this logic. This is what Nichanian calls “testimony as document.”27 His response is to conceive of a sort of testimony which operates outside the logic of truth as the preserve of historians and outside the domain of factuality as defined by the archive. Rather than claiming to accurately represent or reconstruct the original event, this testimony would expose the impossibility of such a representation or reconstruction. Instead of being obsessed with getting its factuality recognized according to the archive’s terms, it would show that what is at stake is the genocidal will’s precluding of any possible conception of fact outside the archival logic. This, in Nichanian’s words, is “testimony as monument,”28 one which employs perspective, imagery and interpretation instead of accuracy, authenticity and factuality; it operates emblematically rather than realistically.

How might the accidents with which the previous section ended be interpreted in light of Nichanian’s arguments? Importantly, whereas Nichanian focuses on the survivors’ testimonies and truth-seeking efforts, it is not possible to know for sure that those featuring in the accidents in question are the actual people who were subjected to the violence. But the opposite holds, too: bearing in mind the reports on “Islamized Armenians” that surfaced after the Van earthquake – the event this essay opened with – one cannot definitively know that they are not the survivors, either. Moreover, many of the interlocutors relaying the accidents are themselves survivors of more recent atrocities or strongly identify with such atrocities’ victims, a phenomenon highlighted especially in the direct analogies drawn in and around Diyarbakır between the persecution of the Armenians and that of the Kurds. I would therefore argue that it is in contexts where the distinction between victim/survivor and perpetrator is impossible to definitively determine, or is at least perceived as such by the actors involved, that the legacy of the violent history becomes spatially and temporally pervasive and is transformed into the stuff of accidents. It is in these contexts that the

26. Ibid., pp. 3-4.
27. Ibid., p. 94.
28. Ibid.
environment in its totality, including landslides, fault lines, buildings and streams as well as people and bones, acquires the role of an active agent within accidents, and is made to testify, through both language and materiality, to the violent history. This is what may indicate a third category of testimony in addition to the two (i.e., “document” and “monument”) proposed by Nichanian: that of “testimony as environment.”

“GEOSTORICAL TRUTH”

How might the category of truth that is likely to emerge from “testimony as environment” be conceptualized? To explore this final question, I would like to turn to Bruno Latour’s critique of political ecology.29 The whole of Latour’s œuvre greatly resonates with Nichanian’s work, as the former also engages with the crises of objectivity and, more specifically, with the subject-object divide, which have characterized modernity.30 This engagement has more recently taken the form of a criticism of political ecology, in which Latour questions long-established assumptions regarding the relationship between humans and the environment.

Latour suggests that contemporary eco-political movements have been greatly debilitated because, much like the forces they have sought to contest, these movements, too, have taken the Earth and/or nature for granted as a passive object and perceived it in diametric opposition to active subjects that are people.31 For him, the problem with political ecology is thus one and the same with that which characterizes history as conceived by modernity: material objects and spaces – in Latour’s terms, “nonhuman actors” – are assumed to be no more than backdrops or props within social processes unfolding between humans. This problem is evident, for him, in the modern notion of fact. If Nichanian problematizes this notion by questioning modernity’s limiting of factuality to archival existence, Latour points the finger at modern science. While seemingly aiming to get to better know the environment, “scientific” production in the modern mode effectively results in the petrification of natural phenomena as “fact,” which then reduces the active and ever-changing force that nature actually is to an inert and impotent object.32 Importantly,

30. Latour’s magnum opus in this respect is *We Have Never Been Modern*.
this has implications for how temporality is understood and experienced. As science’s establishing of “facts” as such are the major driving force behind the modern understanding of progress, what separates tomorrow from yesterday in modernity is only the further detachment of humans and the environment, and the latter’s increasing petrification as passive objects to be dominated by the former.33

Latour’s most recent response to this problem has been influenced by contemporary environmental crises and discussions around the Anthropocene (a thesis that considers human activity the single major factor defining the Earth’s ecosystems in our current geological epoch). In these crises and discussions, he discerns an Earth that “has now taken back all the characteristics of a full-fledged actor.”34 Moreover, if the historical agency of the Earth as the assemblage of human and nonhuman actors is now undeniable, the impact, for Latour, is mutual: the earthliness of history has also become evident. He proposes to reconceptualize history after this impact as “geostory”, where the prefix “geo-” does not imply a “return to nature” but indicates “the return of objects and subjects” to the common ground from which they had been dislodged due to modernity’s hierarchization of their respective agencies.35 This reconceptualization therefore also indicates a new understanding of how the future might be distinguished from the past: by an increasing degree of reattachment between humans and the environment as actors of equal sway and standing.36

Latour’s concept of geostory is resonant with many of the accidental encounters discussed in this essay. Consider, first, the diversity of the actors involved in the accidents, which attests to a levelling of human and nonhuman forces. Secondly, note the various epistemologies employed, which include folk wisdom and colloquialisms, therefore demonstrating the impossibility of confining these encounters to the preserve of scientific knowledge production. Finally, consider how the accidents challenge the modern idea of progress. To use a geological metaphor, such accidents transform the temporality of the present-day relationship to the violent history concerned from an open crater to be closed and left behind by way of archival or scientific production into a volcano that is constantly at risk of erupting in the future and causing new craters to be grappled with. These resonances render “geostorical

32. Ibid., pp. 91-127.
33. Ibid., pp. 190-192.
34. B. Latour, 2014.
35. Ibid., p. 16.
truth” a potential notion through which to conceptualize the truth coming out of accidental encounters with violent histories in contexts characterized by the blurring of the lines that separate yesterday from tomorrow, perpetrator from survivor/victim, and natural disaster from political violence.

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In this essay I have taken as departure point a set of fieldwork encounters with the Ottoman Armenians. Seen through the prism of research preplanning, these encounters seemed external to my work. Whereas the research was intended to be about architecture, the encounters involved nature and bones. Whereas I had set out to research the legacy of political atrocities from the late 20th century, the encounters drew attention to those in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But a different outlook emerged when these encounters were reconsidered in relation to similar fragments from other relevant discussions around the Ottoman Armenians, and were conceptualized, together with the latter, as “accidents” in Rosalind Morris’ terms. This has presented various possibilities for understanding how seemingly unrelated mechanisms, actors, and sites enable the legacies of ostensibly discrete violent histories to reverberate through one another.

Such a reverberation is, in many ways, fundamentally contradictory to modernity – or, put in Paul Virilio’s terms, the accident remains the only viable epistemology in the dusk of modernity.\(^{37}\) As Morris has helped demonstrate, in constantly running the risk of cropping up, accidental encounters with violent histories challenge ideas of progress built on the irreversible sequentiality of the past, present and future. As shown through Marc Nichanian’s work, such encounters also challenge the limiting of the factuality of an event to its existence in archives, in that they make the environment testify to the violent history and thus give rise to what I have called “testimony as environment.” Finally, when considering in light of Bruno Latour’s ideas, the encounters complicate humans’ domination over the production of knowledge about past poli-

tical violence, as geographical formations and geological forces work in tandem with people to unearth the violent past, helping produce what I have termed “geostorical truth” about this past.

Importantly, such accidental encounters may present limitations as well as possibilities regarding questions of justice in the aftermath of political violence. First, as argued above, these encounters emerge as a medium through which to produce knowledge about violent histories primarily in contexts where the distinction between the concepts of perpetrator and survivor/victim is blurred. Secondly, the accidents involve the conflation of natural and human forces, and therefore run the risk of obscuring the question of with exactly whom responsibility and culpability lie. For these two reasons, “geostorical truth” and “testimony as environment” are not likely to be particularly useful when recognition and reparation are sought on platforms of international justice. But, after all, are these platforms themselves not also products of modernity and have they not proven rather ineffective on their own as regards the goals of preventing future atrocities and establishing social justice? The conceptual categories proposed in this essay promise to complement rather than revoke modernity’s judicial mechanisms towards achieving these goals.

**Bibliography**


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Figure 1 The Diyarbakır Citadel location where human remains were found during construction works, as seen in the immediate aftermath of the discovery [January 2012, photograph courtesy of Ömer Aktaş]
Figures 2-3 The streams in rural Sivas which have acquired colloquial names
due to their genocide-related associations [July 2012, photographs by Eray Çaylı]