

Reflection Statement

History too frequently builds barriers; it is a constructed and dominant narrative that is rarely questioned. Yet personal testimony possesses the power to dismantle these barriers. My post-modern short story, 'The Weight of Paper', aims to engage readers in the personal histories of those immersed in the Armenian Genocide's continuing aftermath. Through examining this genocide's enduring emotional impact, my wider purpose is to highlight that marginalized voices can be overlooked in the metanarrative of history. Written in the genre of historiographic metafiction, my piece examines history's construction as a concept driven by perspective rather than objectivity. Thus, I aim to illustrate the potential of postmodern history to destroy accepted history's intransigent barriers. The two central fictional characters – Aghavni, an elderly Armenian woman, and Emir, a young Turkish conscript – provide a tangible, human face to traumatic historical events. Though the narrative of history demands an audience, the responsibility of interpreting meaning is often relinquished. Thus a Postmodernist lens empowers and confronts audience participation in challenging history's denial of multiple truths. The story's characters, genre and form intentionally provide points of relevance for diverse readers, demanding conscious emotional and critical engagement.

My passion for modern history and historical fiction has underpinned the writing process. Initially, I explored the manifestation of genocides in different historical periods. From a breakthrough observation of history's limitations – a lesson which we oft fail to learn – purpose shifted to a specific exploration of the nature of history through the Armenian Genocide. The contemporary tension around the legal recognition of the genocide, exacerbated by the Internet's dissemination and the current unrest in Turkey, led me to target a wide readership. Readers are assured of this contemporary relevance through a paratextual footnote. My fascination with this debate also influenced the story's insight that conflicts

about legal truth influence politics but cannot encompass the truths of everyday existence for those affected by genocide. It is the shared humanity of the characters, *'nothing but constructions'*², which engages the audience.

A United Nations' photograph, *'Elderly Armenian Woman Guards Home'*³, sparked pivotal character, plot and thematic developments. It inspired me to utilise a retrospective setting and a genocide survivor to portray history's implications. An elderly character provides accessibility for a 'baby boomer' audience, empowering them to promote their own individual and collective histories. Simultaneously, the character's complexity intends to provoke young audiences to appreciate the oral histories of the elderly as an adjunct to, or interrogation of taught history. The photograph proved invaluable in shaping Aghavni's characterisation and the antithetical symbols that define her, *'She owns a gun... After her needle lace, it is undoubtedly her favourite possession'*⁴.

Research was critical in developing authenticity, given my focus on foreign histories and cultures. Initially, my greatest obstacle lay in deciding which information was essential to purpose, and which facts were interesting, but ultimately redundant. Thus, researching highlighted the constructed nature of the historical process. Survivor accounts, such as the *'100 Lives'*⁵ project, placed me in the position of an audience. This shaped my writing process and characterisation by indicating the most resonant features of testimonies were

² 'The Weight of Paper', pg. 14

³ United Nations, (1990). *Elderly Armenian Woman Guards Home*. [image] Available at: <http://www.unmultimedia.org/s/photo/detail/751/0075187.html> [Accessed 13 Dec. 2015].

⁴ 'The Weight of Paper', pg. 2

⁵ Gregorian, V., Vardanyan, R. and Afeyan, N. (2014). *Still Alive: Genocide Survivors Today*. [online] 100 LIVES. Available at: <https://100lives.com/en/armenia/detail/7223/still-alive-genocide-survivors-today> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2016].

deeply personal. Furthermore, *Armenian Golgotha – A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide*⁶ by Grigoris Balakian imbued the genocide's facts with a sense of humanity, assisting the integration of historical research into plot and language. Its elements of memoir (first person point of view, emotive language and character voice) influenced the tone and content of Aghavni's letters. My decision to utilise an epistolary format was initially founded from the Extension 1 course and the study of Romantic subjectivity in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*⁷, where readers arrive at their own truth through the portrayal of multiple voices. Further, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*⁸ conveyed the intrinsic human need to tell stories, both as a cathartic exercise and as a way of realising unacknowledged truths. Hence, Aghavni's voice is liberated through her letters.

Investigation into form elevated the piece from simple historical fiction to a coherent work of historiographic metafiction. This strengthened the link between purpose and medium. I was immediately enticed by the short story genre and, through stories such as Bharati Mukherjee's '*The Management of Grief*'⁹, came to see its possibilities as a combination of fact and fiction. This duality is demonstrated in the shift from monosyllables to figurative sibilance, '*they locked the fence months ago, in April, they drove the silver spears into the ground and split the scars in half once more.*'¹⁰

⁶ Balakian, G., Balakian, P. and Sevag, A. (2009). *Armenian Golgotha*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

⁷ Shelley, M. (1818). *Frankenstein*. London: Penguin Books.

⁸ Coleridge, S. (2001). *The rime of the ancient mariner*. Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech.

⁹ Selvadurai, S. (2016). *Story-Wallah: Short Fiction from South Asian Writers*. 1st ed. [ebook] Canada: Thomas Allen Publishers, pp.91-109. Available at: <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=sYfVa1Tr3okC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Story-Wallah&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwix8pKJyabMAhWhnqYKHWMfDXcQuwUIHzAA#v=onepage&q=Story-Wallah&f=false> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2016].

¹⁰ 'The Weight of Paper', pg. 6

Despite not studying postmodernism in Extension 1, Linda Hutcheon's critical analysis *A Poetics of Postmodernism*¹¹ fundamentally guided the story's theoretical development. Discovery of her term '*historiographic metafiction*', coupled with the study of *Cloudstreet*¹² in Advanced English Module B, prompted the breakthrough understanding that postmodernism is intrinsically linked to an engaged critique of historical events. It indicated that, like contemporary historiography, postmodern conventions – authorial intrusion, paradox and irony – '*blur the line between fiction and history*'¹³. Aghavni believes in the truth of her history, yet the unreliability of her memory and alterations to her letters prompt audiences to question the possibility of historical truth. The holes in the fence symbolically invite readers to fill historical gaps and draw personal conclusions. From the study of Module A, Elective 1 Intertextual Connections, I have come to realise the story's potential to resonate with Australian audiences in creating recognition that Anzac Day's importance in our culture has silenced our knowledge of the genocide's beginning on April 24th 1915. Hutcheon's insight, '*there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here —just unresolved contradiction*'¹⁴, shaped the ambiguous conclusion, "*The words have met an audience. They stick to Emir's boots and leave a trail of footprints as he walks away. Is the fence singing in the wind?*"¹⁵

I realised the importance of metafictional elements upon reading Jerome de Groot's *The Historical Novel*¹⁶. His comment, "*The historical novel's self-awareness is part of its generic*

¹¹ Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A poetics of postmodernism*. New York: Routledge

¹² Winton, T. (1992). *Cloudstreet*. Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press.

¹³ Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A poetics of postmodernism*. New York: Routledge. Pg. 113.

¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 106.

¹⁵ 'The Weight of Paper', pg. 25

¹⁶ De Groot, J. (2010). *The Historical Novel*. 1st ed. [ebook] New York: Routledge, Available at:

<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=ojBZBwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false> [Accessed 24 Apr. 2016].

make-up”¹⁷, inspired the need for self-referentiality. This developed the narrator’s ironic tone, ‘*Excuse the exploitation of my powerless characters to tell a story about powerlessness*’¹⁸. The narrator is intended not as an authoritative source, but as a contradictory voice to provoke readers’ enquiry.

The deeply symbolic setting of the Armenian-Turkish border fence is intrinsic to the story's purpose. The article ‘*Ghosts of the past haunt Turkish-Armenian border*’¹⁹ adapted the setting from the early 21st century to 1993, after the border's closure during the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Though the border represents the barriers of historical conflict, ironically it is what connects both characters. This concept underpins plot, genre and purpose, and invites the intended audience to consider their own barriers. Additionally, 'The Weight of Paper' as a postmodern piece seeks to ‘*interrogate these borders*’²⁰ of all that is conventional. It builds borders in order for readers to challenge them. Importantly, it confronts young audiences’ assumption that globalisation renders all borders immediately permeable. Emir subverts stereotypes, yet encompasses the experiences of young audiences as he is challenged by the psychological fence between himself and his father. Furthermore, Aghavni appeals to female readers: whereas women have traditionally been silenced outside of domestic circles, Aghavni disseminates a forceful political message.

¹⁷ Ibid, pg.142.

¹⁸ ‘The Weight of Paper’, pg. 24

¹⁹ Resneck, J. (2015). *Ghosts of the past haunt Turkish-Armenian border*. [online] DW.COM. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/ghosts-of-the-past-haunt-turkish-armenian-border/a-18395546> [Accessed 19 Jan. 2016]

²⁰ Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge. Pg. 225.

Originality is vital to providing new insights into the enigma that is history. *The House on Mango Street*²¹, a novella by Sandra Cisneros, inspired the use of vignettes for structural tension and as a metaphor for the fractures created by history. Original appropriation of a dramatic beat in the story's initial phases evokes the tension between the characters' voices, 'The wire is so sharp that it cuts her and she cries out but ...[beat] / Emir hears only silence'²². Ironically this desire to be heard unites both characters. Reinforcing this engagement, complex images evoke a progression from disconnectedness to unity – Aghavni and Emir are conflicted through their labels – old/young, Armenian/Turkish, civilian/soldier. I also crafted original motifs, such as the paper motif, to portray the fallacy of conventional history, which fails to embrace all perspectives. Upon realising that the motif was being overused in the characters' dialogue, its use was relegated solely to the narrator. The paper is physically and psychologically manifested through personification, which was inspired by Romanticism's glorification of the sublime, 'In Armenia, the hills are so splattered with ink that they appear as dark, weary watchers of the burdens of the past.'²³ The motif of ink is symbiotic with paper - empowering in its permanence, but also able to stain, like history.

History is as fascinating as it is deceptive. The English Extension II course has been an invaluable learning and creative experience. Composing 'The Weight of Paper' awakened my understanding of fiction's power to give voice to that which is otherwise silenced. The story's message is sobering in affirming the reality of history's selectivity. However, its lasting meaning for audiences is also one of hope – we all, in some small, productive way, can stitch

²¹ Cisneros, S. (1984). *The House on Mango Street*. 1st ed. [ebook] New York: Random House. Available at: <http://www.nlcphs.org/SummerReadings/Freshmen/HouseOnMango.pdf> [Accessed 2 Apr. 2016].

²² 'The Weight of Paper', pg. 7

²³ 'The Weight of Paper', pg. 2

ourselves into the vast manuscripts of history. Ultimately, we all have an obligation to ensure that not only our voices, but also the voices of others, are heard.