



FRESNO PACIFIC  
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

---

**An inhabitant of the Earth: Saroyan on the other.**

Author(s): David Stephen Calonne.

Source: *Pacific Journal* 9 (2014): 17-32.

Publisher: Fresno Pacific University.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/549>

---

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the Fresno Pacific University community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the Web and assures their preservation for the future.

## An Inhabitant of the Earth: Saroyan on the Other

DAVID STEPHEN CALONNE

My grandparents, Vagharshak and Flora Galoostian, were born in Julfa, Persia. They traveled to Calcutta, India, where they lived for several years and came to live in America in Sanger, California. My parents, Pierre and Mariam, and my brother Ariel and I would often make the approximately four-hour trek from Los Angeles to visit them, driving up through Bakersfield, to the great San Joaquin Valley, through Kingsburg, Tulare, Visalia, and Yettam. The names of these towns entered into our mythology, signifying the faraway, exotic, and rural, back-in-time cosmos so radically different from our smogged, freeway-clogged, billboard and utility-lined Los Angeles. We would arrive at dusk among the stretching tender tendrils of the green grape vineyards with the lovely mountains in the distance below the blue sky: the world of ancient Armenia.

I had heard that Saroyan had visited my grandfather and written an inscription in one of his books—I believe it was the Faber & Faber edition of *The Insurance Salesman and Other Stories... : “To Vagharshak Galoostian, Armenian Poet and Scholar, Man of the Pepper Tree and River Stones.”* Saroyan had been impressed by the great stones my grandfather had brought from the nearby Kings River. Saroyan enjoyed talking to my grandfather Vagharshak (who wrote poetry in both English and Armenian) in his magnificent library filled with many of the English classics (Shelley, Byron, Keats, Shakespeare, Milton) that he had acquired teaching in the Armenian College in Calcutta. It was 1969, and I was sixteen and just discovering literature and classical music and Vagharshak would recite to me from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*—“Of Man’s first disobedience, and the fruit/of that forbidden tree... Sing Heavenly Muse” and Armenian poetry: Omar Khayyam in the original Persian (as well as Edward Fitzgerald’s version) Saadi, and Hafez. My grandfather was multicultural.

Saroyan certainly knew Sanger, for he tells the story of his coming into the world “on Eye, or I Street, later called Broadway, near Ventura Avenue in Fresno” and how he remembered his father’s time in Sanger in *Births*: “... and my father Armenak, at that moment at rest in a vineyard worker’s barracks at Droge’s vineyard near Sanger, about twelve miles east of the house on Eye Street.”<sup>1</sup>

America in 1969 was a volatile place. People still referred to persons from other countries as “foreigners.” My mother told us of the prejudice she encountered in Sanger when she was young: the Anglos would make fun of Armenians by calling them “*Eench gooz-es*,” which means “What do you want?” in Armenian. Cesar Chavez and the Mexican farmworkers had been protesting for just treatment, the Native American movement was in full swing, blacks who were justly enraged after centuries of enslavement began to burn down American cities. I had just read Saroyan’s *The Oyster and the Pearl* in my sophomore high school English class and been moved by the story of the barber Harry van Dusen and the allegory of the pearl, which contains the hidden truth, faith, and secret of existence which is love. Even here in this play containing Anglo characters like Van Dusen, Larrabee, McCutcheon, Greeley and Applegarth, Saroyan adds the watch repairer Wozzeck, again the outsider, the “foreigner,” but he also belongs in this lovely small town of “O.K.-by-the Sea California” where the play is set. Just as Saroyan anticipated Samuel Beckett’s and Eugene Ionesco’s “theatre of the absurd” with *The Time of Your Life* and was as a central figure to Jack Kerouac and the development of the Beat Movement, he also prefigured contemporary post-structural debates concerning identity and difference, selfhood and the “social construction of race.”

G. F. Hegel’s famous “Master and Slave” narrative (sections 178-196) in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, posits that the Master needs the Slave to achieve a sense of identity, a self. The Master appears to be an autonomous, powerful entity, but in fact is dependent on the Other to achieve selfhood. This may lead to a struggle to the death for recognition, for each member of the “relationship” is locked into an inescapable vulnerability.<sup>2</sup> We see the results of seeing the

Other as an object to be reduced to the hegemony of the Subject in Sartre's famous pronouncement "hell is other people," as well as in our violent world today. Hegel's insight became central to later theorizing concerning the Other by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Levinas turns Hegel upside-down and asserts that we must serve the Other, we must be responsible to the Other, we must be attentive to and respectful of the Other, we must honor reciprocity. Prior to other abstract philosophical problems should be our ethical duty to our fellow human beings. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* of the face:

The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. This mutation can occur only by the opening of a new dimension. For the resistance to the grasp is not produced as an insurmountable resistance, like the hardness of the rock against which the effort of the hand comes to naught, like the remoteness of the star in the immensity of space. The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power. The face, still a thing among things, breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it. This means concretely: the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it power or knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

William Saroyan was very much a Levinasian. In his writings, recognition is freely given with love, and "the face" is honored in its infinite mystery. In *The Human Comedy*, the child Ulysses hears a Black man singing verses from "My Old Kentucky Home" as he travels past him on the gondola of a train. Ulysses waves to him and is overjoyed when the man "waved back to Ulysses, shouting: 'Going home, boy—going back where I belong!'"<sup>4</sup> This encounter takes place speechlessly, without language, without awareness on the part of Ulysses of the "race" of the man he sees on the train. It is an epiphanic, revelatory mo-

ment, revelatory in particular to the reader, who witnesses a primal spiritual encounter: the fatherless child recognizes and *sees the face* of the Black man who has been denied a home in America, and who is “going home,” as the novel itself will end in a vision of home when the MaCauley family accepts into its midst the orphan Toby.

It is perhaps no accident that *The Human Comedy*'s main characters are named Ulysses and Homer, for Saroyan conceptualized his novel as a symbolic allegory in the tradition of Homer's great epic. In this respect for the Other, Saroyan honors the tradition of Ancient Greek *xenia*, the sacred obligation of the host to the guest, the duty to make the guest feel *at home*, which we see repeatedly exemplified in Homer's *Odyssey*. *Xenia* recurs in Saroyan's great play *The Beautiful People*: the young girl Agnes, referred to as a “saint” in the *Dramatis Personae*, even accepts mice into her world as an act of spiritual devotion and says to Jonah, her father: “We're not apart from the others, Father. I thought we were, but we're not. We are *they*, and they are us. I know that now. I don't want the foolish life. I'll learn to live all over again, but if I can't live the life I know is mine to live, if everything is to be meaningless and foolish... .”<sup>5</sup> The Webster family, composed of Agnes, her brother Owen, who writes one-word poems, and poet and father Noah, welcomes Steve, “a homeless young man,” into the warm orbit of their love. They even accept into their midst the insurance man Prim, who becomes converted to the religion of imagination and love. The stranger must be made to feel at home, and until this ethical goal is realized, one cannot live peacefully with oneself.

As Paul Ricoeur in *The Course of Recognition* declares: “The self is ‘at home with itself’ in this world that it inhabits. The stranger is what troubles this sense of being at home with oneself.”<sup>6</sup> In *My Heart's in the Highlands*, the Alexander family reaches out to the elderly Scottish actor and musician MacGregor, while in *My Name Is Aram*, Aram Garoghlanian performs a similar act of acceptance when he rides in the Packard automobile of the Ojibway, Locomotive 38. As an Armenian, Aram knows very well what it is to be the Other, and he naturally reaches out to his Native American friend. The revelation of the mystery of the

Other is captured in epiphanic moments that occur throughout Saroyan's work. Those who know suffering speak a silent language, beautifully memorialized in "The Poor and Burning Arab" from *My Name Is Aram*. The Arab Khalil and Aram's Armenian uncle Khosrove sit silently communing with each other without uttering a word, their sense of loneliness and solitude is too great for language, a silent colloquy rooted in suffering, a wordless lyrical sensitivity to each other's wounds.

Saroyan is constantly reaching over racial barriers in a completely effortless and natural way to allow these soulful communions between Armenians, Blacks, Arabs, Scotsmen, Native Americans (and scores of other types of humans) to happen. From the beginning of his career to his later work, such as the plays *Armenians*, *Bitlis*, *Haratch*, and *Warsaw Visitor*, he thought deeply about "race," "ethnicity," "nationality," "culture," and questions of "personal identity." Each of these terms have been subjected to such close scrutiny over the past half century that many scholars doubt whether they have any clear meaning at all—hence the quotation marks. Indeed, Saroyan prefigured contemporary "post-structural" conceptions of the non-existence of categories such as "race," which was invented to justify hierarchical structures of domination and colonialism. Kwame Anthony Appiah in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* intricately analyzes the historical construction of the conception of separate groupings of human beings and concludes that in reality there is no such thing: "American social distinctions cannot be understood in terms of the concept of race: the only human race in the United States ... is the human race."<sup>7</sup>

And Saroyan's radically democratic position on class issues can be seen in his rejection of the Pulitzer Prize, which he proudly declared he could not accept because "wealth should not patronize art." He would not accept a social hierarchy based on "race" or "class" but rather like D.H. Lawrence, he acknowledged only those who were "aristocrats of the spirit." The MaCauleys, Garoghlanians, Websters, and Alexanders were all poor, but rich in the things of the spirit: love, generosity, compassion, and a fierce rejection of the reign-

ing American materialistic values. Social hierarchies exist to serve the interests of those in power, and although Saroyan never was officially Socialist or Marxist—he made a point of being apolitical—his values were always with the “working class,” not with the wealthy. He cannot return to his memories of childhood without connecting “race” and “class.” The ten-year-old Saroyan almost died from the influenza epidemic that rampaged through the San Joaquin Valley, and he tells us in *Where the Bones Go* that his mother Takoohi “very nearly broke the front door down in hurrying to see if I was still alive, sick with the influenza in late 1918 that just about wiped out somebody from every family in town, almost without exception, as she had been informed by her fellow fig packers at Guggenheim’s—Armenians, Italians, Syrians, Assyrians, Portuguese, and Germans.”<sup>8</sup> It is typical of Saroyan that he needs to tell us this. He needs to make sure we understand that his America is *all* of the various ethnicities and the “class issue” is connected, as he takes pains to tell us that his mother worked packing figs.

It is also significant that many of Saroyan’s greatest works were composed during the Thirties and the rise of Fascism. Who is Blick, the mean-spirited cop in *The Time of Your Life* who wants to arrest the tender-hearted Polish prostitute Kitty Duval, but an incarnation of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin? Saroyan often lamented that the body of humanity was broken and needed to be reassembled. He described humanity in “The Trouble with Tigers” as “this mangled tribe, that still unborn God” and he seeks to banish war and all divisions based on race, class, and nationalism in order to bring humanity to its highest potential. This is seen in “Antranik of Armenia” when the narrator declares: “The Turk is the brother of the Armenian and they know it. The German and the Frenchman, the Russian and the Pole, the Japanese and the Chinese. They are all brothers. They are all small tragic entities of mortality. Why do they want them to kill one another? What good does it do anybody?”<sup>9</sup>

Saroyan developed a new, hip, all-embracing, cosmic style which strove to depict America in all its “ethnic” plurality. It is noteworthy that in the following

passage from “Baby” from *Three Times Three* (1936) it is a “Mexican girl” who sings a beautiful song symbolizing America in all its multiplicity and power:

Sang baby. O maybe. Sang motors and wheels till Saturday night in America, and a hundred thousand jazz orchestras sang *So come sit by my side if you love me*, and the sad-eyed, weary-lipped Mexican girl silenced Manhattan uproar with soft, velvet-petaled singing of darkness and death, O heart there is no end to the river’s flowing. Sang locomotive north through snow to Albany and west to Chicago, O baby maybe.

Mexicans appear repeatedly in Saroyan’s plays, stories, and memoirs as the original powerful inhabitants of California and Mexico whom he admired as he worked alongside them in the vineyards of the San Joaquin Valley. Here the girl’s singing fills the American Saturday Night from Manhattan to Albany to Chicago.

Anti-war, pro-love, pro- Indian, Black, Mexican—Saroyan in the Thirties was way ahead of his time. His celebratory vision of an inclusive America would appeal greatly to Jack Kerouac (several passages in *On the Road* refer directly to Saroyan and echo his style and themes) and the Beat Generation and would thus influence the flower children of the Sixties.<sup>10</sup> San Francisco, named after gentle Saint Francis, would become more than thirty years after the premiere of Saroyan’s great play *The Time of Your Life* the center of the American counterculture. The play is a rite, a ritual that brings together the fragmented, broken body of America in a celebration of peace and love, of Whitman’s democratic vistas, demonstrating through the magic of art the possibility of Kitty Duval, a Polish prostitute; Wesley the Black piano player; Willie Faroughli, an Assyrian “marble-game maniac,” Nick the Italian bartender, creating, at least for the time being, a community of joy. No one had said it this way before, not Faulkner, Steinbeck, Hemingway, or Fitzgerald. No one had shown what America was supposed to be. Saroyan continued even through the war years with plays like *The People With the Light Coming Out of Them*, which celebrates Mike Okagawa, a Japanese who is recognized as being as American as anyone else.



Saroyan is the poet of love, the visionary poet of the disenfranchised, of those who until relatively recently in America were still referred to by many as “minorities” and “foreigners.” Growing up in poverty, losing his father Armenak at the age of three and being placed in the Fred Finch Orphanage in Oakland, California, a vulnerable, sensitive boy without a home, he knew from the beginning the emptiness and loneliness of the outcast and was well prepared for a life-long struggle with questions of identity and self. In a moving but little-known memoir of his father entitled “My Father’s Sleeplessness” published in *Keghuni*, the publication of the Mekhitarist Fathers of Venice, Saroyan recalled that when he was younger, he saw his father as “too sensitive for this world,” that he was not tough enough, but later came to understand his father’s “failures” as Saroyan himself began to struggle after his initial literary success with intractable reality.<sup>11</sup> Armenak, a man of the spirit who wanted to write poetry, had been a noble “failure” in an America, which recognized only material values. Like his father, Saroyan was preoccupied with the transformation of humanity’s very nature. As he recalled in *Not Dying*: “I began, as most writers do, in the expectation of changing the world. It is chaos, as you know, and a kid just can’t cherish chaos. He wants order. He wants balance. He wants rightness. I also meant to change the nature or pose of man, of the human race.”<sup>12</sup> Again, as long as the Other is not included, the artist must constantly fight for inclusion, for a reconceptualizing of humanity as inhabiting One World.

Indeed, this sensitivity to the plight of the Other is often developed precisely by those who have been mistreated and thus grow a set of finely-attuned antennae with which to detect injustice. Gloria Anzaldúa in her masterwork, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, defined the source of visionary power which she names in Spanish *la facultad*:

*La facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see deep structure below the surface. It is an instant ‘sensing,’ a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not

speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world.

Those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitized (when not brutalized into insensitivity). Those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense. Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest—the females, the homosexuals of all races, the dark-skinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign.<sup>13</sup>

Anzaldua also writes eloquently of her complex relationship with her multiple identities as a speaker of Standard English, Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex, and *Pachuco*. She lays claim to all of her possible selves and does not want to be compelled to privilege any particular incarnation of her identity by the American State.

Like Anzaldua, Saroyan was both concerned with the Other and thus equally preoccupied with questions of identity and difference, with the problems of selfhood. In “Antranik and the Armenian,” from *Inhale and Exhale*, (1935) he eulogizes the death of the great Armenian general Andranik Ozanian (1865-1927) who fought the Turks, and he considers his own double identity:

To hell with it, I said. It’s all over. We can begin to forget Armenia now. Antranik is dead. The nation is lost. The strong nations of the world are jumping with new problems. To hell with the whole damned mess, I said. I’m not Armenian. I’m an American.

Well, the truth is I am both and neither. I love Armenia and I love America and I belong to both, but I am only this: an inhabitant of the earth, and so are you, whoever you are.<sup>14</sup>

The psychological debate over nature vs. nurture and the philosophical conundrum of identity and difference are knotty issues, yet Saroyan intuitively understands that neither is an either/or issue but rather both/and. “Identity” is complex, fluid, and contradictory, and indeed he will come as we shall see in his later work to a conception of identity as a kind of existential choice which goes beyond the accidents of “nationality” or “ethnicity.”

If Saroyan resembles Gloria Anzaldua in his awareness of his multiple identities, he also recalls W.E. B. Dubois who wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.<sup>15</sup>

Saroyan, like Dubois, is “both and neither,” is endowed with a similar “double-consciousness,” and ultimately has an identity as a human being, which transcends both his “Armenian” and “American” labels. In “Seventy Thousand Assyrians,” the character who obviously represents Saroyan tells the Assyrian

barber, Theodore Badal, “I have no idea what it is like to be an Armenian or what it is like to be an Englishman or a Japanese or anything else. I have a faint idea what it is like to be alive. This is the only thing that interests me greatly.”<sup>16</sup> Saroyan will assert in this wonderful early story and in several of his other works that the Assyrians, like the Armenians, are a great ancient “race,” no different from any other human being, united by the fact that we all have fallen from original greatness and plenitude.<sup>17</sup>

For scholars in post-colonial studies, Shakespeare’s plays provide fertile examples of the ways the European West has unconsciously portrayed Other people as inferior and as needing to be “mastered” by the superior White Man. Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* has been recently conceptualized as the colonizer, and Caliban as the colonized. The colonists possess writing and are thus “civilized,” while the colonized are “illiterate” and must be “civilized.” Saroyan, in a little known essay entitled “The Fascination of the Faraway in the *Arabian Nights*,” declares:

The *Arabian Nights* is not too well known to the Arabs, who are mainly illiterate, a condition we have mistakenly come to believe is unfortunate. Illiteracy is not the same as stupidity. I remember, for instance, a grape-shipper in Fresno from Boston who couldn’t do simple arithmetic but just happened nevertheless to have become a very rich millionaire, as the saying is. Some of the most intelligent members of my own family, some of the most magnificent story-tellers, speaking in three magnificent languages—Armenian, Kurdish, and Turkish—couldn’t read or write one word in any of them, and although they had been in California for many years hadn’t learned any English beyond hello and goodbye, which for all practical purposes may in fact be enough.<sup>18</sup>

I quote this passage concerning “literacy” to suggest Saroyan’s inclusive attitude towards yet another example of the Other: those who do not conform to the White Anglo Saxon model of acceptability, education and “civilization.”

Saroyan's famous declaration from "Seventy Thousand Assyrians" underscores this point: "I see life as one life at one time, so many millions simultaneously, all over the earth...If I want to do anything, I want to speak a more universal language. The heart of man, the unwritten part of man, that which is eternal and common to all races."<sup>19</sup> The secret mystery of humanity's interrelatedness is "unwritten," is "universal," and is a "language" which transcends all ideology and mind-made barriers.

In his late phase, Saroyan returned to his questioning of the Other and identity in his play *Haratch*. In *Haratch*, Saroyan asks: "What is an Armenian? Who is an Armenian?" and is answered by Zual: "No, why is an Armenian? Where is an Armenian? When is an Armenian? The answer is this: An Armenian is a Turk who says I am an Armenian. It is a decision open to all people, and only Armenians have ever wanted to be Armenians, everybody else has not made a decision but has gone right on being whatever it was he believed he was, anyhow. You have got to choose to be an Armenian, you have got to want to be an Armenian ..."<sup>20</sup> For Saroyan, the self is fluid, identity is not fixed, and as we recall in *The Time of Your Life*, Joe memorably says: "Living is an art. It's not bookkeeping. It takes a lot of rehearsing for a man to get to be himself."<sup>21</sup> So too, identifying with one's "racial," "ethnic," or "religious" traditions is a matter of choice, an existential decision, not a given, not a matter of one's essential being, but rather a role one may choose to play, just as Joe makes the theatrical connection to selfhood as a matter of rehearsing. Assyria returns when Khachig Toloyan asks:

I have a friend who is an Assyrian, but he doesn't speak that language, he speaks Armenian, and of course English, and he is learning Russian because he believes it will be a good thing to reach Tchekhov untranslated. Well, my question is this: is this friend of mine an Assyrian, actually? In view of the fact that there has been no geographical Assyria for centuries? He does not even speak the language, he is studying Russian and not Assyrian, he speaks Armenian as his family language

because his people have always been close to the Armenians, and he looks as Armenian as many or even most Armenians look Assyrian. I mean, what about us? Not just the few of us here in the editorial office of *Haratch*. I mean, Armenians everywhere. Are we Armenians, or are we indeed something else?<sup>22</sup>

Martin Heidegger made the word “Being” famous in the twentieth century in his masterwork *Sein und Zeit*, (1927) but Saroyan also used the term, particularly in his wonderful quotation “my work is writing, but my real work is being.”<sup>23</sup> Being, a state of balance, like the daring young man sought to achieve on the trapeze, is beyond racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. It is achieved through the act of existential choice as one plays one’s own role and rehearses selfhood.

In his late phase, Saroyan deals with the Jewish person as Other as well as the Holocaust. In a section entitled “Abraham Is a Jewish Name, Is it Not?” from *Where the Bones Go*, he describes a trip to the Greek island of Hydra with his children when he took them around the world. They had been invited by some “important people” to their estate on the island. Saroyan writes:

Coming back, a man came to me to let me see the tattooed numbers in something like purple ink upon his arm which meant that he had been the victim of the German wartime crime upon the Jewish people of Germany and of all countries which were seized and governed by Germany. This man said, in effect, “You are an American, tell me, how did it happen that a Jew became the president of your country?’ Abraham Lincoln, that is. I had a terrible problem: I wanted him to have Abraham Lincoln Jewish, but at the same time I felt that the simple truth might in the long run serve him better. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘I’m not sure Abraham Lincoln was Jewish, you know.’ ‘How not Jewish?’ the man said. ‘Abraham. That is a Jewish name, is it not?’ ‘Yes’ I said, ‘but many people of many races have given their children names from the

Old Testament.' I am happy to remember that the man did not abandon his belief that long ago America had elected a Jew to the highest office in the land.<sup>24</sup>

As we saw previously with the declaration that “an Armenian is a Turk who says I am an Armenian,” Saroyan delights in the playing with the meaninglessness of categories, of placing our constantly shifting and fluid selves under the control of words. Language is made up of words, after all. Words are labels assigned to things and persons, but they do not provide an adequate description of the inner mystery of the individual soul. In that substratum we are all the same.

The Holocaust was much on Saroyan's mind, for we see him return to the theme in the play *Warsaw Visitor*. In Act 2, Scene 1, “Moustache,” the Saroyan character speaks: “... for the past forty or more years I have been trying to feel the Jewish experience in relation to the holocaust.” Martha asks him “Why?” and he responds:

Because I am an Armenian, but as I did not experience the Armenian holocaust of 1915 because I was in America in California and was too young, seven years old, even to begin to understand it and then too busy running after my own meaning until the beginning of the Jewish holocaust, in 1934, let's say, the year of the publication of my first book, I decided by God I have got to try to understand, the millions dead have got to be understood one at a time, and the millions who killed the millions have got to be understood also, and indeed they are the millions who are so difficult to understand. The Turks, that is, and then the Germans. If it is hideous to be killed, is it not even more hideous to kill?<sup>25</sup>

And in Act 2, Scene 6, we read concerning Auschwitz and Buchenwald:

... the Jewish dead are different from all of the other dead murdered by the rest of us—oh yes, we did it... it was not just the Germans, it was

not just Hitler and his big fat skinny sick brilliant stupid clever dirty partners who always always only followed orders, as they kept saying at the Nuremberg trials—it was us, old boy, us, us, and I mean us.<sup>26</sup>

War and genocide, as Levinas tells us, are the final destruction of the Other, the final triumph of Heraclitus' famous saying “War is the Father of All”:

But violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action. Not only modern war but every war employs arms that turn against those who wield them. It establishes an order from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same.<sup>27</sup>

During the volatile summer of 2014, we have witnessed the killing of an unarmed Black teenager in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri and the subsequent militarized police crackdown on the population of the city. We have seen the savage murders of several American and British hostages taken by ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, we have seen the incursion of Russian troops into the Ukraine and the destruction of a passenger jet; attacks by Hamas through tunnels into Israel and death-dealing Israeli raids into Gaza. The Jewish philosopher Levinas and the Armenian poet Saroyan both speak on behalf of the Other, and we would do well to listen to their wise voices.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> William Saroyan, *Births*. (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 1983). 22-23.
- <sup>2</sup> Charles J. Friedrich, *The Philosophy of Hegel*. (New York: Random House, 1954). 399-410.
- <sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). 197-198.
- <sup>4</sup> William Saroyan, *The Human Comedy*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1943). 4.



- <sup>5</sup> William Saroyan, Three Plays: *The Beautiful People, Sweeney in the Trees and Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1941). 54.
- <sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*. trans. David Pellauer. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). 158.
- <sup>7</sup> K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). 32.
- <sup>8</sup> William Saroyan, *Where the Bones Go*. (Fresno: California State University, 2002). 134.
- <sup>9</sup> William Saroyan, "The People, Yes and Then Again No," in *The Trouble with Tigers*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938). 164; "Antranik of Armenia," *Inhale and Exhale*. (New York: Random House, 1936). 261-261.
- <sup>10</sup> See David Stephen Calonne, *Saroyan's Influence on Kerouac and the Beats with an Introduction by Lawrence Ferlinghetti*. (San Francisco: Sore Dove Press, 2010); *William Saroyan: My Real Work Is Being*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).
- <sup>11</sup> William Saroyan, "My Father's Sleeplessness," in *Keghuni: Armenian Illustrated Review*. (Venice: San Lazzaro, 1950). 69.
- <sup>12</sup> William Saroyan, *Not Dying*. (Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1963).194.
- <sup>13</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. (San Francisco, 1999). 60.
- <sup>14</sup> William Saroyan, "Antranik of Armenia," in *Inhale and Exhale*. (New York: Random House, 1936). 263.
- <sup>15</sup> W.E. B. Dubois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in *A World of Ideas*. 8th Edition, ed. Lee A Jacobus. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010). 292-293.
- <sup>16</sup> William Saroyan, "Seventy Thousand Assyrians," *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories*. (New York: Random House, 1934). 34-35.
- <sup>17</sup> See David Stephen Calonne, "William Saroyan's Assyrians and Armenians," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, Vol. 9, 1999. 65-73.
- <sup>18</sup> William Saroyan, "The Fascination of the Faraway in the Arabian Nights," *The Arabian Nights: Introduced for Young Readers by William Saroyan*. (New York: Platt and Munk, 1966). 5.
- <sup>19</sup> "Seventy Thousand Assyrians." 32.
- <sup>20</sup> William Saroyan, *Haratch*, in *An Armenian Trilogy*. ed. Dickran Kouymjian. (Fresno: California State University, 1986). 153-154.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Time of Your Life*. 112.
- <sup>22</sup> *Haratch*. 154-55.
- <sup>23</sup> William Saroyan, *Obituaries*. (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 1979). 324.
- <sup>24</sup> *Where the Bones Go*. 87.
- <sup>25</sup> William Saroyan, *Warsaw Visitor, Tales from the Vienna Streets: The Last Two Plays of William Saroyan*. ed. Dickran Kouymjian. (Fresno: California State University, 1991). 104.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.
- <sup>27</sup> *Totality and Infinity*. 21.