

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hamlet after Genocide: The Haunting of Soghomon Tehlirian and Empirical Fabulation

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Abstract

Soghomon Tehlirian was acquitted in Berlin in 1921 for the killing of Talat Paşa, Ottoman minister and architect of the Armenian Genocide. Complicating clear-cut distinctions between truth and fabulation, and personal revenge and legal justice, this paper examines the 1921 trial in light of Tehlirian's 1953 memoir, to show the legal, moral, and epistemological work done by the ghost of Tehlirian's mother. I move beyond the usual designations of Tehlirian as mere political assassin or self-evident moral witness and consider him instead as an "empirical fabulist." My coinage of the term empirical fabulation is animated by Saidiya Hartman's (2008) call for "critical fabulation," and my reading of Tehlirian as an empirical fabulist recognizes him as a genocide survivor who aspired for collective justice, a son haunted by his mother's ghost, *and* a historical actor who gave a fabricated testimony that was nonetheless based on the empirical facts of genocide. This paper is an invitation to explore the political and ethical potential, and perhaps even the necessity, of fabulation in recounting acts of genocidal violence that strain or defy straightforward representation, especially in cases when the existing rule of law does not rise to the demands for justice.

Keywords: critical fabulation; empirical fabulation; hauntology; politics of truth; politics of emotion; vengeance; justice; Armenian Genocide

Introduction

Soghomon Tehlirian, whose family perished in the Armenian Genocide in 1915, was tried in a court in Berlin in 1921 for killing Talat Paşa, Ottoman minister and principal architect of the genocide. The verdict that led to Tehlirian's acquittal was based on expert testimony that diagnosed his medical condition as "psychological epilepsy," one marked by recurrent visions of his murdered mother who summoned him to avenge their family. The trial itself turned into an international platform for exposing the kind of sovereign violence that would, within a few decades, constitute a unique category in international law: genocide. Tehlirian, in turn, came to be celebrated as a national hero by Armenians around the world. Legal theorist

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Raphael Lemkin and philosopher Hannah Arendt would come to view him as a righteous avenger and moral witness. But he would also be revealed as an assassin appointed by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Tashnagsutyun) and a “false” witness who had not, in fact, witnessed the murder of his family first-hand.

Complicating clear-cut distinctions between truth and fabrication, as well as between personal revenge and legal justice, this paper examines the 1921 trial in light of Tehlirian’s 1953 memoir, which has remained in the shadows, to scrutinize these two texts for not only the empirical information they hold but also “for the ways they speculate upon ontological, epistemological, and political questions” (Kazanjian 2016: 140). There is already a rich body of writing on the Tehlirian trial by historians and genocide scholars, with a proliferation in the last five years in commemoration of the genocide’s centennial.¹ Drawing on this scholarship, I develop a concept I call “empirical fabrication,” which, I will argue, allows us to fathom the balancing act between fact and fabrication calibrated by Tehlirian during his court testimony and in his unexamined memoir. I diverge from existing designations of Tehlirian as “a hitman” (Yenen 2022), an assassin who was transformed into a “righteous avenger” through the crafting of a legal narrative “that was exculpatory and redemptive at once” (Dean 2019: 53, 48). My reading of Tehlirian as an empirical fabulist recognizes him as a genocide survivor with an aspiration for collective justice, a son haunted by his mother’s ghost, and a historical actor who gave a fabricated testimony that was nonetheless based on the empirical facts of genocide. Centering Tehlirian as a historical actor who “fictions a politics”—to evoke Foucault’s (1980) felicitous phrase—in the service of genocide recognition summons us to rethink the relationship between truth and fiction, and between personal revenge and legal justice. This paper, then, is an invitation to explore the political and ethical potential, and perhaps even the necessity, of fabrication in recounting acts of genocidal violence that strain or even defy straightforward representation (Nichanian 2002), especially in cases where the existing rule of law fails to rise to the demands for justice and retribution. In extending that invitation, I follow the lead of a spectral figure, as Tehlirian himself did: Tehlirian’s mother’s ghost, who beset the courtroom in Berlin and haunts the pages of her son’s memoir.

My coinage of “empirical fabulist” is animated by and indebted to cultural historian Saidiya Hartman’s paradigm shifting call for “critical fabrication” (2008). Although the practice of critical fabrication manifests itself throughout Hartman’s oeuvre, it is in her seminal essay “Venus in Two Acts” (2008) that she employs the phrase to describe a systematic and intentional way of writing against the archive. And it is in her latest, genre-defying book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), that critical fabrication reaches its full-fledged and most radical expression. For Hartman, the archives of slavery are inadequate for all the reasons historians attuned to the workings of power and authority have already taken them to task—from the question of whose perspective holds sway to who is given recognition as a historical actor to who has sufficient economic or symbolic capital to leave any footprint in official records. But for Hartman the archives of slavery are irredeemably compromised beyond all these limitations: these archives are a record of and an instrument for those with power and privilege to continue to force obscurity and illegibility upon the oppressed. When the powerful do

¹See Alexander 1991; Bogosian 2017; Dean 2019; Derogy 1990; Garibian 2018; Ihrig 2016; Jacobs 2019; MacCurdy 2015; Resta 2016; and most recently, in this journal, Yenen 2022.

represent the marginalized, they do so only in ways that justify their rule over the latter, rendering them devoid of any interiority or grace. Therefore, if the very paradigm of the archive erases the subjecthood of the enslaved, the archive itself, she says, is none other than a sort of fiction, one constituted by “the rumors, scandals, lies, invented evidence, fabricated confessions, volatile facts, impossible metaphors, chance events, and fantasies ... [that] determine what can be said about the past” (2008: 9). Hence Hartman’s insistence on reading archives creatively and speculatively to “imagine what cannot be verified” (ibid.: 8). Such speculative reading also entails filling in the omissions, reconfiguring marginalized subjects as important actors with fully fleshed-out subjectivities, and even exploring how their lives *might have been*. Critical fabulation thus becomes a methodological approach and an ethical stance, “both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling” (ibid.: 11). It becomes a way—perhaps the only way according to Hartman—to retell the interior lives of enslaved people and their descendants in their full complexity, agency, and humanity, and “the only available form of redress for the monumental crime that was the transatlantic slave trade” (2020).²

I have been emboldened by Hartman in my own quest to tell an impossible story of the Armenian Genocide while amplifying the impossibility of its telling.³ Empirical fabulation differs from Hartman’s critical fabulation in two crucial respects, however. First, I emphasize that in empirical fabulation, the historical actors themselves are doing the fabulation, not the author. The author is committed to following the lead of the empirical fabulist as accurately as possible. The second point of divergence is that I sustain a more explicit engagement with what Annette Gordon-Reed, in her measured critique of Hartman, has called the concern with “the threshold of evidence” in reading the archives speculatively (2020).

I rely on two primary sources in my engagement with spectral figures to investigate the mechanisms whereby truths are simultaneously revealed and fabricated. The first are the transcripts of the trial, which were kept verbatim and have been published in English. The existing scholarship on Tehlirian predominantly relies on these as the primary source. Yet, an equally critical source is Tehlirian’s memoir, *Verhishumner*, written after his acquittal. Very few scholars have worked with it, likely because only fragments have been translated to and excerpted in English (Atamian 1961; and more recently Bogosian 2017). The full text existed only in Eastern Armenian, with an original Cairo edition (T’ēhlirean 1953) and a subsequent Yerevan edition (T’ēhlirean 2006).⁴ By reading the court proceedings in tandem with

²It is important to reiterate the gradual shift in Hartman’s own thinking in regard to what is within the realm of possibility: while her reading of the two Venuses in 2008 cautions about the extent to which she can reconstruct those figures obliterated by the archive, she argues for far more interpretive license in *Wayward Lives* in terms of what the historian may imagine, moving in the direction urged by Kazanjian (2016).

³While presenting from this piece at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in November of 2021, I was asked whether it is apt to draw an analogy between the erasures of the archives of slavery in the United States and the erasures of the archives of the Armenian Genocide. Lerna Ekmekcioglu (2021) has eloquently articulated the relevance of a comparative framework between the epistemic violence of trivializing the continuing violence of slavery in the American present and the systematic denial of the Armenian genocide in Turkey, as well as its continued distortions and erasures in the predominant scholarship in Turkish Studies.

⁴At the time of writing, the memoir remained untranslated since its first publication in Cairo in Eastern Armenian in 1953. I used the 2006 Yerevan edition (T’ēhlirean 2006). I was able to delve with such detail into this source thanks to the linguistic and scholarly expertise of Ararat Şekeryan, a Ph.D. candidate in

the memoir, we can better understand the role of Tehlirian's mother's ghost as his steady guide in the journey toward the decision to kill, and the subsequent balancing act between fact and fiction. The ghost is also a persistent and uncanny reminder that perhaps any rendition of collective violence relies to a certain degree on the spectral.⁵

A Landmark Trial and the Origins of Genocide as a Legal Category

I consider myself not guilty, because my conscience is clear.... I have killed a man. But I am not a murderer.⁶

These were the words uttered by the twenty-four-year-old Soghomon Tehlirian to a packed court in Berlin, as he stood on the stand on 21 June 1921 on trial for killing Talat Paşa, leader of the Young Turks, Minister of Internal Affairs during World War I, and chief architect and executioner of the Armenian Genocide. Spoken by the man who shot Talat with a single bullet to the head in daylight in Berlin, these words would resonate across national borders and through decades of legal scholarship. The apparent discrepancy between owning up to a killing and disavowing the act as murder constituted a key dilemma for legal scholar Raphael Lemkin (2013) and philosopher Hannah Arendt (2006[1961]). Both would mull over how to assess an individual act of retribution in the absence of legal accountability for mass violence perpetrated by sovereign states. Lemkin's musings would eventually lead to his coinage of the term "genocide," now an internationally recognized legal category to define mass murder targeting a national, racial, ethnic, or religious group and codified as an independent crime in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.⁷

But Tehlirian's words were momentous from the moment he uttered them. The *New York Times* described the proceedings as "Berlin's most picturesque and most sensational criminal trial in years."⁸ In the courtroom were well-known public figures who also testified as expert witnesses: General Liman von Sanders, the German Commander in Chief stationed in Ottoman territory at the time of the genocide and implicated in potential complicity; Reverend Grigoris Balakian, one of the few who had survived the first wave of arrests of more than two hundred fifty Armenian community leaders in Istanbul on 24 April 1915; and J. Lepsius, a Protestant

Department of Slavic Languages at Columbia University. In multiple sessions throughout the summer of 2020, he went over every sentence with extraordinary care and meticulousness, translating to and rechecking my final renditions in English, although any remaining errors are completely mine. In working with the original text, we paid special heed to the use of critical words, such as "ghosts," "dreams," and "visions" and to those passages that described Tehlirian's emotional states. Meanwhile, a translation by Ishkhan Jinbashian of the entire memoir is being prepared for publication, with an Introduction by Armen Manuk-Khaloyan, Robert Gerwarth, and Jay Winter. I am grateful to Armen Manuk-Khaloyan for providing a draft and look forward to the publication so that the memoir will finally reach the English-speaking readership. Another translation by B. Demirjian was just printed by the Gomidas Institute in September 2022.

⁵Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison has pioneered in centering the spectral to confront the (im)possibilities of the depiction of slavery and its afterlives.

⁶Transcript of the court proceedings of the trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, as cited in Yeghiayan (2006: 18). All subsequent quotations from the trial are from this publication.

⁷To this day, the Turkish state's official line has been to deny the Armenian Genocide. For two pioneering treatments of genocide denial in Turkey, see Akçam 2006, and Göçek 2016.

⁸*New York Times*, 3 June 1921.

missionary who witnessed and documented the atrocities. Tehlirian's own legal defense team was composed of Berlin's most famous criminal lawyers. The audience extended beyond the confines of the courtroom, and included Armenians scattered around the world who held their breath with the expectation that some justice might be restored. The trial took place in that brief interlude when Armenians were hopeful for retributive justice in the immediate aftermath of World War I, from which the *entente* powers had emerged victorious, and just before the treaty of Lausanne in 1923 which dashed those hopes (Ekmekcioglu 2013). The audience also included officials of the Turkish government keen to thwart any counter to the wheels of denialism they had already set in motion. Finally, it included German government officials who worried that evidence might come to light that exposed German officials had collaborated in the deportations, labor camps, and massacres (Ihrig 2016). The stakes of Tehlirian's trial thus traversed the gamut from individual suffering and demands for retribution to national guilt, complicity, and denial.

"From a legal point of view," the District Attorney for the prosecution, Mr. Gollnick, summed up on the second and last day of the trial, "the case is quite simple":

On March 15, 1921, the defendant shot and killed Talat Pasha on Charlottenburgstrasse. The aim was well taken. Death was instantaneous and there is no doubt that the defendant wanted to kill. He committed the act intentionally. Did the defendant not testify that he still felt gratified in having successfully committed that act?... There is no question in my mind that what we are dealing with here is a political assassination. The defendant's motives were political hatred and political vengeance" (Yeghiayan 2006: 124–25).

To argue his case that the killing was premeditated, political, and without attenuating circumstances, District Attorney Gollnick piled one piece of incriminating evidence upon another. Had not Tehlirian said, during his preliminary interrogation by the police inspector (even if he subsequently retracted the statement in the official record), "As soon as I saw my parents' home in ruins, I wanted to avenge their deaths. In order to do that, I went and bought a pistol"? Had he not carefully mapped his itinerary across Europe to find Talat, sorting out his travel documents along the way with suspicious ease and sense of direction, to finally arrive in Berlin? Had he not, once he located with certainty that Talat resided in 4 Hardenbergstrasse, abruptly moved out of the flat he was renting at the time and taken up residence right across from Talat's apartment, even though he would still have to pay the remaining rent on his former lease? Had he not instantly grabbed his pistol upon spotting Talat from the window where he must have kept constant watch, the pistol conveniently located in his suitcase, ready to be reached for when the right moment came? (Yeghiayan 2006: 123–30).

As the District Attorney thus sought to prove long-term planning and cool-headed calculation, he also pointed to Tehlirian's temperament to bolster his case, rhetorically asking: "Was the defendant bad-tempered or easily provoked? The evidence is to the contrary. He was a gloomy and calm man, wrapped up in himself. He was not one to dance with joy and have fits of passion.... On the contrary, he was one who kept his thoughts to himself to a point where he would calmly analyze them and take action." He supported this assertion by citing

testimonies of Tehlirian's Berlin neighbors and acquaintances who had heard him tinkering on his mandolin and the sad Armenian songs he listened to alone in his room, or who had witnessed his fainting on a dance floor where his Armenian comrades had taken him in an attempt to dispel the melancholy that seemed to perpetually envelope him. "The motive of the defendant," Gollnick concluded, "was to get revenge through killing Talat, who he was convinced was the instigator and the perpetrator of the massacres of the Armenians" (ibid.: 127).

The defense, in turn, built the legal foundation of their case on Article 51 of the German code that prevailed at the time of the hearings: "A homicide should go unpunished when the defendant committed the act unknowingly or when he commits the act under the influence of moral anguish that he no longer has control over his free will" (ibid.). Of the five doctors who testified, all but one granted the possibility that Tehlirian's free will was significantly diminished. A more cautious Dr. Liepmann, a privy medical counselor of the court from the University of Berlin, suggested, "There were motives of suffering which put pressure on the defendant and limited his free will" (ibid.: 112), while a more confident Dr. Haake, a neurologist, declared, "An emotional epileptic, such as the defendant, is unable freely to control his will under the constraint of such mental images. I would... give an affirmative answer to the question, Was there a total lack of free will?" (ibid.: 120). All concurred with the diagnosis of Tehlirian as epileptic.⁹ They pointed out, however, that because his epileptic attacks were induced differently from the prevailing textbook definition, Tehlirian's condition merited a different term: "psychological epilepsy." The attacks were clearly triggered, they explained, when the patient encountered scenes or thoughts from his past. There was already an acknowledgment by these experts, then, of the peculiar nature to Tehlirian's fainting spells. They foregrounded an emotional predicament, albeit one with legal ramifications, a predicament that transcended individual predisposition and gestured toward, even if it did not explicitly articulate, the notion of collective trauma.

Indeed, much of the rest of the trial was devoted to rendering Tehlirian's horrific past as part of an episode of violence and trauma collectively experienced by Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman-Turkish government, thereby intertwining the legal question of free will with the political question of state-led mass murder. The crimes committed by members of the Committee of Union and Progress, commonly known as the Young Turks, were exposed through the testimonies from Tehlirian and other key witnesses who had survived the massacres. The latter were intended not only to corroborate Tehlirian's account but also to communicate to the jury, and the wider national and international audience, the systematic and collective nature of the killings of Armenians across the entire Anatolian landscape in 1915 and throughout World War I.

On the trial's first day, Presiding Justice of the District Court Dr. Lehmborg asked Tehlirian to narrate the murder of his family in detail. Although the *New York Times* reported that, at this point, "[Tehlirian's] Oriental temperament got the better of him and he shrieked," the court records give no indication that he lost his composure. They recount that Tehlirian, subdued and lucid, told the court that the news of deportations began to arrive in his hometown Erzincan in May of 1915, and that in

⁹They included Dr. Richard Cassirer, neurologist and professor at Berlin University, and Dr. Edmund Forster, chief physician of the neurological clinic at Berlin University.

early June everyone in their village was ordered to prepare to leave. The residents were assured that their money and valuables would be handed over to authorities for safekeeping. Three days later, everyone was “herded outside, and the line of people moved forward in caravans and convoys,” with soldiers on horseback and other gendarmes escorting the caravans. Once the convoy was some way from the city, they were ordered to stop. The gendarmes began to plunder the deportees. “During the plundering,” Tehlirian explained, “one of the gendarmes dragged away my sister, and my mother cried out, ‘please let me go blind.’” “I can’t remember that day anymore,” Tehlirian resumed. “I don’t want to keep on being reminded of that day. I’d rather die right now than continue describing that black day” (ibid.: 9).

But Justice Lehmberg insisted on hearing the details, so Tehlirian carried on, with mostly affirmative interjections from Lehmberg. “They took everyone away and struck me as well. Then I saw how my brother’s skull was split apart with an ax.... My mother fell.... I don’t know why, from a bullet or something else I was struck on the head and fell to the ground. I have no recollection of what happened afterwards.” After he regained consciousness, Tehlirian said, perhaps a day later, perhaps two, “I saw my brother’s body had fallen on top of me” (ibid.: 9–10). When asked how he had managed to escape, Tehlirian described a convoluted itinerary, first through the killing fields, then taking refuge in the mountains, and eventually finding his way back to his village nearly a year later, in March 1916. When he arrived there, he told the court, he found his house in ruins and no trace of any of his family. In his search for his parents and other siblings he hoped might have survived, he traveled to Istanbul to place inquiries. When he gave up any remaining hope, he moved first to Geneva and then to Berlin, trying to get as far away from the past as possible. But, Tehlirian insisted, he had no idea that Talat lived in Berlin when he arrived there.

The defense reiterated in their closing statement that when he accidentally found out that Talat was inhabiting the same city, Tehlirian did not even talk to his Armenian friends in Berlin about it. This was because, his attorneys explained, he was trying to put the encounter out of his mind. The defense underscored that this “chance encounter” with Talat “did not make [Tehlirian] decide to kill Talat” (ibid.: 137). While it might have been the case, the defense team granted, that Tehlirian was truly overwhelmed by his feelings upon discovering that he inhabited the same city with the ex-minister, at that time he had no thought of killing him. It was only upon a visitation by his mother’s ghost, attorney Werthauer averred, that Tehlirian first thought of revenge: “The deep feelings he experienced then passed. He remained calm, and thoughts of vengeance did not recur to him. He carried on as before until five to six weeks later, when he saw a dream, materially almost like a vision. His mother’s corpse arose before him. He told her: ‘I saw Talat.’ His mother answered, ‘You saw Talat and you did not avenge your mother’s, father’s, brother’s, and sister’s murders? You are no longer my son’” (ibid.: 137). The jury of twelve gave their verdict as “not guilty,” and Soghomon Tehlirian was acquitted.

The Ghost in the Courtroom

The existing scholarship on Tehlirian’s trial has already established the significance of the trial as a milestone in thinking about questions of national sovereignty, international accountability, and legal retribution in the face of state-sponsored mass atrocities against specific groups of citizens: at the time of the hearings, there was no existing legal procedure to prosecute state-orchestrated mass murder or even

a common legal vocabulary to talk about it. Although the official purpose of the Tehlirian trial was not to seek justice for victims of the massacres or to resolve the legal question of international accountability, the hearings did ultimately turn into a platform for exposing and thinking about collective murder by a sovereign state. In his concluding remarks, Defense Attorney Werthauer asked, "Of all the juries in the world which one would have convicted Tell if he had shot his arrow at Gessler?" (Yeghiayan 2006: 161). And to make sure that the broader significance of the Tell analogy was not lost on the spectators, he added, "Is there a more humanitarian act than that which has been described in this courtroom?" (ibid.: 161).

It was not just the rhetorical strategies of the defense team that equated Tehlirian's act to one of morality and conscience. A near age-mate of Tehlirian at the time, long before his rise to world fame as the coiner of the term genocide, was the Polish legal scholar Rafael Lemkin. Then a law student, Lemkin was ardently following the trial, if only from a distance. In his autobiographical account, *Totally Unofficial*, published near the end of his life, Lemkin (2013) recalled that it was Tehlirian's trial that first made him to ponder the tension between the breach of the existing legal order by an individual taking it upon themselves to seek justice and the ethical and legal imperative to punish mass murder committed by sovereign states that were not held accountable within that order. Lemkin said he became preoccupied with the conundrum of acting "as the self-appointed legal officer for the conscience of mankind" (ibid.: 20). Cautious as he was regarding the implications of exonerating self-appointed restorers of justice, he also deeply empathized with Tehlirian's predicament. It made Lemkin "feel that a law against this type of mass racial or religious murder must be adopted by the world" (ibid.: 20). That feeling solidified into a legal agenda that he resolutely began to pursue just five years later, when Shalom Schwartzbard shot the Ukrainian minister of war, Symon Petliuria, for the mass murder of Jews. Hannah Arendt (2006), too, considered the killings by Schwartzbard and Tehlirian to be similar. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as Arendt came down on the side of Schwartzbard, who had lost all fifteen members of his family, she invoked Tehlirian. He, too, had been "forced," in Arendt's words, "to take the law into his own hands" given that he "was a member of an ethnic group that did not possess its own state and legal system" (ibid.: 265). Recently, historian Carolyn Dean (2019) has taken issue with such treatment of Tehlirian or Schwartzbard as heroes who did the work of justice, a dissenting view I engage with at the end of this article.¹⁰ But analysts of the Berlin trial, whether sympathetic to or critical of Tehlirian's acquittal, have not given due attention to the ghost of Tehlirian's mother, whose absent presence hovers over and ultimately sways the hearings.¹¹

¹⁰Acknowledging Yenen's impressive use of a wide range of secondary literature on the Tehlirian trial, I nonetheless find his perspective troubling in regard to (1) the moral equivalences he assumes between Tehlirian (a genocide survivor) and Talat (a genocide perpetrator), from the very title of the article, "The Tehlirian-Talat complex" to his non-contextualized use of an utterance by Tehlirian's son who apparently said, "How can a murderer be a hero?" in order to garner moral authority for the author's own stance; and (2) his dismissal of "revenge" as an emotion that needs to be somehow easily gotten rid of in the path toward "reconciliation," a point I will return to in my conclusion.

¹¹Two notable exceptions are Garibian (2018), for whom the invocation of the mother's ghost works as self-evident proof of Tehlirian's morality, and Ertür (2015), who, in her sophisticated examination of three different political trials including that of Tehlirian, centers the spectral in a brilliant theoretical juxtaposition

In his closing speech, the Defense Attorney circled back to Tehlirian's initial account of the visitation of his mother's ghost, recalling her to convince the jury that the killing was not premeditated but triggered by Tehlirian's haunting. But rather than simply offering the vision as proof of Tehlirian's psychological condition, the attorney spoke at curious length about the ghost. He described the appearance of the ghost "materially, almost like a vision" (ibid.: 136). As he elaborated on the vision, Von Gordon walked a tightrope: he sought to impress upon the jury the force of the vision without entirely jettisoning the "superiority" of Western legal rationality. "It is quite evident," he proposed at one point, taking an abrupt culturalist turn in his argumentation, "that such visions play an altogether different role in the lives of spirited Easterners than they do in the lives of us Westerners who look upon such things from a philosophical and medical point of view." He continued, "I remind you of the passage from the Holy Bible which reads: 'And the angel appeared to him in his dream....' A similar apparition or corporeal vision is what had the decisive effect on Tehlirian.... At that moment, the defendant wanted to kill Talat" (ibid.: 137).

Consider the deft maneuver here: the Defense Attorney marks Tehlirian's worldview as that of a "spirited Easterner," decidedly different from the "lives of us Westerners." In the first instance, Von Gordon appeals to cultural otherness as an ameliorating factor: *they* are not as secular or rational as we are in the West, so *we* have to evaluate their actions not based on our own terms but on *their* terms. And yet, Von Gordon's move is different from the essentializing version of cultural relativism whereby those different from the observing self are cast as the non-comparable or untranslatable Other. Rather, immediately after assigning Tehlirian to the Easterner slot, Von Gordon proceeds to remind the court of a passage from the Holy Bible: "and the angel appeared to him in his dream." Tehlirian may be a spirited Easterner, but his cosmology is not entirely alien to those attending the Berlin court. As fellow Christians, the audience is assumed to share an understanding of angels and corporeal visions. Despite his disavowal that "us Westerners" are not at the mercy of apparitions, Von Gordon goes on to reaffirm the relevance and power of the spectral in the very next breath through evoking the Holy Bible.

The historical context was crucial for the success of this double move of estrangement and familiarization. In addition to spiritualism being still widespread in Europe in 1921 and the formidable legacy of ghosts in Christian belief and practice, the European public was particularly preoccupied with ghostly sightings in the immediate aftermath of World War I (Davies 2018). There was a spike in the circulation of supernatural encounters among soldiers, which Owen Davies explains by the existing Catholic and Orthodox credence in guardian angels, along with Protestant groups' endorsements of such sightings as an expression of God's continued intervention in human affairs. This fascination with the supernatural also manifested itself in the abundance of literary references where ghosts played a leading role (ibid.: 53–65). Indeed, in his *Hamlet in Purgatory*, literary critic and cultural historian Stephen Greenblatt (2013) argues that the Protestant denunciation of the idea of Purgatory, so central in Catholic belief and rituals around death and the afterlife, was also an attempt to curb the Renaissance belief in ghosts. But secularizing efforts never succeeded in eliminating intimacy with specters or other enchanted

of performativity and haunting. Neither, however, read the trial in conjunction with the memoir, which is key to my exploration of movement between fact and fiction, and between personal revenge and legal justice.

things. Rather, the fascination with ghosts remained submerged in the public psyche and still appealed to the Elizabethan audience in a variety of forms: “as vengeful familial spirits, as emblems of conscience, and agents of redemption” (ibid.: 199). Furthermore, Greenblatt suggests that Shakespeare himself never quite came down on either pure skepticism or full-fledged belief with regard to the spectral; the audience was “invited to credit their existence in a peculiar spirit of theatrical disavowal” (ibid.: 196).

Taking my cue from Greenblatt, I submit that Attorney Van Gordon’s appeal to the jury regarding the ghost was not dissimilar to the invitation extended by Shakespeare, except now the stage of theatre has been replaced by the stage of the court.¹² The defense used the ghostly visions to give insight to Tehlirian’s very core, one untarnished by calculation or caution: while the ghost made Tehlirian lose control and abandon the path of rationality, it also represented everything that was authentic and unfiltered about him.

I am not suggesting that the ghost was the only reason for Tehlirian’s acquittal. As has already been well-documented, there were other crucial factors that weighed in his favor. The jury was reminded, for example, that a post-World War I tribunal in Istanbul had already convicted Talat of war crimes against humanity and sentenced him to death in absentia. Furthermore, during the hearings, three other key witnesses had given testimonies to expose the full extent of the atrocities from death marches, kidnapping, and rape to labor camps, torture, murder, and the mutilation of corpses. Finally, Germany had its own interest in acquitting Tehlirian to ward off charges of complicity for the mass atrocities (Dadrian 1996; Ihrig 2016; Moses 2012). In that regard, the last sentence of Defense Attorney Niemayer’s closing speech is telling: “In the East and all over the world, we Germans have been held responsible with the Turks for the crimes committed against the Armenians. If a German court were to find Soghomon Tehlirian not guilty, this would put an end of the misconception that the world has of us” (Yeghiayan 2006: 176).

Nonetheless, the mother’s ghost appeared in the trial’s most decisive moments. Not only did the ghost provide the elusively solid foundation on which to establish Tehlirian’s lack of free will and the authenticity of his motivation, but the timing of the apparitions was critical to making sense of why Tehlirian acted when he did in the face of an otherwise confusing chronology of events. Ostensibly to clarify the confusion in Tehlirian’s account with regard to premeditation, Von Gordon asked, “Did I understand correctly that after finding the apartment in H. in order to be close to Talat, the defendant afterwards at times dropped the idea because the thought occurred to him: you cannot kill another person?!” He then answered his own rhetorical question to drive home the point of the power the ghost had over an otherwise reluctant Tehlirian: “To put it briefly: did this decision he made after the spirit appearance stay firm, or did he sometimes drop it and then devote himself to his usual occupations, because he said to himself: you cannot kill someone?” Presiding Judge Lemberg responded in support of Von Gordon’s emphasis on a hesitant Tehlirian: “That’s indeed what he said; he wavered in his decision.” And Tehlirian put the final knot on the presentation of a self who, against all his inclinations, did

¹²If we wanted to push Greenblatt’s line of argument further, one might speculate that the defense team’s appeal might have served to trigger the purgatorial traces buried but still dormant in the Protestant collective consciousness, for example in Goethe’s *Faust* and Thomas Mann’s *Dr. Faustus*.

what he did because of the haunting: “I did waver. Whenever I felt sick, I wanted to honor my mother’s command. But when I was well again, I said to myself: you cannot really kill someone.” The distinction between the linear logic of rational decision making and the asynchronous logic of haunting was effectively blurred by Tehlirian and the defense team because, despite law’s disavowals of having anything to do with the spectral, they were able to tap into the Western cultural legacy of the ghost not merely as psychic disturbance but also as moral guide. To acknowledge that the ghost plays a critical role in the staging of Tehlirian’s defense, however, is not to reduce the ghost in the courtroom to a purely instrumental performance by Tehlirian and the defense team. Such a reduction would be an impoverished reading of the extent of Tehlirian’s haunting and would also evade the epistemological and ethical question of how or if genocidal violence can be testified to.

Ghost or Phantom?

If the summoning powers of ghosts were unleashed in the Berlin court, on the Elizabethan stage, and on the battlefield, it took somewhat longer for the social sciences to engage with them. Anthropologists, intimately attuned to the life worlds of the people they work among, provided some of the earlier exceptions reaching back into the nineteenth century with work on ancestral spirit possession to more recent engagements with ghosts (see, for example, Akin 1996; Ivy 1995; Ong 1988; Semerdjian 2022; Weller 1994). Thanks to Nobel Laureate novelist and essayist Toni Morrison and the pioneering work of critical race theorists, the spectral now claims formidable space across the social sciences and the humanities.¹³ Derrida has coined “hauntology” as a field in its own right. Playing on the homophony of the two terms—hauntology and ontology—Derrida’s (1994) hauntology engages questions of being and presence but provocatively splits from ontology in shifting the focus away from presence and toward that which is neither present nor absent—the zone between visibility and invisibility, life and death. Adopting a hauntological perspective does not require one to believe in ghosts but it does demand the recognition that “the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be” (Jameson 1995: 39).

There is, of course, more to the hauntological perspective than this minimal acknowledgment of the limitations of the available epistemologies we currently have at our disposal to fathom any of our given realities. Vinciane Despret (2019), for example, has recently called for ontological *tact* in relation to the claims made by the spirit mediums and the spirits of the dead. But it is the ethical and political component to hauntology that I am interested in here, following those scholars who wrest haunting out of the realm of individual psychology and situate it amid the violent legacy of modernity and nation-building, colonization and racialization, capitalism and dispossession. In this scholarship, haunting is also about how the legacy of violence continues to be central to contemporary relations of power and inequalities, as well as more recent engagements that center the uncanny and the phantomic as pivotal to questions of indigeneity and dispossession (Gordon 2008 [1996]); Good 2020; Ginsburg 2018; Lincoln and Lincoln 2015; Navaro 2012).

¹³See Lincoln and Lincoln (2015) for an excellent overview of scholarship on haunting across the social sciences and humanities, as well as their own contribution via the distinctive “critical hauntology” they propose.

While there is broad agreement on the ethical and political stakes of utilizing a hauntological perspective, there is some divergence as to whether all specters are really ghosts. In their foundational work on trauma, haunting, and transgenerational communication, psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok (1986) prioritize phantoms for the role they play in how “undisclosed traumas of previous generations might disturb the lives of their descendants *even and especially if they know nothing about the distant causes*” (quoted in Davis 2005: 374). More specifically, phantoms *lie*. But the secrets of lying phantoms tend to remain unspeakable, according to Abraham and Torok’s culturally undifferentiated account, because of the sense of shame and prohibition that beset the haunted. That is why the goal of psychoanalysis is to uncover these secrets so that “the phantom and its noxious effects on the living can be exorcized” (ibid.: 378). By contrast, the key spectral figure in Derrida is not a toxic, lying phantom who needs to be exorcized for the haunted subject to start healing.¹⁴ Rather, it is ghost whose secret “is not a puzzle to be solved; it is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future” (ibid.: 378–79).

Is the spectral figure of Tehlirian’s mother a (Derridean) ghost or an (Abrams and Torokian) phantom? The mother’s ghost is not deceitful; she is speaking as a witness to the violence. Nor does she present a puzzle to be solved, at least not to Tehlirian, who entertains no doubt as to her true identity and the veracity of her message. While there is certainly a sense of shame in the ghost’s invocation, the shame does not stem from an untold secret but from the inaction she perceives on the part of Tehlirian against those guilty of the deeds that caused their family to perish. The specter that haunts Tehlirian does not lie: it is Tehlirian who “lies” in his legal testimony, as we shall shortly see in greater detail, in order to tell the truth of genocide. However, the motherly ghost is also different from the Derridean specter. The primary ethical injunction of the latter is to avoid the premature reduction of spectral encounters to an object of knowledge that can, and should, be defined, and instead learn to live with indeterminacy. By contrast, the ethical injunction of the ghost of Tehlirian’s mother is clear and conclusive: revenge.

But do we really have to choose between the ghost and the phantom? For Avery Gordon (2008), who uses the terms interchangeably, the stakes go beyond either piercing through (the phantom’s) lies to reconcile with (one’s) truth or the aspiration to avoid closure of meaning altogether. Rather, engagement with specters is nothing less than a politics of justice, an investigation into the continuing repercussions of the past as they structure the present and the future. In Gordon’s words, “The ghost is alive, so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory out of a concern for justice. Out of a concern for justice would be the only reason one would bother” (ibid.: 83–84). Byron Good (2020) similarly juxtaposes this political turn with the earlier psychoanalytic angle of Abraham and Torok, but without replicating the ghost/phantom distinction. Good calls for a hauntological ethics, one that lets go of the assumption that we are rational subjects with immediate access to our thoughts, memories, and feelings and starts from a different assumption, that the self is already haunted and fundamentally flawed in terms of self-knowledge (ibid.: 423).

¹⁴Csordas (2020) offers as a third figure the demon, which stands for the theological evil spirit.

What would a hauntological ethics look like when a haunted self has such confidence over their self-knowledge that they purposefully fabricate a lie in order to convey their truth? I find that Good's depiction of the haunted and barred self can accommodate a subject who purposefully fabulates. In fact, it is just this complex nature of a "lie" in the rendition of collective violence that informs my concept of empirical fabulation. I suggest that we can adequately reckon with the nature of the lie of his testimony, and the truth of genocide, only by simultaneously holding in tension Tehlirian as political actor in a quest for justice and Soghomon as haunted son under the spell of visions that induced his psychological epilepsy. To explore that tension, we need to turn to Tehlirian's memoir.

Hamlet after Genocide

If Tehlirian's testimony in court is the best-known instance of his empirical fabulation, a far less recognized but equally important source is his memoir, which remained untranslated for nearly a century after its first publication in Cairo in 1953.¹⁵ I will now follow the ghost of Tehlirian's mother as she makes her appearances throughout the memoir, *Verhishummer*, to show that, while empirical fabulation does not necessarily require a haunting, ghosts are particularly potent in illuminating what is empirical in empirical fabulation. While the hauntological perspective allowed me to hold in tension the political and the psychological, the concept of empirical fabulation enables me to trace that tension as it works itself out in Tehlirian's testimony.

Critical fabulation, as enacted by Saidiya Hartman has the historian, the author, or the analyst as the key actor who does the fabulating: In *Wayward Lives* (2019), she exercises her imagination for crafting narratives that—"To write new narratives and tell other stories entail a creative practice untethered to the rules of the historical guild, and characterized by the willingness to be directed by the assembly, the ensemble, the multitude, the chorus" (Hartman 2020). Specifically, Hartman conceives of ordinary young black women as "social visionaries" and "radical thinkers ... who never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise," and imagines their everyday bold acts of experimenting with freedom (Hartman 2019, xv). Here, I view Soghomon Tehlirian as the empirical fabulist, as a historical actor and survivor of the genocide. I track the imaginative leaps he makes and the blanks he fills in, thereby recognizing in him the author who is keenly aware that "language and narrative and plot are entangled in the mechanisms of power" (Hartman quoted in Okeowo 2020). In my reading of his memoir, I have been emboldened by Hartman's explication of critical fabulation as close narration. But while I walk in Tehlirian's footsteps as he finds his way back to his village to find his childhood destroyed, as he is first visited by his mother's ghost, and as he decides to hunt down Talat Paşa, I am careful to retain the distinction between the interpretation of the analyst and the fabulation of the protagonist.

¹⁵While the exact division of labor between the two needs future research, Tehlirian worked in collaboration with Vahan Minakhorian, an Armenian Revolutionary Federation old hand, while writing his memoir in Belgrade in the 1930s and 1940s. Minakhorian was originally from Iran and hence the seeming anomaly of the first edition being in Eastern Armenian although it was published in Cairo, a major hub for Western Armenian. I am most grateful to Armen Manuk-Khaloyan for this invaluable piece of information.

While it never came to light in the trial, in his harrowing memoir Tehlirian reveals that, long before their encounter in Berlin, he was intent on killing Talat, the *hresh* (the monster) or the *vishap* (the dragon), as he alternately refers to him. It also becomes clear that Soghomon did not witness the murders of his family. He was not even in Erzincan at the time. Soghomon had left his town in his teens to join his father in Serbia, who had immigrated there for work. On the eve of World War I, Soghomon would be on the move once again: this time he would flee, defying his father, to join fellow Ottoman Armenians who volunteered for the Russian forces.¹⁶ Inducted as a *gamavor* (volunteer) in an Armenian battalion led by General Antranig, Soghomon trained in Tbilisi, Georgia waiting for deployment to fight the Ottoman army.¹⁷

In his memoir, Soghomon is unabashed and explicit about the fact that he started to entertain the idea of hunting down Talat from the early days of the genocide, when he first began to realize the horrific extent of the killings and the likelihood that his family, too, had perished. Upon his arrival in the village and the first dream visitation by his mother, his idea solidified into resolution. It was in mid-July, Soghomon Tehlirian tells the reader, when the Russian troops occupied Erzincan, that he was first able to make his way back. In the square he saw children playing in the yard of the Central School, which had been converted into an orphanage for the children whose parents had been deported or murdered. His own house had been transformed into a makeshift military abode.

Upstairs, the big room where we used to hang out, eat our lunch and dine in the summertime, along with the four bedrooms, were full of shabby beds for the soldiers. In front of my very eyes, our house had donned the shape of a historical monument. I saw a soldier come out of my small room. He said something but I did not comprehend it. There was a lump in my throat, and I could barely hold back my tears. I walked outside. The trees that encircled our house were gazing at me like old and loyal friends, all neatly gathered. I used to know every single bird nest on these trees and recognize the distinctive chirping from each. I would aim little crumbs of bread towards them from my window. I used to know which tree would exude gum in the summer. In the winter, I would shake the heavy snow off their branches so that they could thrive.... [Now] humps and holes had formed across the garden.... Wild weed had taken over.... There was no longer life here.... But I could detect one corner at the far end of the garden that seemed to be untouched. It was in that corner that Avedis, in the days of our childhood, used to throw my mother's black shawl across his shoulders, and sing "Surp Asdvadz" (Holy God) and other hymns, like a clergyman, full blast. I noticed a mound in that corner, covered with bushes. How come a mound had formed when the trees in that spot were still intact? A tremor (*sarsur*) shook me to the core. I felt a cold breeze filled with lukewarm blood and my head started to spin. Terrified (*zarhurankov*), I tried to step back but I fell to the ground (2006: 44–45).

¹⁶He would eventually persuade his father to give him permission, since he still needed parental consent to join the volunteer army.

¹⁷This is also where he met his beloved Anahid at age eighteen, who he waited to marry until after he completed his mission and was acquitted. They had two children.

When Soghomon came to himself, he tells us, it was still dark. He stepped out of the garden, still trembling: “My head was burning like a furnace, my entire body was shaking. I got up and I covered my body with my overcoat, but it did not help. My body was quivering with cold” (ibid.: 46). Passing by the Tarikian family house, he discerned a figure, his brother Misak, who would turn out to be his only remaining sibling. They embraced, and Misak told him that he, too, had just made his way back from Serbia via Batum to search for the family. Noting how sickly his brother looked, Misak ushered Soghomon to the house of the Tarikian who had stayed alive by converting to Islam, a last resort for some Armenians in some locations during early stages of the genocide.¹⁸ As they recounted the massacres they had witnessed, Mrs. Tarikian took a look at Soghomon and insisted he should rest.

When Soghomon looked out from the window, which had a view of their own garden, his body began to tremble anew. “I saw myself as a pathetic, useless, worthless creature. Revulsion was what I felt towards myself. I was not anything like those who had a reason for and a desire to live.... My imagination was still not able to grasp how, the population of twenty thousand Armenians in this cheerful town were reduced to a handful of families” (ibid.: 46). He conjured the image of Talat’s “disgusting” countenance—the “monster”; the “dragon.” Now Soghomon wanted Talat’s blood to flow. “Could I really believe that justice would one day prevail?” (ibid.). At this point in his memoir, he abruptly transitions into a strange narrative mode, with no signposting as to whether he is describing a nightmare, waking dream, or reminiscence:

As if one day, traveling from afar, my boots mired in dust, traversing mountains high and low, I finally arrive in Kuybashi.... I make my way to our house gate. Just before I enter, near the poplar trees, I see a severed head. It is rolling towards me. It is my mother. My mother’s head. Yet, surprisingly, her head is open, her dusty headband has slipped from her hair and has fallen down on her neck.

Come here son,” she gasps, out of breath, now her head next to my feet, “come here so they don’t see you.”

“Where, *mayr* (mama)?”

“There, go there. In the garden, Under the shrub, where we are all lying.”

“But where is your body, *mayr*?”

“There, my son, there. Hurry!”

And I follow my mother’s head. Her head disappears among the thicket. They really are all there, lying quietly under the shrub. Here is my brother.

“Hi, Avedis!” I whisper.

And a gentle breeze echoes his name through the poplar trees “Avediss....” My brother stares at the sky, eyes wide open. My mom’s head stands next to her body, dozing.

“You are all here, like this,” I murmur with shock. “Hripsime, Markar, Bayzdar get up!” I say.

My brother abruptly turns his gaze at me and asks, “Who are you? What do you want from us?”

“Don’t you remember me?” I say, forcing a smile.

¹⁸See Suny (2015) for a more detailed account of forced conversions. See also Deringil (2009) for mass conversions during the earlier Hamidian massacres of 1895–1897.

“No,” says my brother softly. And he slowly shakes his head from side to side. Suddenly, from behind the clouds, the moon hastily shows its jaundiced countenance. Only now I realize that my brother’s head is smashed.

I lean over and with awe, I say, “It is me, Avedis, it is Soghomon!” as I try to take his head into my hands. But his face abruptly darkens and a cold, tight smile appears on his lips.

“Ah, it’s you! Yes. Indeed, you look like him. But where were you? Where were you when we fled here? Why are you not lying here with us? And why do you try to cajole me like a thief in the middle of the night? Go, go away. I do not know you!”

And I kneel amid the bushes and start sobbing like a child (ibid.: 47–48).

In describing his fainting spell in the garden, Tehlirian had not used the word for fainting but simply depicted the act of falling to the ground. In this instance, too, he used neither of the Armenian words for dream—*yeraz* or *tsnork*—to describe his first encounter with the spectral.¹⁹ The sequence opens with the ambiguous, “As if...” The power of Shakespeare’s rendition of the spectral, Greenblatt has pointed out, is that Shakespeare comes down on neither side of sheer fantasy or of transparent reality. He teeters on those edges between “hallucination and spiritual reality, between fantasy and fact,” and, “where psychic disturbance and objective truth meet” (2013: 193).

If the spectral figures in the universe of Soghomon’s memoir echo those stories that informed the Elizabethan playwright of murdered spirits returning to haunt their murderers, Soghomon’s visions recall most obviously King Hamlet, the quintessential Shakespearean ghost commissioning retribution and the protagonist struggling with the assigned mission. But there is also a difference that is critical to the genocidal context. While King Hamlet commissions revenge from his very first appearance, Soghomon’s mother initially asks him not to avenge them, but to join them. His brother, too, accuses him not of failing to seek retribution but for not lying there with them. The dead, in the immediate aftermath of genocidal violence, beckon the living not to avenge them but to die with them. (Perhaps it is also not arbitrary that, unlike Hamlet’s father, who even if deathly pale always appears as an intact body, Soghomon first encounters his mother as well as his brother as beheaded apparitions.) The initial reproach and the concomitant guilt, therefore, are not (yet) about revenge. They are about the guilt of survival itself, of having survived a massacre that was intended to include him. Recall here Soghomon’s estimation of himself: as a pathetic, useless, worthless, creature. He feels no desire to live, unless there is a purpose he can hold on to.

It is only in later apparitions, the ones that Tehlirian also recounted in court, that his mother starts calling for revenge. Hence the progression in the visions, from the ghost’s invitation to join the dead to its call for revenge and redemption. It is as if the only way that Soghomon can justify refusing the invitation to join the ranks of the dead is by transitioning to an avenger. As the mother’s ghost transforms into an avenger and transforms Soghomon in the process, she is no longer headless but appears to him whole. Moreover, she increasingly speaks in a tongue similar to King Hamlet’s, in which the condition of filial loyalty becomes revenge. She scolds, “You

¹⁹Whereas in reference to other dreams he had, Tehlirian does use the term “Mangutyán *yeraz*.” In another instance, he asks, *tsnork gam iraganuytun*, “vision or reality”?

saw Talat and you did not avenge your mother's, father's, brother's, and sister's murders?... You are no longer my son" (T'ehlirean 2006: 137).²⁰ Soghomon's guilt increasingly takes on the shape of Hamlet's: guilt not just of being alive but of taking no action in the face of the injustice and violence suffered by one's kin.²¹

A crucial difference remains, however, between the Hamlet who is haunted to avenge the murder of his father and Soghomon haunted to avenge the murder of his entire family and community. Hamlet will occasionally be thrown into tortured indecision between action or inaction: "O cursed spite/that ever I was born to set it right." Soghomon never wavers, or at least never confesses to any such hesitation in his memoir. He never doubts the morality of the act to kill the *hresh* who had given the orders to wipe out his family, along with virtually the entire Armenian population in Anatolia. Only when he is forced to do things that take him off his course for revenge—from having to take lessons in German to being dragged to go dancing by his fellow mates—does he experience the deepest anguish.

It is, of course, hard to know for certain if the memoir glosses over any wavering Tehlirian might have actually experienced, as his lawyers in court strategically claimed that he had. Hesitation or doubt would not have been befitting of a man with a cause, one who must already have had some intuition that his account would be read by future generations of Armenians. This is why I read the memoir, too, as an act of empirical fabulation, and do not assume it to be a transparent window into Tehlirian's soul. And yet, it is the choices he makes in the memoir which contradict the account he gave to the jury that ultimately provide a fuller portrait of Soghomon Tehlirian, one that unsettles designations of him as a "desperate hitman" simply in the service of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Furthermore, the discrepancies between the court testimony and the memoir enable me to further explore the calibration between the empirical and the fabulated, toward an understanding of the nature of "the lie" in a context and landscape engineered to wipe out the truth of genocide.

I thus turn to the final key discrepancy between the court testimony and the memoir: the assassination of Talat was not Tehlirian's first killing.

Lying to Tell the Truth

The day after his arrival in Istanbul in December 1918, Soghomon recounts in the memoir, he went to the office of the newspaper *Jagadamard* to place a listing for missing family members. "Who are you searching for," the clerk behind the desk asked him. From the tone of his voice, it became instantly clear to Soghomon that the search for relatives had become ordinary, a matter of meaningless paperwork. Still, he told the clerk, "My mother, my brother, the wives of my two brothers and their

²⁰Compare this to King Hamlet, who prompts in Act 3: "Do not forget. This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose."

²¹Not all the young Armenians Soghomon met in Berlin were melancholy souls; neither were they all consumed by a passion for revenge. In fact, Soghomon describes his profound disappointment with and alienation from those who seemed to have put the past beside them and were intent on enjoying life. Once, Soghomon recounts, they dragged him to a dancing lesson. As Soghomon reluctantly danced with a woman he had met for the first time, he recalled the dances back in his village, then the scent of blood washed over him and he collapsed, an epileptic attack that was testified to by his friend during the Berlin trial.

children.” “Impossible to find them all,” the clerk responded, “and even if you were to find a single one of them, that would be extraordinary” (2006: 112).

At the office, he met Yeranuhi Tanielian, a high school teacher, who told him that most of the slaughterers (*chartarar*) had fled Istanbul. And as they walk through the streets of Galata, a central hub also for non-Muslim citizens, Ms. Tanielian suddenly paused: “This is the residence of Talat’s Armenian conspirator.... Harutyun Mgerdichian the informant, who became rich on the blood of our community’s most brilliant, bought a house, now enjoying his life! Istanbul’s Armenian intelligentsia was arrested and later killed based on the list Mgerdichian compiled for Talat” (ibid.: 115).

The “list” in question is the notorious list of more than 250 leaders of the Armenian community whose arrests in the middle of the night on 24 April 1915 have come to be viewed as the decapitation strike that marks the beginning of the genocide of 1915. Soghomon, though not yet privy to the full significance of “the list,” froze in his tracks, his thoughts fixated on the “new monster” (*nor hresh*): Harutyun, the rat: “Had it not become inevitable to begin my mission of vengeance (*vrezh*) with him, the mission that had become the reason of my existence for a while now?” (ibid.: 116).

Any lingering doubt in his mind as to the veracity of Ms. Tanielian’s account was laid to rest after his brief visit for a coffee with her and her mother. As he took leave, Ms. Tanielian fetched an album book from her desk. “Would you be so kind as to write a few lines here,” she asks. Soghomon inscribed the following lines:

“I sang the song of vengeance with my reed pen / Եղեգնյա գրչով վրեժ
երգեցի.

Let flames erupt from this very pen/ Ընդ եղեգան փող բոց ելաներ.”

“Ah, those lines are from Varujan,” sighed Ms. Tanielian, “I am a fan of his epic poetry. What forces we have lost....”

“Varujan has been killed, too?”

“He was on the list prepared by the informant Artin [Harutyun].”

Soghomon went on to inquire after other luminaries of Armenian literature, Siamanto and Rupen Zartaryan, and she responded: “He too, he too! All of them” (ibid.: 116).

Soghomon’s decision was clinched. After a few days of keeping watch, he stood gazing at the Mgerdichian residence with a direct view of a dinner table where a group of guests were gathered. “The informant had raised a glass and was delivering a speech” (ibid.: 126). Soghomon took aim at his head, where he knew he was certain to kill, but at the last minute, he could not resist the inner voice that urged him to aim for the heart. The windows came crashing down and he ran.

Soghomon Tehlirian was never found out or charged for the killing, but news spread among the Armenian resistance, which rendered him an ideal candidate for Operation Nemesis, a special mission of the Tashnagtsutyun, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). Not revealed in the Berlin trial, then, was the fact that ARF had selected Tehlirian to kill Talat, designated as “Number One” on their assassination list, which included one hundred other influential Young Turks. The ARF, operating out of Watertown, Massachusetts, obtained Tehlirian’s visa so he could travel to Europe, paid for his expenses in Berlin, and made sure that he would be represented by the top lawyers in Germany. Marian MacCurdy (2015), based on the

hidden archives of her grandfather discovered in their family home in Syracuse after his death, has documented Tehlirian's correspondence with other members of the operative in the United States and in Europe. It provides ample evidence of the care with which his assignment was planned and executed by a core group within the party.

It is easy to see how some have seized upon these facts to argue that Tehlirian's testimony in Berlin was merely a series of lies and that he was simply an assassin carrying out a task assigned to him by a political organization. While this position is often taken in the service of genocide denial, for others it stems from an inadequate understanding of Tehlirian's life because of a failure to engage with the memoir as an equally important archive. My claim is not that the memoir reveals "the real Soghomon Tehlirian," but it certainly complicates and deepens our insight into him as the historical actor and haunted son that he was.

Dismissing Tehlirian's testimony or his memoir as either sheer falsehood or conniving self-presentation in the service of a political agenda ultimately ignores the nature of personal testimony and the possibilities of representation in cases of genocidal violence and denial.

That the line between truth and fiction here was much more complicated is eloquently described by Eric Bogosian (2017), who demonstrates that Tehlirian used the trial to reveal the full extent of the violence of 1915 by "offer[ing] mere fragments of truth" (ibid.: 86) and "walking a tightrope as he balanced truth and fiction" (ibid.: 88).

It might not have been exclusively his personal story, but every detail Tehlirian testified to at the trial was drawn from the collective history of genocide. A variation of every sentence he uttered has been replicated by other survivors of the Armenian genocide, spoken in hushed voices behind closed family doors, or silently transmitted across generations.²² Moreover, the personal account was already, inextricably political. "It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth," Foucault writes, "for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth.... One 'fictions' history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one 'fictions' a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth" (1980: 193). This was how Tehlirian and the Tashnak party must have seen their task: a testimony fabricated on the basis of the historical truth of collective murders perpetrated against Armenians, thereby a testimony that functioned as a politics of genocide recognition, which, while not yet in existence, would inspire Lemkin to coin the term a few decades later.

Pushing Foucault's proposition to its extreme, would anyone on that stand who exposed the truths of genocide qualify as an empirical fabulist? Someone, for example, who did not lose family members or witness the condition of the orphaned children? At an even further remove, someone not Armenian but committed to the cause of genocide recognition? While I see the political possibilities in this line of argumentation, for the designation of empirical fabulist I propose here, it does matter that Tehlirian was a first-hand witness to genocide; that he saw the mutilated corpses of murdered villagers as he and his battalion fought the Ottoman army across the Russian border; that his mother, brother, and brothers'

²²On silent transmission and transmission via forms beyond the strictly discursive, see Bilal (2006); Harootunian (2019); and Watenpaugh (2019). Moreover, it needs to be underscored that even at the time of the trial there were collected volumes of eyewitness testimonies.

wives were massacred; and that when he finally reached his village he witnessed that virtually no Armenians were left.²³ In my oxymoronic juxtaposition of the empirical with fabulation, I retain, therefore, the relevance of the proximity of the testimony to personal experience and involvement.²⁴

My concern with the limits of fabulation and the “threshold of evidence” (Gordon-Reed 2020) constitutes the second divergence from my reading of Tehlirian as empirical fabulist and Hartman’s deployment of critical fabulation. While Hartman refuses the charge that what she is doing is historical fiction, she also deliberately commits to “imagining another kind existence” for the people she writes about. Hers is an intentional eschewal of the boundary between what Hartman imagines Black life was like in Philadelphia and New York at the beginning of the twentieth century and what Black life could have been. She is explicit that blurring the line between what *was* and what *could have been* is part of her ethical and political stance in a historical and epistemological context that will not allow Blacks full personhood. According to historian Annette Gordon-Reed’s measured critique of Hartman, however, it is also the case that Hartman does not consider whether there might be a point at which the critical fabulator might be going too far. This is what Gordon-Reed (*ibid.*) refers to as the “threshold of evidence,” which, if entirely jettisoned, risks “projecting progressive visions and practices of freedom onto women who were in fact driven by brute necessity and poverty” as the critical fabulist reimagines their lives.

As the third-order interpreter of Tehlirian’s second-order rendition of his experiences, I remain wedded to calibrating the threshold of evidence. So does Tehlirian, I argue, treading the delicate line between the Hartmanian leap to critical fabulation and holding onto the concern with the “more traditional, social-historical questions of who did what, where, when, and why” (Kazanjian 2016: 135). If contemporary indigenous hyperrealist art forms “fake it with the truth,” (Biddle and Lea 2018), because this was seen as the most powerful way to expose the violence of settler colonialism, Tehlirian similarly calibrates how “artifice enables reality effects” 2006: 6).²⁵ The empirical fabulist offers a new political and ethical mode of

²³Tehlirian writes that he found out that of the eighteen thousand Armenians in Erzurum, only 120 remained, six of them men. The orphans he encountered on the road, who talked of unburied corpses with flies hovering over them, “seemed to have left no traces of language, identity/Armenianness, or humanity”—*Lezu, Hayutyun, Martutyun* (T’ehlirean 2006: 33–43). For documentation of the elimination of Armenians in Erzurum, see the Erzurum chapter in Kévorkian’s monumental and comprehensive history of the genocide (2011).

²⁴I am grateful to Rob Weller and Kimberly Arkin for thinking through this particular point with me.

²⁵There are, of course, different kinds of fakes (Copeman and de Col 2018). Fabricated or alternative facts have been put to use in the production of colonialist histories (Trouillot 1995), state oppression (Weller 2017), systematic disinformation (Cheyfitz 2019), and the manufacturing of doubt in the service of genocide denial (Mamigonian 2015). But does reckoning with the ways in which the manipulation of facts have been integral to settler colonies, imperialist policies, and nationalist and authoritarian projects mean we must espouse a singular notion of Truth or stop exposing the limitations of purely empirical accounts of the world? Anthropologists have long been attending to “partial truths” (Clifford 1986), embracing the truth-telling capacity of composite accounts (Malkki 1995; Sanford 2003), the revelatory power of semi-fictionalized ethnography (Narayan 1999; Abu-Lughod 1991), and most recently, of ethnographies of refusal (Simpson 2007). Engaging with Tehlirian as an empirical fabulist, I see this article as contributing to the effort across the social sciences and humanities to parse this wide spectrum of fact and fabulation.

truth-telling, of making truthful statements about historical events and experiences that cannot be articulated otherwise.²⁶

It should be clear by now that I am wary of reading Tehlirian's testimony and memoir solely in strategic terms. Joining those who ponder whether it is possible to write about the Holocaust, philosopher Marc Nichanian (2002) has insisted on the impossibility of being a witness to a catastrophic event like the Armenian genocide. Any telling that aims at veracity is bound to fall short of the violence of the actual experience. Rather than striving to represent genocidal violence through archival facts or witness testimony, Nichanian beckons us to turn to art and literature. As genres that do not profess empirical veracity and embrace their constructed nature, only the arts and literature can broach even if never quite capture genocidal violence. If Adorno declared that no poetry was possible after Auschwitz, Nichanian argues that there can *only* be poetry after the *Medz Yeghern* (the Great Catastrophe). On Nichanian's account, one may suggest that Tehlirian had no choice but to fabricate. We can go full circle back to his memorable utterance in court: "I can't remember that day anymore.... I don't want to keep on being reminded of that day. I'd rather die right now than continue describing that black day" (Yeghiayan 2006: 9). What from a purely empirical point of view might appear as testimonial evasion emerges as the (un)tellable truth about the collective experience of genocide that exceeds the limits of the genre of personal or legal testimony. Hence the ghostly ontology I have presented, which is less about the empirical reality of the ghost and more about the conditions of possibility, or perhaps necessity, for such hauntings.

Conclusion

I have argued that the term I propose, empirical fabrication, troubles the easy distinction between a (testimonial) lie and a (historical) fact, as well as that between legal justice and personal vengeance. It is that latter distinction that plagues two very recent analyses of Tehlirian. For Carolyn Dean (2019), the Tehlirian trial is an example of the "rather startling transformation of vigilantes into righteous avengers, of assassins into witnesses of terrible crimes and heroes of humanity" (ibid.: 54) one that was made possible by the projection of pureness of intention onto assassins through the crafting of a legal narrative "that was exculpatory and redemptive at once" (ibid.: 48). Alp Yenen, who refers to Tehlirian as a "hitman," posits the necessity of an "anti-hero" framework as well as of doing away with feelings of revenge if we want to walk the path toward what he calls "Turkish-Armenian reconciliation" (2022). Both authors assume a clear understanding of where "vigilante justice" begins and "legal justice" ends. This paper has taken a different tact by posing the question: Why can we not view Tehlirian's killing of Talat as *both* an act of vengeance *and* an act of justice? While Dean asserts that "the defense *instead* represented his acts of vengeance as an act of conscience," (2019: 63, my italics), I have asked how we can disentangle vengeance from conscience with ease. Such confidence in their absolute separation eschews the haunting and moral dilemma of Tehlirian, and for that matter, of Hamlet. Neither

²⁶I am grateful to one of the anonymous *CSSH* reviewers for this concise rendition of the stakes of my intervention.

does it acknowledge the shortcomings of the law, which made the Tehlirian trial so compelling for Rafael Lemkin and Hannah Arendt.

To reduce him to a political assassin in the service of Tashnagtsutyun, or to a troubled soul under the spell of his apparitions, does not do justice to Soghomon Tehlirian as a historical actor. Nor does it fully capture the complexity of “the political” itself. I have urged that we must consider the entire constellation of genocide trauma, loss of family, epileptic attacks, *and* Tehlirian’s political commitments as enabling him to undertake the killing of Talat and take the moral stance he did to account for his act. I have also suggested that Tehlirian articulated these nested commitments and afflictions through what I call empirical fabulation, and his mother’s ghost was the pivotal actor in guiding him as he moved between fact and fabulation. I have argued that Tehlirian’s testimony in court and in his memoir, both acts of empirical fabulation, are ultimately about the social and political conditions that create hauntings; they are about those instances that compel us to go beyond purely empirical accounts of the social world.

Unlike restorative approaches in hauntology, however, I am less convinced by the ultimate emphasis on healing through “hospitable encounters” (Gordon 2008[1996]) with ghosts. Once we “blast open the door of the uncanny” and “let the ghosts walk through” (ibid.: 66), we may no longer be able to pick and choose our encounters, hospitable or otherwise.²⁷ Let me, then, conclude with the following provocation: If we are to rethink retributive justice in ways that do not cater to impatient and often one-sided calls for reconciliation,²⁸ vengeance emerges as an emotion that needs to be duly reckoned especially by scholars who work in and on post-genocidal landscapes and by the citizens who inhabit them, all the more so when genocidal violence is systematically denied and justice is not served within existing normative legal frameworks.

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²⁷For a non-hauntological but pertinent analysis of the preference for “comfortable encounters” with genocide in Turkey’s contemporary art landscape, see Tataryan Aslan 2021. For the uneasy implications of such preferences for politics and activism in Turkey, see Parla 2019.

²⁸I am inspired here by Miriam Ticktin’s foundational work on innocence, where she takes to task how notions of pure innocence are projected onto *and* demanded from those towards whom compassion is to be extended. Innocence as a precondition of compassion allows only gratitude and rules out anger or resentment as legitimate emotions felt and expressed by survivors (2017).

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