

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO ARMENIAN IDENTITY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY:  
VULNERABILITY, RESILIENCE AND TRANSFORMATION  
Conference Proceedings  
October 2016

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO ARMENIAN IDENTITY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY:  
VULNERABILITY, RESILIENCE AND TRANSFORMATION

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EDITOR

**Altuğ Yılmaz**

ENGLISH COPY EDITOR

**Hrag Papazian**

TRANSLATORS

**Burcu Becermen, Can Evren, Kate Ferguson  
Margo Gevorgyan, Ceylan Gürman, Nare Kalemkarian**

INDEX

**Lara Taş**

PROJECT COORDINATORS

**Arıcan Paker, Karun Özçelik, Lara Taş**

BOOK DESIGN AND DESIGN CONSULTANCY

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Anarad Hıgutyun Binası  
Papa Roncalli Sok. No: 128  
Harbiye 34373 Şişli/İstanbul  
T: 0212 240 33 61-62 | F: 0212 240 33 94  
info@hrantdink.org | www.hrantdink.org

CRITICAL

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APPROACHES

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TO ARMENIAN

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IDENTITY IN THE

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21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY:

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VULNERABILITY,

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TRANSFORMATION

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## HRANT DİNK FOUNDATION

THE HRANT DİNK FOUNDATION WAS ESTABLISHED AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF HRANT DİNK IN FRONT OF HIS NEWSPAPER AGOS ON 19 JANUARY 2007, IN ORDER TO AVOID SIMILAR PAINS AND TO CONTINUE HRANT DİNK'S LEGACY, HIS LANGUAGE AND HEART, AND HIS DREAM OF A WORLD THAT IS MORE FREE AND JUST. DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS FOR EVERYONE REGARDLESS OF THEIR ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS OR CULTURAL ORIGIN OR GENDER IS THE FOUNDATION'S MAIN PRINCIPLE. THE FOUNDATION WORKS FOR A TURKEY AND A WORLD WHERE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IS LIMITLESS AND ALL DIFFERENCES ARE ALLOWED, LIVED, APPRECIATED, MULTIPLIED AND CONSCIENCE OUTWEIGHS THE WAY WE LOOK AT TODAY AND THE PAST.

AS THE HRANT DİNK FOUNDATION 'OUR CAUSE WORTH LIVING' IS A FUTURE WHERE A CULTURE OF DIALOGUE, PEACE AND EMPATHY PREVAILS.

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## WELCOME SPEECH

## RAKEL DİNK\*

translation from Turkish

KATE FERGUSON

Dear guests, dear participants: welcome.

*Sireli paregamner yev harkeli hiraviryalner, pari yegak.*

First of all, I would like to express how happy we at the Hrant Dink Foundation are in having organized this conference in Istanbul together with Hamazkayin. I would also like to thank the Gulbenkian Foundation and the Consulate General of Sweden for their support.

This building in which we find ourselves today is a former Armenian school; one of the many schools established by the Anarad Hghutyun Sisters Union. Founded in the 1840s by Armenian Catholic Patriarch Bedros IX (Hasunian) and run by Sister Andonian, the union's aim was to educate the daughters of poor families from the Catholic Armenian community and ensure they devoted their lives to religion. The union, whose headquarters were located in Valideçeşme Street, in the district of Pera, founded educational institutions at preschool, primary school and high school level in Istanbul, after which it began establishing education programmes in over twenty cities and villages in the eastern provinces and Cilicia. The Anarad Hghutyun School in Pangaltı was opened in 1903. The original building, however, was too small and insufficient for its purpose, so in 1915 it moved to the building in which we sit today. In the 1960s the school had hundreds of pupils, but in 2004 the school brought an end to its educational activities due to a lack of students. In 2015, one hundred years after the school began operating here, we moved the Hrant Dink Foundation to this building. And here in this building, in Istanbul, we are laying the groundwork for the Armenian Research Institute.

During the project 'On This Day in 1915',<sup>1</sup> which we launched to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Genocide, we learned by chance that on the night of 24 April 1915 many intellectuals were rounded up from this very street, then known as Cedidiye Street. Here in Istanbul today,

\* President of Hrant Dink Foundation

<sup>1</sup> In 2015, the Hrant Dink Foundation opened a Twitter account named '1915'te Bugün' [On This Day in 1915], in which it shared tweets that gave day-by-day accounts of what happened during the Genocide, based on resources in various languages.

we are discussing Armenian identity, with all of these memories and this troubled past, and I believe this is symbolic of the important point Armenians have reached in understanding and overcoming our trauma. The fact that Armenian identity is being discussed here in all its aspects, including in relation to Turkish identity, will contribute to helping the Armenian community shed its paranoia.

The series of articles for which my husband Hrant was tried for ‘insulting Turkishness’ was entitled ‘On Armenian Identity.’ In these articles he discussed many aspects of Armenian identity, including demilitarization, building relations with Armenia or the impact of our institutions on identity; but the sentence for which he was put on trial was about the place of Turks in Armenian identity. He believed that focusing on the Turks’ denial was an attitude that was poisoning the Armenian identity, and that focusing on the Turks’ recognition of the Genocide was a waste of time that only delayed the awakening of the Armenian identity; he believed it important to focus instead on topics that would reinvigorate the stifled productivity of the Armenian community.

I would now like to continue by sharing with you an article written by Hrant in 1996, the year *Agos* was founded, when the paper was just two months old.

### **A Lyrical Solitude<sup>2</sup>**

*“Solitude cannot be shared,” said the poet Özdemir Asaf.*

*So, what do we share?*

*Is it in celebrations that we find the clearest measure of lives shared?*

*No, it’s not there either. Wasn’t that night the simplest indicator of that?*

\*\*\*

*That night, I was invited to two important events that happened to clash at precisely the same time. The first was our Yeraz’s<sup>3</sup> dance performance, and I went there first. Such a shame! The hall was almost empty. But well done to our kids! They weren’t discouraged and did their very best up there on the stage.*

*My second stop was the Open-Air Theatre where there was a great festival of music. And what a beautiful name they had given it!*

*Lyrical History.*

<sup>2</sup> *Agos*, 7 June 1996; *Bu Köşedeki Adam* (Istanbul: Hrant Dink Foundation, 2009), pp. 277-278.

<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1994 within the Getronagan High School in Istanbul, the Yeraz Dance Ensemble was made up of young dancers aged 12-21. It was active until 1999.

*Government representatives, diplomatic emissaries, national and international press, and thousands of delegates from abroad had filled the Open-Air Theatre. The programme had everything you could ask for. All the historical roots that formed Turkey's past and present paraded by, one after the other, offering music and dances reflecting their culture. Turks, Greeks, Jews, Circassians, and many more —each different, yet each with its place in this shared garden—formed a beautiful scene on stage. It was impossible not to be moved.*

*However, as the programme progressed, my heart sank. We Armenians were nowhere to be found in this garden.*

*What a shame, what a real shame!*

*Perhaps they couldn't find anyone to perform?*

*I wanted to cry out, "I can get up and sing something!"*

\*\*\*

*I suddenly pictured the kids of Yeraz in my mind's eye. Just a short distance away they were, despite everything, giving it their all to make even a small contribution to this shared sphere. I looked at the crowd, and everyone was happy. . . As for me? I was alone.*

\*\*\*

*Now I walk with heartbroken steps. Lyrics, melodies spill from my lips of their own accord.*

*"Firkatin aldı bütün neşe vü tabım bu gece," [Your departure has stolen all my joy and strength tonight] sings Bimen Şen, to the rhythm of my staggering footsteps.*

*"Ben kulunum, sen efendimsin benim," [I am your slave, you are my master] sings Nigoghos Agha to the strains of the violin of my squeaky teeth.*

*"Bilmem ki safa neşe bu ömrün neresinde," [O where doth lie pleasure and joy in this life] sings Levon Hancıyan in the B-flat whine from my nostrils.*

*"Gamzedeyim deva bulmam," [Succumbed to sorrow, I can't find no remedy] sings Tatyos Efendi accompanied by the sound of the oud that forces my rib cage to breaking point.*

*And. . .*

*"Kimseye etmem şikâyet, ağlarım ben halime," [I complain to none, but cry alone, lamenting the state I am in] sings Kemani [violinist] Sarkis Sucuyan Efendi to the sound of my flowing tears.*

\*\*\*

*So what should we do now? Should we go back to the drawing board and explain at length to those who ostracize us the contributions*

*Armenians have made to this country in the fields of music, theatre, architecture and all branches of art?*

*Of course we will, and we will do so tirelessly, without ever giving up.*

*But first come and let us share for a moment in this lyrical solitude.*

Yes, even oppressed by the cruelty of evil, of death, of the world, humanity continues and will always continue its existence. And as we live it is our duty to protect hope, belief and, above all, love. Nobody chooses their parents or their race; they find themselves within a family, a race, an identity. But at the same time, everything in nature, in our environment, affects—or wants to affect—us and our identity. The teachings, the values, the perceptions, the beliefs, the attitudes and the behaviours of those who raise us affect us, ground us, shape us, nurture us and serve as an example. We are able to choose some of the factors that form our identity, we can choose what to believe in, where and how we live. But no identity should believe it has the right, while living itself, to scorn, belittle, insult or hate the other. Bearing the responsibility of our identity, understanding and carrying our past, being part of a driving force to build a future of dignity is up to us, it is our choice, just as it is our choice whether or not we live in a way that is poisonous to us, harbouring anger, rage and an unforgiving attitude.

Here, over these two days, we will be examining the positive and negative impacts of the behaviours and attitudes that are specific to—or perhaps rather have been attributed to—our identity as Armenians; we will be discussing the costs and benefits both for us and for those around us of being confined [in a particular identity]<sup>4</sup>. Here in the Anarad Hghutyun building, where Armenian children once ran through these halls, were educated in these classroom, we will discuss, try to understand and learn about our Armenian identity, we will hear about the research of you, our valuable scholars, and we will talk about how we, as decent people who prioritize human values, can carry this identity into the future, and I believe this will contribute a great deal to each and every one of us.

Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish, Greek, Circassian, Jewish or Assyrian; I thank everyone who has helped to shatter the loneliness of these lands. I wish us all a fruitful conference.

<sup>4</sup> Translator's addition.