

TALAR CHAHINIAN, *Stateless: The Politics of the Armenian Language in Exile* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2023). Pp. 312. \$80.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper. ISBN: 9780815638025.

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In *Stateless: The Politics of the Armenian Language in Exile*, Talar Chahinian sets forth the theoretical framework of “stateless language” as an effective approach for considering the ways in which speakers of the Western Armenian language negotiate their identities as dual members of “communities in dispersion” and as “diaspora communities” (21). Chahinian also employs the term “stateless language” because Western Armenian is “not the official language of any nation-state” (23). Broadly, Chahinian’s gestures of making arguments particular to the study of Western Armenian language, literature, and literacy, all while thinking through implications beyond this specific case, characterize the writing style and structure of *Stateless*.

Throughout the book’s introduction and six chapters, Chahinian illuminates the ways in which Western Armenian writers in post-World War I Paris and in post-World War II Beirut confronted existential questions including: whether exile could serve as a conducive condition for creative production in a stateless language; whether a national or transnational orientation to collective belonging would best serve as a connective tissue for the global Armenian community; and whether Western Armenian could flourish alongside its counterpart of Eastern Armenian. The word “politics” in the book’s title serves as an encompassing term for what Chahinian reveals from the archives: the cacophony of voices that weighed in on these topics, the sociocultural contexts in which those respective viewpoints emerged, and the points of agreement and disagreement that appeared on the printed page. An element of contemporaneous politics remains unspoken in the text—that most of the authors she references were

men—as well as what factors may have led to the non-inclusion of women authors in various publishing venues. The politics behind canon-making, however, is not the focus of *Stateless*. Instead, Chahinian's arguments seem to emerge from an overarching recognition of possibility as it was conceived in the past and how it can be imagined in the present.

To that end, the introduction primes readers through overviews on the development of the Armenian language, key discourses in Armenian diaspora studies, and the utility of contemporary trauma and memory studies scholarship when analyzing this body of literature produced in the aftermath of genocide, among other topics. From there, part one of the book—"Decentering Western Armenian in Post-World War I Paris"—introduces readers to Menk (meaning "we" in Armenian), a self-named group of writers whose members included Zareh Vorpuni, Nigoghos Sarafian, Hratch Zartarian, and Shahan Shahnur, living and writing in post-genocide Paris. In chapter 1, Chahinian elucidates these authors' views on orphanhood as a "state of being" and as a "position full of potential" (49), and describes how their writing served the "dual testimonial function of recording the immigrant population's collective experience of scattering, and inscribing the stateless language's vitality in exile" (61). Chahinian continues to explain how their "project of gathering can be seen as the forging of a network of dispersion rather than of diaspora" (65). Chapter 2 provides close readings of novels penned by Menk authors—Zareh Vorpuni's *P'ortsě* (*The Attempt*, 1929) and Hratch Zatarian's *Mer Geank'ě* (*Our Life*, 1934)—and focuses on the indexical representation of collective trauma through the "trope of the absent father" and the "broken family structure" in the aftermath of genocide (76). Chapter 3 addresses how the prevailing "theme of incest" in Zareh Vorpuni's "Vartsu Seneag" ("Room for Rent," 1934), Nigoghos Sarafian's *Ishkhanuhin* (*The Princess*, 1934), and Shahan Shahnur's "Buynuzlě'nerě" ("The Cuckolds," 1932) reveals much about the "familiarity and strangeness" Menk authors felt as orphaned, immigrant writers in the aftermath of catastrophe and in a host nation-state (111).

In part two, titled "Centering Western Armenian in Post-World War II Beirut," Chahinian considers Western Armenian writers in a different temporal and geographic context. Chapter 4 focuses on Shahan Shahnur's novel *Nahanchě Arants Erki* (*The Retreat without Song*, 1929) and traces critical responses to it both at the time of publication and in the many decades after. In examining how "misreading and mistranslation" made possible this novel's "emblematic status" and

“acclaim” among readers (141), Chahinian “interrogate[s] the role of diasporic nationalism in the post-World War II diaspora’s effort to preserve cultural and literary traditions” (141–42). Chapter 5 continues Chahinian’s approach of drawing out and summarizing discourses on the regeneration of the Western Armenian language in exile as she considers the history of the 1946 Second Congress of the Soviet Armenian Writers’ Union, the 1948 Conference of Middle Eastern Armenian Writers, and the Writers’ Association of Syria and Lebanon (WASL). Chapters 4 and 5 exemplify how *Stateless*, while focused on two locales, provides a sound survey of the development and evolution of Western Armenian literature insofar as Chahinian deftly situates author collectives and their goals in relation to one another. In so doing, Chahinian equips readers with the necessary context to understand that the corpus of Menk’s texts—including novels, short stories, novellas, essays, and a journal entitled *Menk’*—was produced in a broader, transnational network of intellectual exchange. That presentation echoes Chahinian’s own assessment that Menk’s project called for Western Armenian literature to be “produced within lateral, nonhierarchical networks of spaces of dispersion” (38). Chapter 6 serves as a conclusion in which Chahinian reinforces what statelessness—both as a lived condition and a framework for analysis that does not rely on a “need to either center diaspora or subordinate it to the framework of a nation” (217)—affords for the vitality of Western Armenian language, literature, and literacy. Chahinian also contemplates questions about the linguistic vitality of Western Armenian and literary production today in this chapter.

Looking from a wider perspective, the best summary of the book’s interventions is found in the following line from the acknowledgements: “This book is about the *possibility of continued* creation, expression, and representation in a language forcefully cut off from its historic place of belonging” (xi; emphasis added). As those key words “possibility” and “continued” make clear, *Stateless* departs from perpetuating a narrative that treats Armenian creative and cultural production in terms of linear development that reached its culmination and dramatic end in 1915, the start of the genocidal process. In contrast, *Stateless* takes as its starting point a straightforward yet necessary observation: that a people slated for extermination—a people dispossessed and exiled—not only continued to live but penned works in different genres which all sparked lively intellectual debates on the condition of dispersion. Chahinian’s strategic choice about what and how to speak of this collective violence’s legacies proves one of the strengths of the book. Moreover, in answering the “why now” question, Chahinian’s response betrays that the stakes of this project

exceed that of recovery and historicization of Western Armenian literary texts published in the wake of 1915. In other words, in summarizing sentiments in twentieth-century literary criticism about the perceived “impending expiration date” of Western Armenian (1), Chahinian presents an argument she returns to—and writes against—throughout the book. In the end, *Stateless* provides a thoroughly-researched account of the “diasporic possibility of regeneration” (1) that networks of literary and linguistic production from Cairo to Beirut, Aleppo, Paris, and Boston evince—a reality that runs counter to the aforementioned doomsday scenario for the vitality of the Western Armenian language.

Finally, Chahinian’s account of literary production in a minor language by writers “operating on the margins of the majority culture” (36) will serve as an insightful resource to address conceptual, methodological, and pedagogical questions in Lebanese, Middle Eastern, and SWANA diaspora studies. For instance, how might the inclusion of Armenians as part of the overarching rubric of the Lebanese diaspora inform and reinforce the study of that latter diaspora as constituted of diverse ethnic, religious, national, and stateless (or given the Republic of Armenia, stated-stateless) communities? After all, *Stateless* illuminates at times how the cities of Paris and Beirut and their respective sociocultural milieus shaped and were shaped by Armenian immigrant communities. How might Chahinian’s historiography of a minority thriving linguistically amidst a majority culture lead to the reimagination of canon construction or the inclusion of Western Armenian literature in courses such as Literatures of the Middle East or Introduction to Middle East Studies? What new inquiries might these confrontations facilitate for comparative and world literature studies? In the final pages of *Stateless*, Chahinian offers initial answers to this last question by responding to a quote by Gayatri Spivak about the state of the discipline of comparative literature in 2003. *Stateless* is ultimately a worthwhile read not only for what it does but also, as Chahinian would suggest, for what it can help make possible.