

**“Becoming White: Contested History, Armenian American Women,  
and Racialized Bodies”<sup>1</sup>**

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Published in *The Journal of the Society for Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the U.S. (MELUS)*,  
Volume 27, Number 1 (Spring 2002); pp. 213-237.

**I. Introduction: historical erasures and racial borderlands**

In his recent memoir, *Black Dog of Fate*, Armenian American poet Peter Balakian describes how, in 1941, his grandmother began to have flashbacks about the Armenian genocide which she had survived years before. Upon hearing the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the onset of war, she became paranoid and delusional. Eventually, she was treated with electric shock therapy, after which she resumed her usual demeanor. “No one ever mentioned this moment in your grandmother’s life,” Balakian’s aunt tells him. “I never heard her mention the Turks again. It was as if it never happened. We say in Armenian: *When the past is behind you, keep it there*” (180).

Recovery of the past is an important function of ethnic literature, both politically and poetically. But what happens if the veracity of the historical narrative itself is contested? What are the effects of the traumatic events of the past upon the body when those events are denied? How may narrating the body’s origins become a strategy of re-presenting the contested history? Recent Armenian American novels and memoirs figure their narratives of origin as centrally connected to the 1915 genocide carried out by Turkey on its Armenian citizens. In light of Turkey’s persistent denial that a genocide of the Armenians took place, and of the United States’

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the following people who read drafts of this article and offered cogent advice along the way: Leslie Bow, Robert E. Lee, Ellen Rooney, Maud Mandel, Kristen Farmelant, Miriam Reumann, Eve Sterne, and the two anonymous reviewers for MELUS.

collusion with Turkish denial, many Americans are not well-informed about the Armenian genocide, while many Armenian Americans believe that Armenian genocide history is under constant threat of erasure. Writing the Armenian genocide into literature, as several recent novels do, is a way of writing it back into history.<sup>2</sup> This article argues that literary inscriptions of Armenian genocide problematize and reconfigure Armenian American ethnicity and gender and that the body is centrally implicated in these acts of negotiation. Carol Edgarian's *Rise the Euphrates*, a recent novel about three generations of Armenian American women, is one such text. It provides a legible example of how the female body becomes a primary trope in the recovery of history and of how the contested nature of Armenian genocide history complicates the way the female body and ethnic origins are figured.

Armenians' racialization in the United States also has implications for this literary articulation of the Armenian American woman's body and its origins. Like the history of the Armenian genocide, the history of Armenian whiteness has been repressed, albeit for different reasons and by different forces. Furthermore, the occlusions of these two histories are not only parallel but interrelated in terms of their effects upon the body. Bodily effects of racialization for people of color have been well explored in theoretical and critical dimensions, but scholarship about bodily effects of racialization on white ethnic subjects is scant. Despite the fact that Armenian Americans enjoy white privilege in the United States, I am claiming that their racialization has carried bodily consequences. Whiteness as a disciplinary regime configures bodies as they are assimilated, excluding some behaviors and signs while producing others.

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<sup>2</sup> A number of texts which perform this cultural work have been published in the 1990s. Second- and third-generation memoirs include Arlen, Avakian, and Balakian. Novels include Edgarian and Kricorian. Plays include Kalinoski and Ayvasian.

Edgarian's literary rendering of the body's historical (genocide) origins, therefore, must be read in the context of the bodily effects of racial assimilation.

In order to account for the ways in which Armenian narratives of origin function in relation to the body's race and gender, this article will consider a wide-ranging set of sources covering several eras. It begins with a summary of conceptions of race in Armenia and Ottoman Turkey prior to the Genocide,<sup>3</sup> followed by a brief discussion of how Armenians have been racialized in the United States. These sections contextualize the interpretation of *Rise the Euphrates* in the second half of the article. I will argue that the novel's recovery of Genocide history is told as a narrative of bodily origins, and that it works in tandem with a project of undermining the stability of Armenian racial whiteness in order to reconfigure the Armenian woman's body as a resistant one.

## **II. Pre-diasporic conditions: nationalism and genocide**

Having been catapulted into diaspora by massacre and genocide, most of the Armenian immigrants who arrived in the United States during the early part of the twentieth century came as refugees. The Armenian genocide of 1915-1923 was a program of "isolation, elimination, or expulsion of the civilian Armenian population in the Ottoman Turkish Empire by their own government" (Blair 1). Earlier massacres in 1894-96 and 1909 resulted in the deaths of two hundred thousand Armenians; over one million more died during World War I (Dadrian, xviii).

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<sup>3</sup> In this article the word "Genocide" is capitalized when it refers specifically to the Armenian genocide and not capitalized when it is meant generically.

Throughout the five-hundred years of Turkish rule of Armenia, Armenians were a subjugated Other, although their difference was not conceptualized according to modern notions of race. Christian and Jewish communities in Ottoman Turkey held a lower status than that of the Muslim majority but because they were monotheists and people of Scripture (*dhimma*), they were protected by Islamic law to some degree.<sup>4</sup> Changing economic and political conditions which originated in the Nineteenth century culminated in the Armenian genocide in the early years of the Twentieth Century.<sup>5</sup> One such change was the rise of modern conceptions of nation, concepts which originated in Europe and were promulgated in the Near East. Historian Ronald Grigor Suny points out that throughout most of its history, Caucasia was marked by extraordinary movement of peoples, which meant that ethnic boundaries were not rigidly defined. Populations were intermixed, and there was a good deal of intermarriage, and bi- and trilingualism (28). People gave their loyalty to religions, local dynasties, or imperial rulers rather than to a nation-state, and it was not until the nineteenth century that ideologies of ethnic nationalism began to solidify the boundaries between peoples (28). Suny uses the term “discourse of the nation” to refer to the notion that “a people constituted on the basis of a shared culture and history has rights to political self-determination, control of their territorial homeland, and, perhaps, even independence” (27). Influenced by this new way of conceptualizing nation, “Armenians in Transcaucasia and the Ottoman Empire reconceptualized their ethnoreligious community, with its primary allegiance to a unique form of Christianity, and elaborated in its place a more

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<sup>4</sup> For a more complete discussion of the Ottoman millet system, see Melson, Chapter Two.

<sup>5</sup> The historical and political forces surrounding the Armenian genocide were complex. Dadrian presents a cogent account of these forces. For a discussion of how other non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire escaped genocide, see Dadrian, Chapter Seven.

European notion of Armenians as a secular nation marked by language, shared culture and history, and territorial homeland” (27).

Ottoman Turks also encountered the European discourse of nation during the nineteenth century, and this encounter gave rise to clashes between the Islamic theocracy of Ottoman Turkey and the more secular European states over issues of nationality and civil rights. In his history of the Armenian genocide, Vahakn Dadrian notes that *dhimmi* inequality under Islamic law gave the Ottoman government a justification for “debarring non-Muslims from the set of rights incorporated in Western public law, especially political rights, and in a certain sense, civil rights as well” (23). The incompatibility of European and Muslim conceptualizations of nation was one of the preconditions which led to the Armenian genocide.

The role of the West in the Armenian genocide was complex. Although neither Armenia nor Turkey was colonized by the West in a conventional sense, both nations were among the West’s many Others. Both were subjected to the Orientalist desire to comprehend, and to secure Western authority over, the differences manifest in their cultures. Both also were profoundly affected by Western imperialism. Rey Chow’s description of China as a country “not everywhere militarily occupied” but nonetheless needing to be read in terms of imperialism is useful in theorizing the relation of Armenia and Turkey to the West. Chow claims that “imperialism as ideological domination succeeds best without physical coercion, without actually capturing the body and the land” (8). In the decades preceding the Genocide, European powers did pressure Turkey to adopt Western ideologies of human rights in order to alleviate the suffering of non-Muslim Turkish citizens such as the Armenians. European powers compelled Turkey to institute legal assurances of equal rights for non-Muslim Ottoman citizens, which “raised the national

consciousness of the Armenian population, who began to press for the actual implementation of these reforms” (Dadrian xxii). However, when it became clear that Turkey was not going to implement the reform measures Europeans had demanded, the Europeans “never truly attempted to force Ottoman compliance; nor did they offer the Armenians the military or political support that they would need to actually try to secure these statutory rights” (xxiii). The voicing of Armenians’ newly-developed political consciousness and goals was then used as an example of rebellious nationalism by the Young Turk government in order to justify a program of total extermination of the Armenians (xxiii).

### **III. The Borders of Whiteness**

Armenian Americans’ place of origin (“Armenia”) is located at one of the geographical and cultural borders of the West. Although Armenian Americans have attained racial privilege by virtue of being constituted as white in the United States, they have at times been positioned, or position themselves, in a racial borderland. As Armenians arrived in the United States from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, they were incorporated into a set of racial categories, and accruing relations of power, which were quite different from those in Turkey or in the triangulated position Armenians occupied within Turkish-European relations. Racial categories in the U.S. were undergoing a process of elaboration in the courts, and the racialization of Armenian immigrants was both a component and an effect of legal/racial discourse at that time.

The construction of that contour of the racial borderland inhabited by Armenian Americans took place through two court trials which determined that they were legally white.

Significantly, the discourse that racialized Armenian immigrants as white at the turn of the century was the same one that excluded other Asian immigrants. Laws pertaining to the citizenship rights of Native Americans and African Americans had been part of the discursive formation of categories of race in the United States throughout the nineteenth century. However, the years of the greatest influx of Armenian immigrants coincided with influxes of immigrants from other parts of Asia.<sup>6</sup> It was during this period that the Asian exclusion acts began to limit Asian immigration and naturalization. Armenian immigrants were classified as white or Caucasian and consequently linked with Europe in the Western imagination. This was accomplished despite the fact that other West and South Asian groups, such as Cypriots, Iranians, Syrians, and Indians were at various times legally excluded from the category “white” even when they, like Armenians, could claim to be “Caucasian” or appeared white. Armenian whiteness was therefore both an effect of the Asian exclusion acts and a tool used in the exclusion of other Asian immigrants from racial whiteness. In his comprehensive study of the naturalization cases of the period, Ian F. Haney-López concludes that “common knowledge” and “scientific evidence” were the main rationales used by courts to determine who was white and who was not (López 5). These two rationales were assumed to be congruent in the early naturalization and citizenship laws. But by 1909, influxes of immigrants from Western and Southern Asia coincided with, and perhaps occasioned, a disjuncture between scientific and popular understandings of race. The racialization of Armenians in legal discourse helped to establish the terms in which the battle between scientific and popular understandings of race were waged.

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<sup>6</sup> Mirak estimates that there were 66,000 Armenian immigrants to the United States before 1915. His data show that the number of immigrants increased dramatically between the 1890s and 1914, according to the following breakdown: 1,500 (1834-1890); 12,500 (1891-1898); 51,950 (1899-1914) (290).

The first naturalization case involving Armenians, *in re Halladjian*, took place in Massachusetts in 1909, and concerned four Armenian immigrants whose naturalization petitions were opposed by the government. In finding in favor of the applicants, District Court Judge Lowell demonstrated the unreliability of “common sense” methods of racial classification, such as the use of color as a measure. The United States brief had claimed that “Without being able to define a white person, the average man in the street understands distinctly what it means, and would find no difficulty in assigning to the yellow race a Turk or Syrian with as much ease as he would bestow that designation on a Chinaman or a Korean” (838). Lowell dismissed the notion that there was a visually-readable, shared racial sensibility, and added that to him, the petitioners looked like Europeans. Furthermore, he said, popular opinion about who looked white and who did not changed over time, as in the cases of the Chinese and Japanese. So color was not a reliable test.

Yet, although Lowell rejected bodily appearance as a sign of racial identity, he effected a rhetorical displacement of Armenians subjects, metonymically substituting Europeans in their place and evoking a picture of European suffering at the hands of Turkish invaders. This substitution of Europeans for Armenians in the place of the colonized enabled Lowell to argue in favor of white status to Armenians, by suggesting that their racial congruence with Europeans rested upon Turkish racial difference. During the era of Turkish imperialism in Europe, “European mothers bore their children, European architects built their mosques, European generals commanded their armies, and it was charged against them as an act of extraordinary cruelty that they took from European families the most promising boys and brought them up to be Mohammedans and Turks” (839). As Lowell’s account of Turkish domination and the



resulting miscegenation unfolded, Armenians dropped out of the picture altogether. Stressing the colonization of Europeans rather than that of Armenians was a strategy designed to inspire the sympathy of what Lowell knew to be his largely European American readership.<sup>7</sup> However, two elements of this line of thinking are troubling. First, it is an example of how the production of Armenian whiteness rested upon an exaggerated Asian (in this case, Turkish) difference, and was used to define and exclude Asian alterity. Second, by not discussing Turkish victimization of Armenians directly, Lowell's account effectively suppressed the historical facts of Armenian physical suffering in the Genocide. Thus, although whiteness conferred privilege upon Armenian Americans, it came as a mixed blessing. Lowell's discursive assimilation of Armenians meant that their whiteness ultimately was contingent upon their Anglo-conformity.

In 1925, on the strength of the arguments made in *Ozawa, Thind*, and similar cases excluding Asian immigrants, the United States renewed its attempts to classify Armenians as non-white. In *U.S. v. Cartozian*, the United States attempted to cancel the certificate of naturalization of an Armenian American immigrant. Like *Halladjian*, this case was settled at the district court level, and again, the United States' bid did not succeed. However, it had to take into account the arguments developed in the intervening sixteen years; more directly than *Halladjian*, *Cartozian* addressed the problem of the assimilation of the body into whiteness. Judge Wolverton argued that Armenians were "of the Alpine stock," quoting authorities from the

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<sup>7</sup> Lowell was not the first to characterize Armenians this way. Missionaries commonly emphasized that Armenians were Christians (in contradistinction to Turkish Muslims) and downplayed their identification as Armenian (in contradistinction to the more Orientalized Turks). On the other hand, it was the discourse of missionaries and relief workers which gave rise to the term "Starving Armenians," which did articulate some measure of distinctiveness to Armenian identity and experience. For a discussion of missionary eyewitness accounts, see Moranian.

ancient Greek historian Strabo to anthropologist Franz Boas, who testified in the case on behalf of Cartozian (920-21). He also took up the question of intermarriage, pointing out that in Russia Armenians “have intermingled freely and harmoniously” with Russians and that “the races mix and amalgamate readily and spontaneously” (920). The example of Russian/Armenian intermarriage assuaged white fears of miscegenation, demonstrating that Armenians did not pose a threat. Furthermore, Armenians were found to be “without appreciable blending with the Mongolian or other kindred races”; consequently, they would not corrupt the blood of the European race (920). Finally, Armenians would “readily amalgamate with the European and white races”; in other words, they could be counted upon to blend in, to melt into the pot (920).

These naturalization cases followed a trajectory in racializing Armenians, the endpoint of which was that Armenian whiteness had to be sanctioned in biological terms. I am arguing that the naturalization discourse was an apparatus for the production of bodies as racialized objects. Both Judge Lowell’s and Judge Wolverton’s acceptance of Armenian biological whiteness was based upon the assumption that they would “amalgamate”; that is to say, their physical differences would be erased through genetic mixing. Although whiteness confers the privilege of not having to be reduced to the body in representation, the process of assimilation that had to take place discursively in order for Armenian whiteness to be established occurred not only in the cultural realm but in the bodily realm as well. Their “Oriental” differences had to be downplayed. Even their bodily suffering at the hands of Turks had to be downplayed. Instead, their physical suffering had to be linked with, and even displaced by, that of European Christians. In other words, legal discourse made the Armenian body irrelevant in order to establish

Armenian whiteness. In discursive realms other than that of law, however, Armenian bodily whiteness has remained at the racial border.<sup>8</sup>

#### **IV. Armenian whiteness in the 1990s**

The historical moment during which the naturalization cases were heard in the courts was also the one in which the establishment of Asian alterity was the main object of immigration restrictions. Consequently, as thousands of Armenian refugees arrived in the United States, their racialization contributed to the production of both whiteness *and* Oriental Otherness, as they were differentiated from other Asian immigrants. In the 1990s, roughly seventy years after *Cartozian*, Armenian whiteness is mainly secure. The children and grandchildren of Genocide refugees have prospered economically and culturally. However, a second wave of Armenian immigration from Lebanon, Iran, and other parts of the Middle East, which began in the 1970s and has continued through the 1990s, has coincided with a resurgence of immigration restrictions in the United States. In some instances Armenian Americans have been victims of anti-immigrant sentiment and ethnic hatred, while in other instances they have been the perpetrators. California, which has a high concentration of these new Armenian immigrants as well as a large community of second and third generation Armenian Americans, offers a case in point. A Los Angeles County commission which tracks reports of hate crimes began to receive complaints from Armenian American victims in 1987. In Glendale, California, home to a sizable immigrant population from the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, Armenians have been victimized

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<sup>8</sup> For a complete history of race in U.S. naturalization and immigration law, see Haney-López. For a comprehensive cultural history of whiteness, see Jacobson.

by white supremacists. At the same time, there is at least one report of a Glendale Armenian American as an offender in a racial conflict. Legally white though they may be, Armenian Americans (especially the recent immigrants) occupy a racial borderland.

Class privilege is also relevant to Armenian American racial identity. The way Armenian Americans positioned themselves with respect to the Los Angeles riot of the summer of 1992 is telling. The shop of one Armenian American grocer was patrolled by his patrons during the riot because of the friendship he had shown to unemployed and homeless members of his clientele, a clientele consisting largely of people of color (Berberian 21). Most of his Armenian customers had long since moved away, but this shopkeeper maintained a commitment to the community even as it became multiracial. The majority of Glendale Armenian Americans, however, remained on the sidelines during the riot, probably insulated in more affluent and less racially diverse neighborhoods.

A third factor in the way Armenian Americans position themselves racially has to do with the psychological fallout from the traumatic past. One psychologist interviewed by an Armenian American magazine said that, presented with a choice of whether to align themselves with African Americans on the grounds that they too are a minority group, or with whites on the grounds of racial status, most Armenians “did neither because they felt alienated from the mainstream,” and that some “didn’t care who was killing who” (Berberian 18). A community relations officer from Glendale linked the Armenian immigrants’ indifference to the Los Angeles riots with their history of survival under oppression, which includes not only the Genocide but also the five hundred years of Turkish domination prior to the events of 1894 and 1915, as well as more recent conflicts in the Soviet Union, Iran, Beirut, and the Karabagh region of Azerbaijan

(Berberian 18). Thus, this apathy must be understood as a function both of Armenians' white privilege in the United States and of their history of being either direct or indirect victims of political conflicts in other lands. Anthropologist James Clifford argues that for "diasporic populations" assimilation is more complicated than it is for other immigrants. "In assimilationist national ideologies such as those of the United States," he writes, "immigrants may experience loss and nostalgia, but only *en route* to a whole new home in a new place" (Clifford 286). By contrast, "peoples whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be 'cured' by merging into a new national community" (Clifford 286).

A final and important factor influencing Armenian American racial positionality is the threat (whether imagined or real) that the Armenian genocide will be written out of dominant historical narratives and forgotten in public memory. Armenians themselves have always talked about "the massacres." In the academy, the Genocide is generally known, particularly in the field of Genocide Studies, although in recent years there have been a number of pseudo-scholarly publications which deny the Genocide.<sup>9</sup> Popular consciousness about the Armenian genocide has been spottier. Americans did know about the Hamidian massacres of 1894-96, and missionary reports and eyewitness accounts kept the Genocide in the public eye for several years after 1915. Popular consciousness declined, however, between the 1930s and 1960s, and did so for a number of reasons. First, despite the abundance of written documentation of the Genocide,

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<sup>9</sup> Hovannisian includes several articles on denial in the academy. For a discussion of Turkish financial backing of scholars at United States universities who deny the Genocide, see Des Pres. One of the best publicized of these cases is the controversy over the Attaturk Chair in Turkish Studies at Princeton University. See Balakian 272-75; see also Smith et al.

this event occurred before the proliferation of visual mass media.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, most of the physical evidence has remained under Turkish control, because Turkey was never occupied by Western powers after World War I. Most importantly, Turkey has always denied that these events were a planned genocide, claiming that Armenians were merely war casualties, or that they were traitorously collaborating with the Allied powers and deserved to die. Although knowledge of the Genocide has been revived over the course of the last thirty years, mainly due to the efforts of scholars in Genocide Studies and Armenian activists, Turkey has also stepped up its efforts to deny the Armenian genocide in the American popular press and academy.<sup>11</sup> Using threats of reprisals, the Turkish government has also successfully prevented the United States government from officially recognizing this event.<sup>12</sup> The denial of genocide is the final stage of genocide: in the first stage, people are killed, while in the last stage, memories of the killings are erased or silenced.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, the trauma of the Armenian genocide continues to affect the

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<sup>10</sup> See Najarian, in which the protagonist compares the reconstruction of the Armenian genocide through memory, without the aid of visual representations, to the televising of violence in El Salvador or Cambodia. Dadrian includes an extensive bibliography of official records from the European powers, Turkey, the United Nations, and the United States government, as well as secondary sources. For eyewitness accounts by Western observers, see Morgenthau and Davis. For a compilation of relevant United States government documentation, see Sarafian. For survivor accounts, see Hartunian and Jernazian.

<sup>11</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, full-page ads denying the Genocide appeared in *The New York Times* and other major newspapers every year on April 24th, the day of commemoration of the Armenian genocide. For a discussion of how the Turkish government succeeded in preventing Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer from making a movie of Franz Werfel's book (*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*) about the Armenian genocide, see Minasian.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of how the Armenian Genocide was excluded from the United States Holocaust Museum, see Linenthal, Chapter Four.

<sup>13</sup> For a more complete discussion, see Lipstadt.

survivors and their descendants, such that they may feel “alienated from the mainstream” in the United States.

Resisting the imposition of silence is a way Armenian Americans may overcome the psychological trauma that is part of the legacy of the Genocide. More importantly for this study, the assertion of Armenian genocide history is a strategy for rethinking Armenian ethnic and gendered identity. Problematizing the racialization of Armenians is another strategy that tends in the same direction. The next section explores a literary articulation that weaves both strategies together, and that adds gender to the picture of Armenian identity developed thus far. Retelling Genocide history is a central concern of many Armenian narratives of origin. In *Rise the Euphrates*, that project is linked with that of complicating Armenian racial identity in order to reconfigure Armenian female body and its origins.

## **V. Rewriting the Body’s history/Writing the body’s race**

Published in 1994, Carol Edgarian’s novel takes on the task of reintroducing the Armenian genocide to an American audience. Orientalism produces non-Western cultures as unintelligible; thus, one of the functions of ethnic fiction is translational. In the case of Armenian history, the Genocide is a site of unintelligibility in the United States. Edgarian intervenes in political/historical discourse to make that history present and intelligible once again. *Rise the Euphrates* tells a story of the origins of the female subject. This story is one of how the subject came to be an ethnic subject in the United States, as well as how the subject came into being out of the Genocide and its aftermath.

Aside from the political project of the novel, its presentation of Genocide history has several implications for literary theory. First, it departs from the formulaic representation of the past some critics have claimed is common to ethnic literature. Critic Berndt Ostendorf has argued that this literary genre “repeats the quest for self-determination and self authentication which characterized the growth of an American literary identity vis-à-vis British dominance” (578). Ostendorf believes that “the culture of ethnic renaissance fits into the American tradition of backward utopias, the myth of the golden age” (584). The “sentimental return to the preindustrial life-style of grandmothers and grandfathers,” he writes further, “may have just as much to do with a compensatory reaction to commodity capitalism as with a conscious ‘third generation’ ethnic revival” (585). Ethnic texts such as *Rise the Euphrates*, however, call this characterization into question. In Edgarian’s novel, the ethnic past is not utopian but apocalyptic.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, literary renderings of Genocide history raise the question of the subjectivity of all narrative, including historical narrative. Poststructuralism has demonstrated that “reality” and “truth” are always constructed. How much weight, then, should be given to each of the conflicting accounts (Armenian and Turkish) of the Armenian genocide? Several of the recently published memoirs and novels by Armenian American writers acknowledge explicitly or implicitly the constructed nature of their narratives, yet still maintain the “truth” of

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<sup>14</sup> This is also the reason that ethnic generational formulae, such as Marcus Hansen's axiom that the third generation wants to remember what the second generation tried to forget, are inadequate to account for remembering and forgetting in Armenian American culture and literature. While texts like *Rise the Euphrates* do follow this formula to some extent, second generation Armenians forget not only because of a desire to conform to American norms, but also because of the psychological tendency to repress traumatic memories. Likewise, Armenian ethnic remembering is complicated by the phenomenon of Turkish denial and U.S. complicity with that denial.



Genocide history.<sup>15</sup> It is crucial for Armenian Americans, as well as others whose histories have been rewritten or erased by dominant discourses, to voice their own accounts and to tell their own narratives of origin.

Finally, Edgarian's novel also makes an intervention in literary theory through its figuration of whiteness. As scholars now begin to answer the call issued by Toni Morrison and others to address the role played by whiteness in literature, a more complex understanding of different whitenesses is needed. Morrison demonstrates how the establishment of whiteness in a literary text rests upon the constitution and exclusion of blackness, arguing that in canonical texts by white authors, "a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness" (6). In canonical United States literature, "Americanness" suggests both the centrality of whiteness and a persistent, troubling specter of blackness at its periphery. Morrison's symptomatic reading of such texts demonstrates how widespread this topos is in the canon, but an assessment of *Rise the Euphrates*, a non-canonical, white ethnic novel, complicates the formula. Edgarian's novel takes place in the 1960s, well after Armenian whiteness was legally secure, but at time when Armenian ethnic (cultural) difference still marked Armenians as Other. Edgarian is anxious to maintain Armenian racial whiteness even while celebrating Armenian ethnic difference. In this respect, her novel follows Morrison's formula: whiteness is naturalized, and racial alterity is figured as a threat from the border. However, it is not primarily blackness which resides at that border. Asian racial difference was at that border in the era of the naturalization cases. In the novel, set forty years later, Armenian whiteness is defined in

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, Balakian weaves discussion of poetry and language together with stories of his family and with excerpted documentation of the Genocide; Avakian sets her memoir in the context of both Armenian genocide history and the Civil Rights movement.

contradistinction to the racial alterity of Native Americans, another group that has suffered genocide.

Edgarian's story of origins is told as the story of bodies, of their origins in the trauma of the Genocide, and of how they come to be assimilated into systems of race and gender in the United States. I will argue that racial production in the novel is connected to the recovery of Armenian genocide history. Both have had an impact on the body and the ways in which it is identified. The central characters' status as white female subjects in the United States is secured through a repression of the bodily violations of the Genocide as well as through the containment of the signs of Armenian bodily difference.<sup>16</sup> Yet the production of the characters' bodies according to American norms of femininity is in tension with an alternative mode of embodiment toward which the novel reaches, one that is more disruptive of the norms of white dominance. This alternative mode of embodiment is a post-Genocide and post-assimilation one which is resistant to those forces. Against the containment of the body's excesses, the novel holds out the promise of a radical reconfiguration of the body through the way it narrates the body's origins.

Set in suburban Connecticut during the 1960s, *Rise the Euphrates* is the coming-of-age narrative of a young Armenian-American girl named Seta Loon. Is it also a family narrative with

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<sup>16</sup> One of the difficulties in theorizing the effects of the Armenian genocide on the bodies of its victims is the fact that many of the survivors have been reluctant to talk about sexual violations they endured. Many if not most of the female survivors undoubtedly were raped, but there was no discourse of sexual abuse survival at the time to encourage them to speak out. Furthermore, Armenian religious and patriarchal values impose narrow and rigid standards for female sexuality, and this contributes to the victims' feelings of shame and to their silence. The lacunae in the testimonies collected from survivors may never be filled in, as most of the survivors still alive are now in the 90s; yet, I would argue, symptomatic readings of those texts can recover some of what they repress. The body is also being made present once more in literature written by descendants of survivors.

multiple protagonists, for although Seta narrates the novel and is clearly the central character, her story is closely interwoven with those of her mother (Araxie) and grandmother (Casard). In the prologue, Casard takes the infant Seta aside at her baptism ceremony and whispers into her granddaughter's ear the story of how she (Casard) survived the Armenian genocide. The story Casard tells is complete but for her "true" name, the name she was given at birth and which the trauma of the Genocide has caused her to forget. She charges her infant granddaughter with the task of "remembering" her name.

The action then shifts back in time to Casard's childhood in Armenia and her Genocide experience. Casard's origins are figured as being rooted in her Genocide ordeal, and the inclusion of her story is the novel's intervention against the silencing of Genocide history. She alone of her family survives the Genocide. She eventually marries, comes to the United States, and gives birth to Araxie; Araxie in turn marries and gives birth to Seta and her brother and sister. The family's attempts to negotiate the competing traditions first of Armenian and Anglo heritage provide a focal point for the story line in the first half of the novel.

As Seta moves from childhood to adolescence in the novel's second half, things begin to change: her grandmother dies, her mother has an affair, she herself experiences the dawning of sexual maturation, her parents separate. Throughout the unfolding of these events, the larger narrative of the family's collective need to confront the past is always present. Overwhelmed by the legacy of death and shame, Araxie tries to escape that legacy first by marrying an *odar* (non-Armenian), George Loon, and later, by having an affair. So it falls to Seta to recover Casard's true name. Eventually, it becomes clear that Seta's quest is not only for her grandmother's

origins but for her mother's and her own as well, because the three generations of women are so intimately connected.

The quest to recover Casard's lost name and history is a strategy of breaking silence. That silence is represented by an abundance of oral references—lips, mouths, eating, feeding, are all prominently figured, as are descriptions of physical pain, focusing on bellies, veins, and, again, on mouths. When Seta watches Araxie applying lipstick, she realizes that her mother's

troubled soul only heightened her outward beauty: her black swath of hair, her deep pooled eyes, the lethargic ease with which Momma made even the smallest gesture seem infinite. Countless mornings I stood beside her to watch the wand of her lipstick slowly, painfully describing the O of her mouth. (4)

The pain of the lips is suggestive of the forms of silencing specific to Turkish, Armenian, and United States cultures respectively. In nineteenth-century Turkey, for instance, many Armenians were afraid that if they were heard speaking Armenian, their tongues might be cut out by Turks.<sup>17</sup> In traditional Armenian culture, moreover, women were special targets of silencing regimes. According to custom, when an Armenian woman married, she went to live in her husband's family's house, where her status was subordinate to that of all the other adults. In addition to performing the household's most menial chores, she underwent a year-long period of silence during which she was not allowed to speak to anyone except children and her husband, and then only when alone with them. This year of silence was called *moonch*, or "the bride swallowed her tongue" (Villa 92). In the United States, Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide, the

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<sup>17</sup> Stories of actual tongue-cutting are difficult to verify. There probably were some incidents but perhaps not as many as Armenians believed. Regardless of how much truth there was to such stories, however, they were widely believed and thus functioned as a deterrent: many Armenians spoke Turkish because they were afraid to speak Armenian.

psychological repression of traumatic memories, and regimes which silence women in general provide the deep background for the embodiment of voice in the novel.

In addition to representing issues of silence and voice, orality in the text functions as a trope of bodily interconnection across generational boundaries—of ethnic transmission—as in this description of Casard and Araxie:

And their breath. It smelled the same, a combination of lamb, pekoe tea, mint and bananas. It mattered not the men they were with, or the children, or how high in the community they might scale. They had the same breath. As a young girl Araxie watched Casard apply her makeup and experienced the odd sensation of her mother's methods and intentions, and yes, the ghosts of the Euphrates, too, planting themselves like a pair of lips on Araxie's white bones. (55)

Casard and Araxie are described as doubles of each other, and their doubling is connected with trauma. That trauma is transmitted by one generation to another through oral connections: kissing, breathing, applying lipstick. Araxie internalizes her mother's "methods and intentions" through these rituals, and they are replayed when she herself performs them later. Thus, each time Araxie traces the outline of her mouth with the lipstick, she is freshly defined as Casard's daughter and as the one whose inheritance is a past replete with death and torture. This somaticization of her mother's Genocide trauma, the text suggests, is the source of Araxie's identity crisis. Seta in turn tries on Araxie's lipstick and looks in the mirror and immediately afterward discovers evidence of her mother's affair. The impact of the Genocide persists, we are thus to understand, into the second and third generations, inscribed upon the bodies of the survivors' descendants.

All the women are caught between two worlds, and one trajectory of the novel is to show that their assimilation into a Western, individualistic mode of identity enables them to heal from Genocide trauma. This dimension of the narrative obscures the ways in which the cultural and

bodily assimilation of the women is always already achieved. Casard, the immigrant, is supposedly the most unassimilated. However, resistant as she is to some elements of American culture, she has readily embraced American notions of femininity, and the text's attempt to portray her as unassimilated masks the ways in which she does conform. For instance, she scorns intermarriage, processed foods, and drip-dry fabrics as too American, but she uses lipstick, which is probably not an Armenian fashion (Thomasian).<sup>18</sup> The sleight-of-hand with which the novel structures Casard's so-called transformation plays to popular notions of assimilation as a voluntary choice. But in the realm of the body, she has already conformed to Western disciplines of femininity. Araxie's struggle to negotiate Armenian traditions and American culture has even more dire consequences for her body. The varicose veins she inherits from her mother are suggestive of the Euphrates River swollen with drowned Genocide victims.<sup>19</sup> And in Seta's description of watching her mother apply lipstick, Araxie appears to suffer physically through conforming to the disciplines of Western fashion. But the description of her physical beauty in that passage shows that Araxie too has already been positioned in relation to American ideals of feminine beauty. Her slightly exotic looks, and the suggestion of suffering that marks her as a

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<sup>18</sup> Evidence of Armenian women's use of cosmetics in the time Casard would have been born in Armenia is scant. According to Ruth Thomasian, director of Project Save (a photographic and oral history archive of Armenian American culture), Armenian women did apply henna to their fingertips, and some wore the Muslim veil, but the use of lipstick is probably a Western influence. Affluent Armenians, particularly in the Western cities like Istanbul, were exposed to European cultural traditions and may have been introduced to lipstick through their contact with Europeans. Casard's family was a village family, however, so her use of lipstick is clearly due to American influence.

<sup>19</sup> In the Genocide, thousands of Armenian women and children were force-marched to the Euphrates River, where they were made to drown themselves. Others were force-marched into the Syrian desert until they died of starvation and thirst. Able-bodied men were usually executed beforehand.

descendant of a tragically doomed, eastern culture, make her an Orientalized figure, yet her difference is not great enough to call her racial whiteness into question.

In another register, however, the tenacity of the bodily linkages among the women is in tension with the text's rendering of their cultural and bodily assimilation. The trauma of the Genocide underlies not only the lipstick scenes but also numerous references to other modes of orality: people eating food, sucking lemons, kissing, playing the *duduk* (Armenian oboe). These moments invite psychoanalytic interpretation, and the text seems to suggest that, cut off in horrific ways from the nurturance of their mothers, Genocide survivors never progressed beyond the oral stage of infant sexuality. One dimension of the novel's project is to move Seta beyond that oral stage and into adult (phallic, heterosexual) sexuality, and this is what drives Part II of the novel, which is called "Kiss Me" and is devoted to Seta's adolescence. However, Western psychological models of development do not fully apply in cultures which conceptualize identities as less individuated and more interconnected. Through the figuration of intergenerational bodily connections, Edgarian also writes Armenian women's identities as intermingled with one another: the generational doublings pose an alternative form of embodiment to that of the psychoanalytic model of development or its partner, Enlightenment individualism.

This alternative mode of embodiment threatens white middle-class conceptions of femininity through its suggestions of feminine excess. Seta is repulsed when she glimpses Casard's legs and sees that, "blue like a river, purple as a bruise, veins crisscrossed her white, white skin, soft as a baby's" (143). I have already suggested that the figure of the veins gesture to the Euphrates River, and indeed part of Seta's revulsion is horror at viewing a sign of the

tortures inflicted by the Turks on the Armenians, but it is also significant that this scene of revulsion is enacted over the female body. It was women in large part who were driven to the Euphrates, it is women who get varicose veins in childbirth; the rivers of fluid within their bodies threaten to rise (as the book's title tells us). This feminine excess is elaborated further in an episode in which Seta's friend, Theresa Vartyan, is abducted by a milkman, raped, beaten, and left for dead. Armenian orality, it is to be inferred, makes Armenian women especially vulnerable, and searching for the milk of one's mother is a dangerous exercise. Theresa's story is a cautionary tale from which Seta must learn. And yet the novel is sympathetic to Theresa's excess and her freedom of spirit. She expresses a defiant bodily difference through promiscuity and flamboyant clothing, violating the rules of both bourgeois American and patriarchal Armenian norms of femininity. Her name comes from the Armenian word for "rose" (*Vart*), which is a sign of fertility in Armenian culture and is an emblem of the pre-Christian Armenian goddess *Anahid*. The elemental and free figure of Theresa gestures to an Armenian American feminine body whose origins are multiple, lying at once in pre-Genocide Armenian culture, in the traumatic experience of the Genocide itself, in the post-Genocide repression of history, and in bourgeois femininity in the United States.

Theresa also embodies the threat of an Armenian racial excess which threatens dominant conceptions of racial whiteness in that she lacks the ability to read racial codes. She is unable to describe the race of her attacker: "First she said her attacker was 'dark,' then 'ruddy,' then 'light-light,' until the only consistency in her story was the timbre of his voice" (314). Her color-blindness is more than a sign of ideological liberalism; it indicates a stance that problematizes race (her attacker's as well as her own). Taken together, her repetitions of the story of the attack



show that racial difference is constructed through language and narrative, and that to write the body's origins in Genocide history is also to call the body's racial identification into question.

Because of Theresa's rebellion against these codes, she is the key to the resolution of Seta's legacy crisis. Seta dreams that all the town's women (a pointedly multicultural group) come together on the longest night of the year for a "solstice rite of absolution," during which they offer a story "for the day after the solstice, for the journey back to the light" (345). They assemble in the town's central square, near a statue of a Native American woman popularly called "Squaw." There Seta is called to account for herself and her legacy. Theresa is present at this ritual, and although she is perceived as dangerously free by members of this group she is the one who provides the solution, by proclaiming that "we can rise again." Seta then decorates the statue with Theresa's box of treasures:

I knelt in Squaw's shadow and spread the box of treasures Theresa had given me at Squaw's feet. The elders stood back to show respect. They winked at each other as I put Theresa's lace in Squaw's Bible, wrapped Theresa's ribbon at Squaw's feet, and scented Squaw's ragged hem with a rose. As I moved around the statue, I recited these words: "The daughter assumes what is unfinished in her mother's life. The unanswered questions become her work. She spins, turning the questions upon herself. Generation after generation, it is a spiraling." (347)

The women are connected across generations and races by a mystified and sentimentalized notion of Native American spirituality. Native American culture is relegated to the past, represented not by anyone present at the ritual but by the statue only. And yet, the production of Native American identity as racially Other (and of Armenian American identity as white) is immediately destabilized by the commonalities between the two cultures. It is logical but ironic that the most prominent representations of racial alterity in the text are of Native Americans, who are to the American continent what Armenians are to Asia Minor. Native American difference thus

becomes both that from which Armenians have stood apart by virtue of their own whiteness and that with which they are aligned.

This literary alignment of Armenian Americans with Native Americans has implications for contemporary racial politics. In the context of heightened racial tensions in the United States, according to which Armenian Americans are both privileged by their whiteness and experience ethnic discrimination, they are faced with a dilemma in terms of how they identify themselves and which alliances they forge. During the era of Asian exclusion, it was Asians from whom Armenians were differentiated. In the more recent context of multiculturalism, official acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide would increase the visibility of Armenian history, but it also might link Armenian Americans with other American ethnic groups that have survived genocides, most notably Jews and Native Americans. *Rise the Euphrates* articulates the fear that Armenian American whiteness will be compromised through association with Native Americans, and at the same time it longs for such an alliance, one that would lend power to all groups fighting racism and historical erasure. The Armenian American border location (inhabited most dramatically at present by California Armenians) is thus a precarious one. Border positionality makes Armenian Americans susceptible to the lure of “secure” white status, even with the suppression of Armenian history that has gone with that status. But at the same time, border positionality has the potential to make powerful antiracist interventions by disrupting the stability of white identity.

This article has linked together three factors relevant to the telling of a narrative of Armenian American ethnic origins: the contestations and recovery of Genocide history, the history of Armenian racialization and border status in the United States, and the figuration of a

resistant Armenian feminine embodiment. *Rise the Euphrates* poses these factors as interrelated. Armenians' assimilation into American norms of femininity is shown to be contingent upon the occlusion of Genocide history and upon the reification of racial whiteness. To the extent that its characters embrace these norms of race and femininity, the novel exemplifies the way in which each of the two terms, whiteness and femininity, is mobilized in the service of securing and sustaining the other. That which constitutes the Armenian feminine difference is repressed in the characters, at the same time as they are incorporated into regimes of racism and patriarchy in the United States. However, a residue of excess—both the excess of suffering and victimization as well as that of uncontained sexuality and bodily revelry—resurfaces in the embodiment of the women characters. Despite the fact that Theresa is punished by rape for being too different, free, and sexual, the novel ends by suggesting that her alternative is something to strive for. Her capacity for resistance resides in her ability to problematize and refigure her origins. Edgarian's inscription of Armenian genocide history as originary is strategic, therefore, in two respects. One is its refusal to capitulate to historical erasure. The other is the deployment that history in rewriting the ethnic female body, and in exposing the processes of racial and gendered assimilation and reification. Although the alternative to which these strategies point is not fully realized in the text, the novel does show how any notion of a resistant Armenian feminine embodiment would arise out of multiple originary forces, including those of Genocide trauma, racialization, gendering, and silencing regimes.

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