

“I think it is [the] mother who keeps things going”: The gendered division of labor in the transmission of memory of the Armenian Genocide

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss what role gender plays in remembering, transmitting, and reframing memories of the Armenian Genocide in order to address the question of how young Armenian women negotiate their roles in this process. Centering the societal roles of memory transmission, we employ the specific sociological lens of gender to analyze 26 interviews conducted in Beirut during the week of the official commemorations of the Armenian Genocide in 2016. We define gender as the social construction of a stylized repetition of acts that reflect power relations. Accordingly, the examination of these power relations is necessary not only to understand the experiences and testimonies of men and women, but also the transmission of memory. While understanding Armenian youth as agents of the collective memory, gender allows us to discuss different patterns of remembrance and transmission. We therefore argue that gender influences how individuals remember the Armenian Genocide, as it underpins the (historically) assigned roles of memory and transmission.

Keywords

Armenian Genocide, gender, generations, postmemory, transmission of memory

“Can you describe yourself?”

Anna¹ is a natural storyteller: a 32-year-old filmmaker born in Beirut in the midst of the Civil War, their family business bombarded during the clashes, she moved first to Cyprus, then to Canada

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with her parents. “My mom is not Armenian. She is what a lot of Armenians consider as *odar*, a stranger. That was a huge problem growing up [laugh].” Both in Canada and in Lebanon after the Civil War, Anna went to Armenian schools. “Ironically, it was because my mom wanted that, not my father.”

Growing up in a neighborhood outside of Beirut “as the only Armenian kid,” the question of belonging has always been present for Anna. When she was invited to participate in a panel in Istanbul, as a 20 years old student, she accepted the invitation with hesitation and mixed feelings. “I don’t know why, but Istanbul and people felt so familiar, although couldn’t understand the language at first. My grandmother and my father still speak Turkish, but I never thought that I would too.” Yet soon after, she discovered that her family is more multilingual than she thought: “I was going to Greece for another conference. Suddenly my grandma starts singing a lullaby in Greek and I am like, what is happening and why my father is smiling?” It turns out that Anna’s grandmother was a Greek orphan raised by an Armenian family in Istanbul.

The unusual first 5 minutes of the interview is followed by the second question: what does it mean for you to be an Armenian? “This is the question that I am trying to answer myself. When you are a child, you are 50% this and 50% that. But then you grow up and you’re like, ‘what 50%?’, you realize that it has something to do with your grandmother, with food, with *dolma*². . .” There, sitting in a café on a sunny Beirut afternoon, Anna implies more than she says aloud: that there is more to her story than what her personal history might offer. Tracing the various components of her identity as she puts them in her terms, there surfaced not one, but multiple sources: her Greek and Armenian grandmother, her *odar* mother, her experiences at Armenian schools, the Lebanese Civil War, multiple visits to Istanbul, *dolma*, feminism and being “an independent leftist queer activist.” On one hand, the transmission of language, memory, and culture through material components such as words, food or a lullaby, help distinguish certain inherited elements of Anna’s identity. On the other, as these elements intertwine with lived experience, everyday life, and unexpected challenges, heritage becomes a continuous process of negotiation. She never ceases to look for an answer to the question “who am I?” struggling to define herself as a somewhat coherent sum of all these components. At the crossroads of it all, the memory of a crucial event casts a long shadow, that is, of the Armenian Genocide.

Anna’s case is a strong manifestation of the complex reality of the Armenian youth in Lebanon: there is no singular, homogeneous “Armenianness” which they perceive and experience. Instead, there are a variety of descriptions pertaining to all the other components of self-identification. From this perspective, even a crucial event of an “ethno-genetic” nature for the diaspora community,³ namely the Armenian Genocide, can be exposed to transformations in terms of remembrance, narration, and transmission. While researching the agency of Armenian youth in relation to collective memory, the meaning of family history and Armenian heritage takes on a new significance for women seeking mnemonic agency. Although the role of women in preserving Armenian identity and familial memory in various Armenian communities has already been explained by earlier studies (Altmay, 2014; Avakian and Attarian, 2015; Azarian-Ceccato, 2010; Bilal, 2006; Brown and DeRycke, 2010; Ekmekcioglu, 2016; Manoogian et al., 2008; Schmeekle and Sprecher, 2008), the dominant focus has been on the survivors of forced deportations and massacres, rather than the generations born after the *memory boom*, when memories are remediated and re-narrated through digital or institutionalized storytelling (Dekel, 2011; Erll and Rigney, 2009; Reading, 2016). Less attention has been directed toward how memories are re-narrated by younger generations, rather than transmitted (Welzer, 2010), and how remembrance can lead to a sort of “negotiation” between what is inherited and what is experienced.

In this article we discuss the gendered division of labor in the remembrance and re-narration of the Armenian Genocide by looking more closely at the direction and application of material and

immaterial resources and capacities utilized by young Lebanese-Armenian women in this process (Allen, 2014). Our aim is to explain gendered intergenerational transmission by referencing different forms of mnemonic capital, as embodied mnemonic capital, objectified mnemonic capital and institutional mnemonic capital (Reading, 2019). We argue that this conception can help us to better understand the gendered division of labor in the remembrance of the Armenian Genocide and the memory work done by multiple generations. In this way, the study can show us how younger generation of Lebanese-Armenian women engage with familial and institutional memories and seek to transform them. Considering the diversity of narratives and discourses within the Lebanese-Armenian community, we aim to understand the role of gender in remembering and reshaping memory and identity, which can shed light on the creation of new configurations of collective memory according to generational needs (Beukian, 2018; Schuman et al., 1997).

Developing a feminist approach to fieldwork

Remembering suggests an active process of engagement whereby groups and individuals reconfigure their relationship to the past and create associations with competing memory sites and narratives (Erl and Rigney, 2009). Accordingly, new performances and identifications of memory emerge in terms of inter- and intra-generational affiliations, along with gender, class, and ethnicity (Bardenstein, 2002). To understand how the memory of the Armenian Genocide is narrated and reconstructed, we implemented qualitative research methods which allowed us to comprehend what lies “beneath manifest behavior” in order to reveal “the meaning events have for those who experience them” (Eisner, 1991). The aim of this methodological choice can be explained in terms of the sociological focus on the question of “why” instead of “what” and “how” (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000). In that regard, the fundamental objective of the research is not necessarily to reach a general conclusion which could represent postmemories⁴ and perceptions of the Armenian youth in a particular geography but to explain, through a gendered lens, how practices, ideas and narratives could lead to particular forms of remembrance, and interpretation. Such a methodological approach may favor “interpretation” (making sense of data) over “analysis” (summarizing what is in the data) (Mills, 2007). Since the hermeneutic approach aims to discover different perspectives to provide a multi-layered interpretation (Willis, 2007), our research project concentrates more on differences and authenticities, and less on common structures or general patterns.

To analyze gender roles in terms of transmission and identity, we developed a specific methodology that derives its perspective and toolbox from feminist methodologies. Importantly, feminist scholars have long contested the criteria that determine the rules of generating and ascertaining “reliable” and “valid” knowledge in social sciences. From a feminist perspective, “knowledge is grounded in experiences of gendered social life, but is also dependent on judgements about the justice of social relationships, on theories of power and the morality of social investigation” (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002: 3). Therefore, adopting a feminist stance within our research methodology signifies the aim to provide “insights into gendered social existence that would otherwise not exist” (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002: 147). Inasmuch as this paper focuses on the gendered division of labor with regard to the transmission of memory of the Genocide and Armenian identity, establishing a framework that would facilitate insights into experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of women was crucial.

Our interpretations concerning perceptions and remembrances of the Armenian Genocide depend on complex data collected during a larger research project about the postmemory of the Armenian Genocide, particularly how it is remembered by Armenian youth in Armenia and the diaspora.⁵ To this end, the research team interviewed 107 Armenians between the ages of 19 and 35, living in Yerevan and Gyumri (Armenia), Istanbul (Turkey), Beirut (Lebanon), Paris and

Marseille (France), Berlin and Cologne (Germany). While the field research in Beirut was entirely carried out during the week of the official commemoration day of the Armenian Genocide in 2016, 10 women interviewed (out of a total of 26 participants) nevertheless revealed a profound variety of backgrounds and experiences. With three students under the age 21 along with seven women over 29, all participants came from different professions as well as different political stances illustrated by affiliations to a range of movements such as the radical left, civil society, and even nationalist or social democratic political parties such as Dashnaksutyun, Hunchakyan, or Ramgavar. Having such a diversity of participants, each with a different approach to the question of gender and its role in memory transmission has given us the opportunity to discuss critical perspectives toward the issue in a broader sense. While the data collected in Beirut upholds the outcomes of this paper on the gendered intergenerational transmission, all the quotations in this article belong to the interviews that the authors conducted.

Reflexivity and researcher-respondent relations were amongst our primary concerns during the 2 years of research, which already involved several complicated layers in respect to our position: we were a mixed group of researchers coming from Turkey and not being part of the Armenian community there, working on the Armenian Genocide, aiming to achieve an understanding of Armenian youth's perceptions. From the beginning of the fieldwork, we were quite straightforward about where we stood on the matter, that is, we would start the conversation by explaining how our personal stories brought us to study such a "sensitive" topic, and how we came to recognize the Genocide in a country where an insistent denialism persists. On one hand, we had to be transparent about our political and intellectual stance to overcome any skepticism about our intentions in doing this research. On the other hand, for most of the respondents, it was their first time having an encounter with someone from Turkey and thus they were seizing the opportunity to understand our point of view on the century-long conflict. Consequently, the fieldwork itself was a contested territory of encounters, exchanges, confrontations, and mutual questioning. In this context, we were obliged to formulate our questions as a manifestation of our sincere curiosity, our will to learn and understand, and not to judge or interrogate. This, eventually, led the participants to formulate *their* responses as descriptively as possible, explicit in terms of personal stories and experiences, yet implicit in terms of their meaning and interpretation.

As for this paper, it is a result of a certain drive to reach beyond such regulated exchange between the interviewer and the interviewee and to reveal the implicit meanings of what has been said. During our fieldwork in Lebanon, we, the authors, had spontaneously deviated from our usual list of questions and started asking more about the experiences of being a woman, queer, or activist. This deviation was inspired simply by the fact that some of our interviewees had a political perspective which we could easily share. Having such common ground inspired questions that eventually led us to develop a curiosity about how these women would negotiate the roles assigned to them based on gender, memory, and transmission. During and after the fieldwork in Lebanon, we had long discussions on gender as a dimension of the act of transfer (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2006: 355). In addition to thematic and narrative differences of women and men, our personal motivation was to further reflect on critical accounts by young women we met in Beirut concerning the issue of transmitting the memory of the Genocide. And, on some occasions, we were lucky enough to break the spell of the storytelling event by being able to discuss certain story units with the collaborators after interviews, before providing our interpretation of their experiences (Borland, 1991).

Gender in genocide and memory studies

Previously ignored by historians, genocide and memory scholars, the study of gender emerged as a part of the scholarship in the 1980s, through the examination of the individual stories and

testimonies of women during the Holocaust (Joeden-Forgey, 2012). As a relatively new subject in genocide research, the inclusion of the particular experiences of women and their stories was not an easy one, and the study of gender was considered by mainstream genocide scholars as irrelevant and remained peripheral (Joeden-Forgey, 2010, 2012). One explanation for this hesitation is the idea that a totalizing form of annihilation such as genocide makes it complicated for the scholar to differentiate victims (Altınay and Petö, 2015). However, several genocides during the 1990s, such as those in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, underline the relevance of gender and gender structures in genocide and genocidal processes. Namely, the fact that systematic sexual violence targeting women and gendered patterns of attack were clear components of the perpetrators' genocidal strategies, showing the potential of gender studies to offer powerful tools for the prediction, prevention, and prosecution of genocide (Joeden-Forgey, 2010).

Aside from sexual abuse and violence against women, feminist writings also focus on the personal and social trauma as well as transmissions of such traumas in familial or societal contexts (Hirsch and Smith, 2002). More specifically, the gendered politics of decolonization, exile, migration, and immigration resulted in questions about the transmission of memory and social trauma across generations and geographies (Hirsch and Smith, 2002). In addressing questions regarding the role of gender in the Holocaust, ghettos, and camps, and in reading and understanding those experiences today, Hirsch and Spitzer utilize the concept of "acts of transfer." Paul Connerton coined this term to describe how the transmission of memory is a collection of acts or roles combined to produce those narratives which are passed down (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2006). In the present, this act indicates individual and collective recalling, a shared past on the basis of common and contested norms, conventions, and practices. This recalling arises from a complex dynamic between several dichotomies: past and present, public and private, trauma and nostalgia, history and myth (Hirsch and Smith, 2002). Gender, as a dimension of this act of transfer, is itself a part of these dynamics and power relations, where there exists a negotiation of how collectives remember based on an interplay of exclusion and inclusion (Heathorn, 2009; Saldívar-Hull, 2006). Hirsch and Smith explain how this act of transfer is gendered, as it depends on:

conventional paradigms and received cultural models, on codes that are culturally shared and available. Furthermore, experience, as well as its recollection and transmission, is subject to gendered paradigms. But gender, like memory, must be grounded in context if it is not to remain an abstract binary structure. (Hirsch and Smith, 2002: 7)

In other words, remembering and transmitting an experience or an event is as much a gendered paradigm as the nature of that experience or event *and* the everyday reality we live in. Alina Bothe and Christina Isabel Brüning argue that a modern concept of gender, which is emerging as a research topic within gender studies, misses the everyday reality of historical subjects. By incorporating gender as a category of analysis of past and present realities and personal experiences, researchers and affected communities can elicit more nuanced understandings of transmission of memory, that criticize power relations beyond class and race. As Judith Butler suggests, the construction of gender as a rigid binary signifies a production process of contested and competing discourses. Butler emphasizes that historians analyzing realms of past experiences are able to examine how the dichotomy of man and woman as well as heteronormativity operate as political and societal instruments of power (Bothe and Brüning, 2015; Butler, 1990).⁶

Consequently, the study of gender continues to gain more attention from genocide scholars and raise questions regarding past genocidal events, given that genocides and mass killings usually follow gendered strategies targeting biological reproduction of victim groups (Derderian, 2005). In her article reviewing studies on the Armenian Genocide with a gender perspective, Lerna Ekmekçioğlu

underlines the novelty of this interest by pointing out “to this day there is not one single book in any language that has both ‘women’ and ‘the Armenian Genocide’ in its title” (Ekmekcioglu, 2015: 186). The mid-2000s were marked by several articles that explored gender and age-specific aspects of the genocide, including sexual violence, and the abduction of Armenian women and children.⁷ As Arlene Voski Avakian indicates, the experiences of women targeted by sexual violence or forced into prostitution both during the genocide and its aftermath as a way to survive are especially brought to light by an increasing number of studies (Avakian, 2010; Bjørnlund, 2009; Ekmekcioglu, 2013; Tachjian, 2009; Üngör, 2012). As academic interest in the Armenian Genocide recently began to involve more studies of gender, the ethical and methodological questions about uncovering the silenced stories of women during and in the aftermath of the Genocide become even more important (Attarian and Yegorjian, 2006). Therefore, the complex issue of gender and memory requires a critical sociological lens to consider both the everyday reality and struggles of women at familial or societal levels.

Thus, the analysis of the mnemonic agency of women requires a study of the unrecognized memory work done in the family unit, as well as their contribution to and interpretation of institutionalized memory. Considering the ongoing debates on why and how women’s histories are forgotten and how their experiences are silenced and omitted (Phoenix and Pető, 2019), it is crucial to understand the memory work and labor of women from different generations with conceptual tools not separated from memory practice. In contrast to the longstanding debate on agency in feminist theory, memory studies so far fall short of systematic analysis of the concept of agency (Wüstenberg, 2017). To understand the mnemonic agency of Lebanese Armenian women, we rely on conceptual tools which provide categories to differentiate the memory work of older and younger generations of women as well as their access to and interpretation of public memory.

In this regard, we understand agency as a matter of possible actions given the context of our interactions with others, and it is precisely this “space left between the surfaces of reaction and the necessity of a decision about what to do” that shapes women’s agency (Ahmed, 2013). Here, we perceive the agency of the women in this study as their reactions to what is expected of them, as well as how they negotiate those terms departing from their own experiences, perceptions, and actions, eventually transforming their performance of being and feeling Armenian—as we will present in examples. When considering memory and mnemonic agency, the possibilities and constraints of action becomes relevant to the accumulation of value through mnemonic labor—of remembering and re-narrating. By extending Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital, Anna Reading offers the concept of mnemonic capital to reveal the gendered dimensions of memory and power (Reading, 2019). Thus, mnemonic labor can take four possible states which can be transformed, exchanged and accumulated through mnemonic labor. Accordingly, the accumulation of the value of memory work by survivor generation who witnessed the mass violence after 1915 and hold and embody those memories—which in some cases cannot be narrated—can be referred as *embodied mnemonic capital*. Via storytelling, these memories can be transformed into *objectified mnemonic capital*, including letters or diaries written by the survivor or published her descendant. One should also consider the preservation of many memory objects preserved in a matriarchal lineage within the family, or in case of drawing family trees, adding new mnemonic value to familial memory.

To understand the role of gender in the dynamic relationship between past and present, we would like to start by looking into the intergenerational and familial forms of transmission of memory and emotions. We observed these to be primarily based on the act of storytelling, which also allows us to reflect on the gendered aspects of producing and disseminating those stories. From there, we present links between reinterpretation or rejection of shared narratives about the past, reselection of memory content and gender, and its projection onto future generations.

The role of gender in remembering

“Genocide? No. It came on afterwards, after I moved to Lebanon, that’s when. I think it started with my grandfather, and then the school. . .”

Like Anna’s parents, Shushan’s parents had to leave Beirut during the Civil War. Today a 30 year old teacher in Beirut, she was born and raised in the USA. She remembers how “mom used to play Armenian music . . . like we had cassettes, Armenian gospel music, when [we] were kids. . .” Returning to Beirut, she also remembers feeling like an “outsider,” similar to Anna, because she neither spoke Armenian nor knew much about Armenian history. However, regardless of how the Armenian community (still) perceives her, she considers herself Armenian, because that’s how her family raised her. “So that’s how it started, every Sunday my mom used to put that cassette and she used to tell us like, instead of bedtime stories we used to have Armenian stories, but not about anything extremely tragic or anything like. About our heroes, our saints maybe. So that’s how I met the concept of Armenia.”

Her connection to Armenianness or Genocide memory fundamentally relies on familial ties: it is her mother who introduced her to the “concept of Armenia,” and it is her grandfather who consolidated the concept by transmitting his personal experiences of survival and suffering. As in Shushan’s case, some members of the young generation were introduced to the Genocide by grand- or great-grandparents’ testimonies, who were mostly child survivors. In other cases, it was parents or grandparents who narrated the stories unveiling the survival or tragic death of their family members. Overall, a deep personal connection to the past through stories told by a mother or grandmother is a common example across the interviews. Through these stories, familial transmission of memory occurs within the blurry images of childhood, prior to formal education at school. The identification with grand- or great-grandparents through testimonies or their narrated stories sets the stage for a deep personal connection with the historical event despite lacking organic connection between the living memory and transmitted memory. In this regard, the postmemory of genocide can be reframed in three aspects of the narrative: the form of telling, the content and the timing. These three aspects imply that parents and grandparents have a certain agency in transmitting their survival stories, in that they manage when, how and what to tell their offspring (Wolf, 2019).

“[My mother] She remembers how her mother cried whenever she told her the story. My grandma, she cried herself telling me this story. So the pain inherited from my great-grandmother to my grandmother and onwards until with me.”

This is how intergenerational transmission within the family was described by Hagop, a 23 year old management student, while portraying his “pilgrimage to my ancestral lands,” in the southeast of present-day Turkey. As he states, his grandmother’s narration comes not only with a factual arrangement of what happened but also with the emotions that this experience awakens. Thus, the adopted form of telling aims to transmit both the content *and* the pain endured. While analyzing the transmission of lullabies within several generations of Armenians in Turkey, Melissa Bilal makes a comparable argument: lullabies, as a means for women to express feelings, experiences, and desires,

“provide a picture of gendered perceptions and experiences of the practices, traditions, customs, and beliefs of a community. Moreover, as they convey the most intimate transmission of feelings and experiences, they keep and transmit the registers of the unarchivable elements of a culture—such as secrets, emotions, and senses.” (Bilal, 2006: 68).

What is intriguing in Hagop’s words, however, is his description of “the pain inherited,” as he reads the emotion in the bodily expression of his grandmother and his mother, and not in the content of the story they tell. As discussed by Sara Ahmed, talking about our experiences of pain

reshape our bodies, creating impressions on their surfaces. In this context, pain is not a private feeling, but rather a feeling that opens our bodies to others, because there is always someone to bear witness to it. This equation also applies in reverse: it is through bearing witness that we reach out to someone in pain, even though we cannot feel or understand the pain of others (Ahmed, 2013). In other words, the “emotional transmission” is unlike any other act of transfer; the pain of mothers and grandmothers is not inherited in the same sense that the memory is. Instead, it creates an impression on the surface of the body of an emotion that cannot be shared or empathized. It is exactly on the grounds of this impossibility to feel their pain that their injury is confirmed. Here lies an ethics, according to Sara Ahmed, that requires one to be open to being affected by something that we can neither know, nor feel:

The call of such pain, as a pain that cannot be shared through empathy, is a call not just for an attentive hearing, but for a different kind of inhabitation. It is a call for action, and a demand for collective politics, as a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one. (Ahmed, 2013: 39)

It is through this “call for action” that our interviewees relate themselves to the stories their mothers and grandmothers tell.

Storytelling and passing on family history are part of the strong intergenerational transmission which takes place during the shared years of life of grandparents and grandchildren, which includes values, religious views or political views. And this process defines the familial identification of children and grandchildren through stories mostly told by mothers or grandmothers. This is crucial because, as previously argued, the form that storytelling takes can convey emotions deeply rooted in the narrative, especially when put in a gendered perspective. The emotional role attributed to the figure of “mother”⁸ permeates into the form and through narration onto the children’s perception of that memory. Gender roles in the act of transfer and passing on group identity seem to intersect in similar patterns, as defined explicitly by Talin, a young business administrator, who also had the chance to listen to her family history from both of her grandparents: “I think in Middle East, Armenians kept things more. I think in USA, it is the same too. They have Armenian schools, they have a lot of Armenian things. In Europe, I am not sure. I can’t tell you. But it depends on the family, it depends on how strong the . . . I think it is the mother more. How strong that she keeps the thing going.”

Talin reminds us that the immaterial labor of women within the household unit involves more than mere reproduction of family and collective memories; women also mobilize things that are connected to familial and collective identification. Furthermore, as can be deduced from Talin’s words, women’s roles as storytellers within Armenian families are not peculiar to Lebanon. In her research on the emerging body of memory work related to Islamized Armenian survivors of the massacres and death marches, Aşegül Altınay emphasizes women’s key function in the process of transmission. Her research implies the exclusive emphasis on “grandmothers” as the titles of this contemporary memory literature suggest: “Nenemin Masalları” (“My grandmother’s tales”), “Anneannem” (“My grandmother”), “Nenem bir Ermeniymiş” (“My grandmother was Armenian”), “Ermeni Kızı Ağçık” (“Ağçık, the Armenian girl”), “Müslümanlaştırılmış Ermeni Kadınların Dramı” (“The tragedy of Islamized Armenian women”) (Altınay, 2014). In addition, Altınay indicates that, in the memoirs written by men as grandchildren, it is once again mothers who take the reins as second-generation storytellers, mostly conveying the stories of grandmothers rather than grandfathers.

For earlier generations, the reproductive labor of women within the family unit was not limited to storytelling but included the preservation and reproduction of the “Armenianness” found at

home as well: carrying on Armenian traditions and customs, preparing traditional cuisine, and keeping the Armenian language alive at home (Manoogian et al., 2008).⁹ Without a doubt, the persisting association of Armenian identity and collective memory attached to food, such as *dolma*, or the figure of grandmother, is no coincidence. Despite recent studies on first and second generation women's labor in dealing with the trauma and memory of the Armenian Genocide, the ongoing gendered gap in mnemonic labor receives no scholarly attention. To better understand the material and immaterial gendered labor of remembrance we need to observe different scales and domains of mnemonic labor already carried out by young Lebanese Armenian women. With reference to distinct states of accumulated and transformed mnemonic value (Reading, 2019), we aim to highlight this unpaid and mostly unrecognized mnemonic labor and to further analyze its role in inter-generational memory transmission.

Transmission of memory: “Post” and “beyond”

“I thought my nation now is in need of me for the new generation to speak more Armenian, to know about the Armenian history. There has to be people majoring in Armenian Literature for this to continue. Or else it will stop, because the new generation and its relation to the Armenian language and history is based on the teachers transferring it to them. And learning Armenian has now to be like learning English; more active, more fun. This is what children need now.”

It is impossible not to feel inspired and moved when Lori tells us about her career choice and plans. Her excitement is highly contagious, as she enthusiastically uses facial and bodily gestures. “That is why I want to encourage my children to listen to more Armenian rather than English.” She is bright and relaxed, and the conversation flies by. Yet at moments when she talks about “the new generation,” “what children need now,” or her future children, one feels slightly taken aback by the gravity of her words. The fact that she has just graduated from high school and is about to finish her first year of studies in Armenian literature makes one wonder more about her ambition and excitement. As a member of the Armenian minority in Lebanon, her attachment to the Armenian language and history recalls Pierre Nora’s concept of “duty of memory”: where the modern memory has gained an archival quality, ethnic groups and minorities bear the burden to conduct research about their roots, and redefine their identity (Nora, 1989). Massacres, genocides and national historiographies overlook or deny the suffering of the survivors, which results in a form of duty to preserve their identity. Similarly, for many young Armenians in Lebanon, the duty of memory and the bond with the past is solidified by the denialist politics of Turkey and its traumatizing effects (Altınay and Petó, 2015).

Indeed, Lori is not the only one occupied, at a surprisingly early stage of her life, with the question of passing on the Armenian identity, history and language to future generations; “keeping the things going.” Many young women, despite their different ages, various professions, political ideas or religious beliefs, express a similar sentiment when engaged with the question of transmission of collective memory and identity. While we were particularly curious about the young generation and their postmemories, the question of transmission to the next generation was raised authentically not by us, the researchers, but by the participants. Additionally, the preoccupation with this question appears as a significant contrast between young women and men; a variable of gender, rather than age, class, educational background, ethnic affiliation or family history. For the majority of the young women participating in our research, the importance of the topic of transmission lies in the reciprocity between present-past and future, the stories and their narrative elements passed down to them and their selection of what to be passed on.

How we engage with the past and its narratives becomes meaningful in discursive struggles between our contemporaries as well as predecessors. What should be learned from the past, the

configuration of experiences and expectations, and how do the new boundaries drawn between “us” and “others” reframe individual and collective identities (Forchtner, 2016)? It is clear that lessons from the past are more than simply textual information on prior events: they also contain emotional orientations framing symbolic collective boundaries, shared by a group through education where memory becomes institutionalized. Undoubtedly, education of a generation by another about a shared past is open to rejection, reinterpretation or regeneration of its narration.

For young Armenian women in Lebanon, education constitutes the vehicle through which they examine their own experiences, analyze established boundaries, redefine their role in what to transmit and how to project it onto the next generation. Thus Talin, who identifies herself as “a bit independent” in regards to her relationship with her family, and does not participate in any political organization, clearly states that she inherited the “duty of memory” at school. When asked about her knowledge on the Genocide as a student, Talin remembers a clear message: “Then they keep on telling you that you don’t have to forget, you have to keep on passing it to your kids, because. . . This is how they taught us.” Consequently, she recalls the moment she became “sensitive when another society go to war, or go through genocide or what is happening in Palestine, in Syria or in Arab countries or even in South Africa. You are a bit more emotional because you know what has happened (to your community).” Nevertheless, she is also skeptical about adopting a discourse of victimization, since she believes Armenians as a people are capable of surviving and preserving things; which is why she adds, “I am proud to be Armenian.” Hence, contemplating the question of transmission, she has a reinterpretation and reselection in mind: “If I am going to teach my (future) kids, I’d teach them that we are survivors, not victims. Because if we were victims, we would have given up and we never did.”

In the case of the Armenian community in Lebanon and the collective memory of the Genocide, formal education at schools includes for the most part history and Armenian literature classes where the younger generation is informed about “the crucial event” for the community, disrupting the temporal continuity, dividing the cycle of social life into a “before” and an “after” the Genocide (Cavalli, 2004). The topic of genocide education was of utmost importance during the interviews with young women. Framed with the question of transmission, many young women revisited their own experiences with formal genocide education as school children, with a more critical understanding as young adults. By commonly expressing concerns for future generations, the criticism of particular aspects of genocide education, including both its form and content, reveal a thematic difference in the way when men and women talk about the transmitted memory. Comparatively, the participants from all countries voiced a lot of criticism regarding the notion of Armenians being a victimized people/nation (Firat et al., 2017). As a matter of fact, a recently developed stance in memory studies concerning the presumed link between memory and trauma is profoundly harmonious with this critique of victimization. From this point of view, histories of violence are becoming increasingly reframed in a way that enables reinterpretation of the position of the victim in terms of the “struggle for a cause” rather than a passive agent that is enduring a traumatic experience. Entailed in the interplay between memory and activism, this stance captures the transmission of positive aspects of a troubled past in the hopes of upholding commitment to particular values, through cultural forms and practices enhancing civic engagement (Rigney, 2018).

Hence, in some cases, the partial disapproval of the widely shared and reproduced narration of the Genocide, as the content of the formal genocide education, can become linked to a preoccupation with the political potentiality of postmemory, namely the transmission of memory to the subsequent generation via education. Arevig’s worry about “the fact that at the school they are still teaching youth about the victimized Armenian” and her emphasis that “there is still the fact that we are still alive and we build a lot of things, we contributed to a lot of communities” moves beyond her lived experience, toward an expectation for future members of her community. As a 19 year old political science

student, she volunteers to teach at the Sunday school. "I rather try to teach them values, because that's what they need and worth remembering." Due to teaching first graders as well as older students, she has had the chance to observe the immediate outcomes of younger members of her community being introduced to the Genocide. Characterized by a simpler explanation designating good and evil and an undemanding narration about the enemy, Arevig dismisses this narration as being "pointless and not constructive: it is a burden to have enemies." Her parents moved from Syria to Lebanon when she was 4 years old. Yet she still has family members in her hometown there, such as her grandma "refusing to come here because it is her home and she doesn't want to leave there."

Her rejection and reinterpretation of how memory is in some cases narrated and transmitted resembles Maral's disapproval of the methods used to introduce school children to the very same notion: "Teaching children the Armenian culture is one of my investments." Maral, a professional dancer and instructor at an Armenian cultural center teaching both modern and Armenian traditional dances to students of different ages, explains her motivation and industriousness with a grimace on her face: "I don't want this generation to have the struggles that I had to go through. . . It took me a life to switch from being an Armenian to being a human." Here, her chosen form of storytelling implies that a certain divergence from the content is at play. As asserted before, by changing the form, the grandparents could adopt different paths of transmission depending on their *own* agency, whereas Maral's statement implies that the agency of the younger generation inspires an even further intervention in the process of transmission by altering the content according to her personal experiences. By negotiating what she would have preferred to have inherited in terms of memory and identity, she also negotiates what is to be transmitted to the next generation. Her impression of genocide education reflects her experience both as a child and an instructor. "At school, the first contact with the Genocide is not always pedagogically well-thought. I would never subject my child at the age of four or five to an insensitive teacher who, to make a point, uses all the atrocities and murdering. A child at that age cannot understand that. And naturally it will cause a traumatic effect on him/her." Like Lori, she is concerned about the methods used to transmit this memory to future generations. "Sometimes it is very nationalistic, very boring, very demanding on the part of the children. And at some point, they get tired of it."

The accounts of institutionalized memory reveal the women's agency as their reaction to gendered mnemonic roles as well as how they negotiate these terms departing from their own experiences, perceptions, and actions, eventually transforming their performance of being and feeling Armenian. In addition to the unpaid and mostly unrecognized mnemonic labor and agency adding value to the familial memory, memory work can also be transformed into *institutionalized capital*, for instance memory objects and testimonies can become part of the public domain via museums, publications, collections, or truth commissions and archives (Reading, 2019). Accordingly, the familial memory can be preserved in the *objectified* form for several generations, while the stories of family members have been re-narrated distinctively in a matriarchal lineage in Lebanese-Armenian families. However, it is the institutionalized form of mnemonic capital that has the greatest longevity and holds public value within the capitalist patriarchy, that is, schools, museums, and many other memory institutions. The reactions of Lebanese Armenian women to the familial and institutional memory can be better understood when they address formal education as a vehicle for memory transmission, and seek to transform it or mobilize their own mnemonic capital as agents in various cultural and educational establishments. Therefore, in addition to the role of storytelling in the family unit, the gendered division of labor in the transmission of the Armenian Genocide also includes the reinterpretation of the norms of remembering the past and collective identity. This reinterpretation reveals the participation of women in the collective memory and how they are positioned with regard to the power structures of memory and institutionalized mnemonic capital (schools, cultural foundations, diaspora organizations).

Anna Reading holds that institutional mnemonic capital involves the greatest labor of memory and has the greatest longevity and indeed public value within capitalist patriarchy, including the family and the law. Assuming relatively fixed sexual divisions of labor in the reproduction of group identity and memory remains important in constructing the ideal family, and actual families remain deeply implicated in reproducing heterosexism. As Anna, the participant from the beginning of this text, states: “Of course the community is blind to (LGBTI and queer communities). The nuclear family, come on! You can’t mess with that. I am quite privileged in mine. But I’ve met a lot of gays in Beirut. And even if the parents know about their children, I guess it stays between them. I don’t know any other example in the Armenian community.”

The tendency to overlook the LGBTQI or queer members of the community is signified by Maral who does not remember her “mother’s generation talking about gays in a negative way, because they doesn’t exist for them. They don’t even realize that there are people like that. . .” Yet, criticism by our participants about how queer identities are being overlooked in the Armenian community in Lebanon could apply to our research as well: not reaching out to more LGBTQI members or activists or seeking further answers on queer identities within the community weakens our analysis by excluding a great number of stories and risks reproducing heterosexism. Limitations, such as time and access, become mere excuses for conforming to heteronormativity, especially in the light of recent groundbreaking attempts in queer Armenian studies and memory studies. As Sevan Beukian demonstrates in the “Queering Armenian Studies” issue of the *Armenian review*, being transnational, multi-local and deterritorialized, the Armenian identity may already be seen as queer. Reconsidering and theorizing the diversity and difference in thinking and being Armenian by various actors would allow “a deconstruction of . . . diasporic nationalism exerted as a project of nationalist heterogeneity that disciplines queer Armenian bodies, utilizing the ‘technologies of sex and race’” (Beukian, 2018). Accordingly, Tamar Shrinian argues that, thanks to extensive ethnographical work in Armenia, the limitations forced by gendered expectations of belonging to “the Armenian nation/family” could be used for insisting on difference and finding out new queer practices of intimacy and world-making (Shrinian, 2018b). In a skillful example of rethinking family, intimacy, and forms of memory transmission, Dilara Çalıŝkan explores the relationship of trans mothers and daughters, while broadening the concept of intergenerational transmission “by departing from the fixed and almost invisible concepts of family and generation” (Çalıŝkan, 2019). In summary, new research reveals how the study of memory and transmission of memory requires a wider look at existing but overlooked relations rather than essentializing narratives.

Conclusion

We began this essay by introducing Anna's story intersecting various temporalities and localities. Similarly, throughout the essay, we sought to share the (mnemonic) experiences of as many young Lebanese Armenians as possible. Being implicated in a shared catastrophic history, interviews and the field research in Lebanon went, as expected, beyond a data collecting activity. During the 2-year long research project, we were also able to learn that there are no guides or textbooks to prepare one to cope with such powerful emotions flowing through generations. Thanks to the participants, we were able to complete a difficult task of collecting as many stories as possible with diversity in opinions on several key issues on the Armenian Genocide and its all too common framework.

In addition to the rich literature on the role of women as storytellers and kinkeepers in various Armenian communities, we seek to explain intergenerational transmission by defining gendered mnemonic labor and different mnemonic capitals. By defining the gendered division of labor in the remembrance of the Armenian Genocide in light of memory work done by multiple generations,

we aim to make the re-narration of family stories and reinterpretation of institutionalized memory by young Armenian women visible. Anna Reading's conception of different types of mnemonic capital helps us to mark how the younger generation of Lebanese Armenian women engage with familial and institutional memories and seek to transform it or mobilize their own mnemonic capital as agents in various cultural and educational establishments. Therefore, we aimed to understand young Armenian women in Lebanon as mnemonic agents capable of actively negotiating the value of the collective memory and reacting to gendered division of labor in remembrance (Ahmed, 2013; Reading, 2019). Multiple responses of how to narrate the stories inherited can be understood by uncovering this negotiation process (Avakian and Attarian, 2015). And this process can be unveiled via the question of transmission, when young women revisited their own experiences with formal genocide education, with a more critical understanding as young adults. Based on individual experiences, the agency of the younger generation even inspires a further intervention in the process of transmission by altering the content. Furthermore, we observe that this process of re-narration and reinterpretation of memory and identity is closely linked to what will be transmitted onto the next generation.

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Notes

1. In order to protect their privacy or anonymity, all participants cited in this article are given pseudonyms.
2. *Dolma* is a stuffed dish especially common in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cuisines. Grape leaves, cabbage leaves, eggplant and zucchinis are popular for rolling, while stuffing includes rice and minced meat. Being a beloved dish for centuries, different versions of *dolma* can be found almost in all Middle Eastern or Asia Minor cuisine.
3. Levon Abrahamian argues that the shared experience of the survivors of the Genocide creates a collective memory which resembles the event to the "Myth of Beginning," hence connecting the origin story of the diaspora to this particular historical event. In this context, the Genocide can indeed become the "Creation Myth" for the constitution of the Armenian diaspora (Abrahamian, 2005).
4. The concept of "postmemory," developed by Marianne Hirsch, originally refers to the memory of the "second" generation after the Holocaust, who inherited their parents (i.e. the survivors) fragmented, incomplete and perforated memories. Consequently, postmemory implies a certain memory work performed by the following generation that involves "imaginary investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch, 2008). By applying this concept to the Armenian Genocide, our aim is to i) distinguish the lived experience from the transmitted memory of the Genocide, ii) recognize generational difference with respect to memory and transmission, and iii) discover the memory work carried out by Armenian youth.
5. For further information on the Project, conducted by a research group from the Association for the Study of Sociology of Memory and Culture in Istanbul, see <http://www.en.memoryon.org>
6. One must also consider that the same dichotomy based on the heteronormativity can cause further ethical and theoretical problems such as excluding the memories and witnessing of LGBTI individuals, as, while studying the history of camp during the Holocaust, the risk of automatically excluding the witnessing of

- the individuals who were there because of their sexual orientations and identities (Bothe and Brüning, 2015).
7. By following Lerna Ekmekcioglu (2015), see Derderian (2005), Tachjian (2006), and Tachjian and Kévorkian (2006).
 8. According to the feminist scholarship, mothering is indeed entangled in gender, more specifically on the basis of the sexual division of labor exceeding the public sphere and diffusing into the private sphere of the family. Similar to gender, mothering is analyzed as a social and historical construct, and not a biological assumption or a natural given. In this context, the emotional role of women is also historically constructed, especially through psychoanalytical interpretation, as well as by the decline of their economic and biological role within the family. Thus, today, mother's work is namely "emotion work" (Chodorow, 1979: 178). Here, our interest in the figure of "mother" is much or less related to this historically constructed pattern, and its reproduction through the transmission of the memory of the Genocide.
 9. In an extensive analysis of intimate and daily encounters in post-socialist Armenia, Tamar Shrinian goes beyond the distinction between private and public, and underlines that women's position and role relegated to the household reverberates in the role of women within the nation "as the hearth (*odjakh*), pillar (*syun*) and light (*jrak*) of the Armenian family" (Shrinian, 2018a). The author argues that women's duty to manage the house and to take charge of the day-care extends to larger localities such as neighborhoods, cities and finally the nation, while the daily intimate encounters in the public space carry narratives of genealogical belonging and expectations based on forms of kin relation; "in post-socialist Armenia, nation is practiced as family" (Shrinian, 2018b).

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