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VIDEO ARTICLE

Carrying the Nest: (Re)writing History Through Embodied Research

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This video article describes the embodied research conducted whilst creating the video performance *Carrying her*; where various meditation techniques serve to confront the taboo history of the Armenian Genocide that reached its climax in 1915–16 in my homeland, Turkey. I instrumentalize my experience living in a two-century old stone house in the city of Mardin, in the Syrian frontier of Turkey, to reconsider the historical wound felt in the collective utterances of the region. Chants, lamentations, lullabies, testimonies, myths and tales guide me through the history embodied in Southeast Turkey and urge my journey to France where I re-discover the wound through sonorities of the Armenian Diaspora. My pregnancy opens a space to reflect upon women's experience of the genocide, translating the corporal phenomenon of being pregnant to the reality of the exiled through the notion of carrying. The sonic universe reclaimed in the diaspora revives my memory of the land in its lullabies. To reclaim the diversity lost from my homeland, I create a soundscape that employs diverse sonorities of Southeast Anatolia. Complemented by the soundscape, the video performance composes my *ağıt*, my lament for the people exiled and massacred.

Keywords: Genocide; Performance; Pregnancy; Exile; Utterance; Chant; Embodying history; Confronting history; Meditation

VIDEO ARTICLE

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STILLS FROM THE VIDEO ARTICLE





VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

[00:10]

Prologue

Mardin-Southeastern Turkey

Overall view of Mardin under snow, End of 19th, beginning of 20th Century [Postcard]

Birzamanlar Yayıncılık

Bir keresinde, bana, bir adam, bu şehri ilk fetheden hükümdarın oğlunu kurban edip kalenin temellerine gömdüğünü söylemişti; oğlunun kanıyla şehri kutsamak için. O temeller üzerine yapılan evlerde yuvalar kuruldu, sonra başkaları geldi, evleri yıkıldı, yıkılmış yuvaların üzerine başka evler, başka başka yuvalar yapıldı. Böylece yüzyıllar boyu çeşit çeşit yaşamlar katmanlarda saklandı. İşte bu şehrin hayaletleri de o katmanlarda otururlar.

Atalarımızdan bize kalan şiddet, savaşlar, kinler kimliğimizin bir parçası olmuş, Tekrar tekrar arkamızdan gelirler. Gözlerimi kapıyorum, onların rahatsız edici yokluğunu hissediyorum. Yüzlerini hafızamda tutmaya çalışıyorum ki sana anlatayım ama onlar kaderlerini tekrar ediyorlar, kayboluyorlar.

Tarafli tarihlerin sayfalarında sıradanlaşıyorlar. Katliamlar hep devam ediyor. Adları değişiyor, bağlamları değişiyor ama yarattıkları hayaletler hep aynı.

Onlar kundakta bebeklerini taşıyan kadınlar, duvağının altında bilinmedik bir eve götürülen gelinler. Gidilen diyarlarda ninnilerde, ağıtlarda su yüzüne çıkarlar. Tarihin duvağını kaldırmak, onların hikayeleriyle yüzleşmek demektir.

Ben İstanbullu Türk bir sanatçyım. Bu benim yüz sene önce anavatanımızda yaşayagelmiş Anadolu Ermenilerinin tabu tarihi ile yüzleşme hikayemdir. Onların yokluğunu, yaşadıkları sürgünü kapsama, içselleştirme gayretimdir. Katledilen kadın, erkek, ve çocuklara ağıtımdır.

A man told me, once, that the first conqueror of this city sacrificed his son and buried him in the foundation of its fortress, to bless the city with his blood. Homes were made in the houses that sit on those foundations. As time passed, others appropriated the city. Houses were made on the ruins of demolished homes. For centuries, homes were ruined to make new ones over and over. As such, diverse lives were hidden between the strata of the city. It is the strata where the phantoms reside.

The wars, the hatred, the violence of our ancestors become part of our identity, haunting us. I close my eyes; I feel their disturbing non-presence. I try to hold their faces in my memory to tell you afterwards but they imitate their fate; they perish.

They are banalized in pages of subjective histories. Massacres continue to exist. Their names change, their contexts change; yet, the phantoms that they produce endure. They are the swaddled babies borne by their mothers. They are the veiled brides taken into an unknown home. They submerge in lullabies, laments, sung in new lands. Lifting the veil of the history signifies confronting their stories.

I'm a Turkish artist from İstanbul and this is my journey of confronting the taboo history of Armenians of Anatolia who lived in our homeland a century ago. It is my attempt to embody their non-presence, their exile. This is my *ağıt*, my lament to the men, women and children who were massacred or exiled.

Carrying her [Video performance] Gros, N. 2017

[02:40]

Context

In this video article, I will describe the creative process of my video performance *Carrying her*, where I embody a taboo-like secrecy in the establishment of the Turkish Nation through sounds, tales, gestures, bodies, words, sonorities, resonances, walks, mythological and historical elements that I collect in my body. I confront and internalise the absence of the Armenian people, exterminated by the Ottoman Government in 1915–16, through the lens of my recent self-exile from my homeland and the experience of pregnancy.

* a taboo-like secrecy: Term used by Zerrin Özlem Biner to describe the discourses and imagination surrounding the ‘Armenian Crisis’ in southeastern Turkey

My experience of living, from 2013 to 2017, in the ancient city of Mardin on the Syrian border of Turkey, triggers my confrontation with the historical fact of the Armenian genocide. The surrounding region of Eastern Anatolia has a long history of stratified tragedies and ethnic conflicts that my generation neglected to affront until now.

Mardin, Beginning of twentieth century, Michel Paboudjyan Collection [Photograph]
Househamadyan.org

“Mardin ... a margin, ... a murky sphere endowed with residues of critical events ...”
Biner, Z. Ö. 2010, p.68

In our current day, the growing culture of marginalizing people who question the Turkish-Muslim identity imposed by the government causes my self-exile, generating my questioning of the foundations of this identity and the destructive tendencies of the patriarchal order that is repeating itself today in Turkey as in all corners of this world.

Carrying her #3 [Pencil drawing] Gros, N. 2017

My pregnancy, the consciousness of embodying the destiny of another, provokes my journey to the diaspora in France and revives my motivation to unveil the history of the exile. Yet, the sentiment of empathy does not describe the bridge that I attempt to build with this performance. My experience of being oppressed in my homeland is far less consequential than that of the Armenian people. Embodying the exile is for me an attempt to heal myself of this taboo.

Armenian Refugee Camp, American Military Hospital No. 3 in Paris, 1918 [Photograph]
Library of Congress

In Mardin, a two century old stone house serves as a site of reconsideration and recollection of hints pointing to the 'aggrieved' haunting the site.

"...people living in Mardin can see for many miles around ... sometimes even as far as the Syrian border... A great number of observers saw the terror ... forever shattered the traditional, subtle and balanced ... pattern of life ... Young and old, Armenians, Syrians, Chaldeans, and Protestants ... marched past the city on their way to Der Zor ... death march through the center of town ..."

'The View from the roofs – What everyone in Mardin could see in 1915' Gaunt, D. 2015

My embodied research begins in Southeastern Anatolia, while I'm pregnant, and I follow the cultures lost from my homeland to their diaspora in France, which also becomes my diaspora where my daughter is born while creating this performance.

[05:09]

Methods & Approach

First developed during an artistic residency in Paris in 2017, multiple methods of meditation shape my embodiment of exile. I instrumentalize mindfulness meditation to open an imaginative space. I direct my attention to the memories of the site in my body and interlace this emotional information with aspects of Armenian culture and history that I am newly encountering. I meditate through the present moment to dig up past experiences and make new historical acquaintances. Desiring to connect to those absent from the site, I turn to archival images.

* Artist-in-Residence Program of the Institut Français at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, France, June–October 2017

Carrying her [Video performance] Gros, N. 2017

Detail from *Armenians*, 1899 [Photograph] Library of Congress

Carrying her #5 [Pencil drawing] Gros, N. 2017

Carrying her [Video performance] Gros, N. 2017

Gazing at images of the deportation shifts my attention to the bodies carrying and being carried. By isolating and redrawing the 'carried' I attempt to weigh the experience of the exile. The images, the physical and metaphorical significance of carrying syncs with my experience of pregnancy, weaving my connection to the women in the context of the deportation and the genocide. The movements born from these methods transform into a meditative walk refined by my acquaintance with the Armenian modal chant practice in Paris. This, in turn, unearths my recollection of the wound that I pursued from Anatolia to the diaspora.

[06:46]

Pregnancy as instrument of embodiment

My embodiment of the bodies exiled in 1915 is also informed by my exchanges with mothers of Mesopotamia, where, at the time, many Armenian children and women were forced to convert to Islam to be appropriated by local families.

Detail from *Sisters, Franciscans and Christians of Mardin*, End of 19th, beginning of 20th Century [Postcard] Birzamanlar Yayıncılık

“... a body, destined to insure reproduction of the species, the woman-subject, ... – a thoroughfare, a threshold where ‘nature’ confronts ‘culture’.”

Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, Kristeva, J. 1980

I observe that womanhood, pregnancy and motherhood are experiences where the body is stuck between nature and culture. On the one hand, the woman refugee carries the weight of reviving the continuum of the culture. This appointed duty makes the pregnant woman an obliged and sacred bearer of the willpower to survive, to regenerate life, to transmit the language to the next generation. On the other hand, the female body is the object of war and conflicts, the violence and appropriation of her body, an indivisible element of war borne largely by women.

Photograph of Zabel [Photograph] in *The American Historical Review*

Rescued Women, Iconic Images of the Armenian Genocide [Photograph] Armenian National Institute

[07:45]

Phantoms of the site, myths & prophecies

The stone house

In 2015, a century after the beginning of the Armenian Genocide, I live in a two century old stone house where I seize an absence, a phantom feeling of grieving. The concave architectural elements of the house, the well in its courtyard trigger my search for the secrecy hidden inside its walls. Partially carved into the rock hill of Mardin, the house's high arched ceilings echo inaudible lullabies and laments. The narrow streets, passages, archways nest myths about the stratum above the city. I stumble across this absence in the region's old Christian villages, demolished, empty, submerged into the soil. The house's terrace overlooks plains stretching out to the Syrian Desert, the pathway of death marches in 1915.

Detail from *Turcs of Mardin, Christians of Mardin*, End of 19th, beginning of 20th Century [Postcard] Birzamanlar Yayıncılık

"... That hidden tunnel in the house was the evidence that something tyrannous had happened ... Everyone told something, my grandma said nothing..."

The Grandchildren, Altınay, A. G., & Çetin, F. 2009

Myths in Anatolia often interpret rocks as a bride, or a woman with a baby fossilized into the silhouette of the landscape. She is petrified into the rock upon her prayer to turn into a stone rather than being caught by aggressors. Myths and tales of the region repeat the secrets held by haunted architectural elements and rocks. The bottomless well, a folkloric element that re-emerges in tales told in Armenian diasporas around the world, provides access to the underworld. The wells of the fortress of Mardin are told to have tunnels reaching the houses from within the rock hill.

The phantoms of the previous occupants of the region, 'those people', are mentioned in testimonies of locals in an odd secrecy.

The World below [Pencil drawing] Gros, N. 2018

"Some gave their babies and goods to Muslims, ... they said 'take him, take all this, just take care of him'. We had many many children in the house ... we even fed the girls."

Anonymous testimony, Mardin, 2014

Boghosian, S. 1986 *Der Zor Cheolleri (Turkish)* [Sound recording] Houshamadyan.org

A century earlier, in 1915, the city and its occupants of diverse communities and religions had seen the convoys of Armenians deported towards the Syrian Desert. People had witnessed their neighbours being exiled, thrown into the wells on the fortress. Some had tried to protect them; others had participated in the pillage and the massacres. The myths of the Armenian houses are still concurring in the region and the houses of the exiled are still dug from within to excavate treasures.

"...the thick stone walls of the houses hold secret items..."

'Acts of Defacement, Memories of Loss: Ghostly Effects of the "Armenian Crisis" in Mardin, Southeastern Turkey' Biner, Z. Ö. 2010, p.83

This uncanny history is fossilized in the cavities of the city. I pursue the feeling of grieving in other elements of the region. This absence, the wound, reappears in the multicultural sonorities that reflect an 'Ah'.

[10:39]

Hints of the wound

'Ah'

Carrying her [Video performance] Gros, N. 2017

'Ah' is an emotive utterance expressing pain in Turkish language. It comes from the insides, the heart and the abdomen. It can be felt in the body as mourning or regret, or it can reside in a place like an oath or a curse. A much-employed Turkish proverb, 'Ahını almak', means 'Bearing the curse of the aggrieved'.

"... when they were being deported ... the Armenian women told the Muslims, 'These lands will bring you no bounty! ... you'll never know peace in these lands!' ... The years passed ... not a single stone stood on top of another. ... and said, 'The Armenians' (Ah) curse came true."

My grandmother, Çetin, F. 2012, p.91

In diverse regions and languages of Anatolia, 'Ah' is wailed in unmetered folk songs. In the tradition of Denbej, the Kurdish storyteller deplores the 'Ah' that remains in sites from tragedies.

Widow Jeghsa Jeghiasarian, Collection of Bodil Biørn [Photograph] Armenian Genocide Museum – Institute Foundation

Widow Shushan Sarkissian, Collection of Bodil Biørn [Photograph] Armenian Genocide Museum – Institute Foundation

Dengbej Gazin, 2017, *Xinis* [Sound on online video]

'Ah' transforms the pain perceived in the body and the mind into its remedy in vocals.

“.. these voices ... made their hearts (dil) or livers (ceger) “burn,” reigniting the residues of pain ..”

‘Archived Voices, Acoustic Traces, and the Reverberations of Kurdish History in Modern Turkey.’ Schäfers, M. 2019 p.465

Lamentation – *ağit* in Turkish, *zêmar* in Kurdish and *vogh* in Armenian – is a ritual tradition where the voice laments the memory of the deceased in prose. The *ağit*, the *vogh*, is ‘burned’ to embody the longing, the grieving for a homeland, for people who have been exiled and forced to migrate.

Woman who came back to Cizre after the curfew lamented for her home 2016 [Sound on online video] Sırnak

Nalbandian, M. 1991–1996, *Dardo of Sassoun* [Sound recording] Houshamadyan.org

The ‘Ah’, the wound heard in the region, emerges in diverse cultures and dominates the modalities of collective sonorities. This wound will urge me to retrace the exiled in the diaspora in a bid to heal and complete. As such my confrontation of the Armenian Genocide extends to the diaspora in France.

[12:36]

Paris 2017

Meditating through the path

“Mayrig” Ghambarian, *Der Zor Cheolleri (Armenian)* [Sound recording] Houshamadyan.org

‘You destroy something and then it continues to be destroyed, ... for a hundred years, two hundred years, it is destroyed, ... what is left is destroyed all the time...’

Kerovpyan, A. 2015

Cultures Have No Sides, a Wide Cloth Band Drawn Tight Keeping the Baby from Falling Out, Between 1915 and 1923 [Photograph] Library of Congress

The land on which culture functions seems to be crucial to its continuum. In the context of France, Armenian culture is heard in diverse voices of the diaspora. Yet, the culture has been interrupted, uprooted, reclaimed and reinterpreted.

Pursuing the depth of elements that I embodied in Anatolia becomes difficult. I encounter the rupture of the path that I pursue from my homeland. I search for the affects of the site in testimonies of the time, historical books, churches of the community, and musical encounters in the diaspora. I employ a kind of mindfulness meditation to focus on the rupture that I embrace in the present moment. Then, I experiment with allowing my mind to wander and make associations between the affective memory of the site and my encounters with the diaspora. Through recollections of the site, I find my longing to connect to the palpable reality of the genocide and I engage in confronting archival images of the exile.

Detail from *Armenian deportees, 1915* [Photograph] The Armenian Genocide Museum – Institute Foundation

Detail from *Armenian woman kneeling beside dead child in field* [Photograph] Library of Congress

[14:16]

Gazing meditation

Gazing through bodies departing, I recognise the landscape that I inhabited and identify those absent from the site. The feeling of grieving, residing in my body from the site, the 'ah' that I carried, emerges as I counter the images of women departing, carrying their babies. The discomfort of my pregnant body, the inescapable growth of the fetus, connects me to the physical and metaphorical significance of carrying.

Detail from *Armenians, 1899* [Photograph] Library of Congress

Detail from *An Armenian woman and her child sit on a sidewalk, 1918–1920*
[Photograph] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Nalbandian, M. 1991–1996, *Giligyo Charte* [Sound recording] Houshamadyan.org

The gaze becomes a method to focus on the stains on the photographic medium. Wrinkles of cloths make shadows that embrace the carried, the bodies that may or may not have survived the genocide. I isolate and re-draw the 'carried'; an attempt to weigh the reality, to internalise the tragedy fixed by the photographic media. Drawing provokes me to further move the carried that I perceive, remember and embody through my pregnant body. As I extend my embodiment into space, I pursue a corporeal understanding of woman's experience in the context of the deportation.

Carrying her [Drawing series] Gros, N. 2017

[15:40]

Embodying the exiled

Carrying her [Video performance] Gros, N. 2017

I remember my self-exile from my homeland, three months previously. The gravity of roots slows the pace of walking while embodying the destiny of another sustains the walk. To walk commemorating the death marches, I work with an image. I imagine that my pelvis and belly is a bucket full to the brim with water, that the water is my baby and every drop is a bit that disappears from her.

* Walking as a poetic movement is inspired by my Butoh training with Fran Barbe at London International School of Performing Arts between 2007–08 and by the two axed walking that I learned from the master Iida Shigemi in Istanbul in 2013.

Like the woman fossilized into the rock while escaping, the archival images immobilise the moment of suspension between life and death, between urgency and exhaustion.

5.000 children from Kharput en route on donkey back and foot [Photograph] The Armenian Genocide Museum – Institute Foundation

Detail from *Armenian Widows and Children*, between ca. 1915 and ca. 1920 [Photograph] Library of Congress

De Lori, Kurdish lullaby, 2014, Personal correspondence, Mardin, Turkey

Performing through this liminality re-evokes the urgency of laments and lullabies that I heard in Southeast Anatolia, the 'Ah' omnipresent in the site draining out in the moments of vocal release. The walking meditation uncovers my childhood memories of İstanbul and the Armenian culture that silently existed around me. I sink into the chants, tales, lamentations, cries and laughter, carried away and forgotten purposefully over time.

"If you go to the Armenian country today, you will hear ghosts singing. And above them you will hear the others singing, those who live on this land. It is ghosts that are singing in Anatolia."

Kerovpyan, A. 2015

[17:18]

The Sonic diaspora

Remedy for the wound

These recollections lead me to dig into the sonic world of the Armenian diaspora. My encounter with the Akn Ensemble and participation in the Armenian Modal Chant workshop evolves into a mnemonic experience that completes my embodied research. Simple, but hard to grasp practice, I begin singing the drone, which develops and is held collectively. We continue singing the drone throughout the session. It is complemented by natural intervals that the master proposes, to develop the basis for Armenian chants.

Carrying her [Video performance] Gros, N. 2017

The drone serves as a mantra that revives a transcendent moment for the collectivity. It shapes a sonic space. In my experience, this sonic space born from the effortless flux of voices translates into a site, an imaginary home, in the same way that the lullaby knits a sonic nest for the baby. It is sung in a low voice, with a natural breath that does not push for projection. It is an embodiment of a healing space for the wound that I recognized in the sonorities of Eastern Anatolia and had an unstoppable urge to follow.

For the soundscape of the video performance, I meditate through the vocal practice of this sonority speaking from and to the internal world. I embody the 'Ah' of the stone house through the modalities of my voice and weave into the lullabies that I collected in southeastern Anatolia. The Kurdish mothers would often cry while they were singing their lullabies to me. Their words would pour out of them in prose to sooth their baby. The lullabies of the region, from Assyrian to Kurdish are haunted by the sonority of the 'Ah', transmitted from one culture to the other for centuries. They may not be mirrors to each other musically but they carry the emotional qualities embodied in the region. The Armenian lullaby I encounter in the diaspora carries a remedy of the wound that I heard in the land, now, deprived of this culture.

I make the base of the soundscape from this remedy weaving a sonic nest by vocalizing hints of Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish, Assyrian, and Arabic lullabies. I reclaim the integrity of the homeland that could have been, complete in its cultural diversity. It is in the lullaby that the emotionality of the land is written. The lullaby, the ephemeral sonic home connects me to my wound of ... losing my home as I begin (re)writing the embodied history of my homeland. An ephemeral history that merges and emerges.

[20:40]

Video article written, narrated and edited by Nilüfer Ovalıoğlu Gros

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Abstract

This video article describes the embodied research conducted whilst creating the video performance *Carrying her*, where various meditation techniques serve to confront the taboo history of the Armenian Genocide that reached its climax in 1915-16 in my homeland, Turkey. I instrumentalize my experience living in a two-century old stone house in the city of Mardin, in the Syrian frontier of Turkey, to reconsider the historical wound felt in the collective utterances of the region. Chants, lamentations, lullabies, testimonies, myths and tales guide me through the history embodied in Southeast Turkey and urge my journey to France where I re-discover the wound through sonorities of the Armenian Diaspora. My pregnancy opens a space to reflect upon women's experience of the genocide, translating the corporal phenomenon of being pregnant to the reality of the exiled through the notion of carrying. The sonic universe reclaimed in the diaspora revives my memory of the land in its lullabies. To reclaim the diversity lost from my homeland, I create a soundscape that employs diverse sonorities of Southeast Anatolia. Complemented by the soundscape, the video performance composes my *ağıt*, my lament for the people exiled and massacred.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide, Embodied Research, Meditation, Memory, Embodied Practices, Performance, Movement Research, Intercultural, Sonority, Site-specific, Embodied Knowledge, Women's studies, Pregnancy, Folkloric elements, Armenian Modal Chant, Storytelling, Lament, Lullaby, Anatolia, Embodied history.

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