Pelin Tan

Surpassing Disaster: Haunted by an Imaginary Smyrna

> They exiled themselves into charm and beauty.
> – Etel Adnan[1]

I am on one of the mountains overlooking Beirut, speaking with the Lebanese artists and film directors Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige about İzmir, a city I know well from growing up nearby. They want to visit İzmir, a city they have never seen, but only heard described by Joana's grandfather using its ancient name, Smyrna. Joana dreams of visiting with the poet and painter Etel Adnan, who was born in Beirut to a Rûm mother and a Syrian Ottoman father who had migrated to Beirut from İzmir, but who – now well into her nineties – has also never visited.

When İzmir was burning in 1922, Joana's grandfather left the city with his family on a boat bound for Beirut. He narrated the exodus to his children and grandchildren using images of İzmir's topography, recalling places as he had seen them through his childhood eyes and conveying an almost fictional world to his descendants, who grew familiar with the scattered imagery of İzmir's terrain without ever laying eyes on the city itself.

Topographies of land and sea do not only represent the physical facets of a civilization. They also provide the surface for an ongoing redefinition of lived space and infrastructure that continuously reconstructs the memory of a city. A map may show a place that we once belonged to, had a nomadic existence in, were exiled to, or always longed to return to. The many forced migrations during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire geographically reconfigured the Eastern Mediterranean and informed the population, cultures, and narratives of the Levant.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's 2016 film *ISMYRNA* compares the oral histories of two women whose families trace back to İzmir, a contemporary city as well as a container for incomplete historical imaginaries. The film documents Joana's visit to İzmir as an adult, when she sees the real city and tries to locate old family properties. She then travels to Paris to describe her experience to Etel, whose age no longer allows her to travel. Their conversation reconstructs moving images amidst the inertia of Lebanon's surpassing disasters.

The film opens with archival footage of Smyrna burning in 1922. In the voiceover, Etel and Joana discuss their memories of the event as it was described by their families since their childhood. The two women's fingers move across maps of İzmir, trying to find and recognize the city's neighborhoods. The maps are from the

Film still from Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, *ISMYRNA,* 2016. Color, sound, HD video. 50 min. Khalil Joreige/Abbout Productions. A coproduction by Jeu de Paume, Paris, and Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah.

book *Plans of İzmir: Smyrna, from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey*.[2] Etel mentions that her mother described İzmir as a planned and cosmopolitan city, and it was due to its density that the fire could spread through the entire city, burning uncontrollably for several days.

The first part of the film uses archival images, documents, maps, and scenes of İzmir, and the second creates an imaginative cartography of İzmir through the memories of Etel's parents and Joana's grandparents. At times, these two layers coincide and create their own form of representation, allowing viewers themselves to reconstruct this city remembered by others. The sea, mountains, and aerial views appear as topographies of grieving and questioning that extend from İzmir to a dialogue with Beirut, another city where historical catastrophes and traumas mix with urban imaginaries and longings.

Joana films from her plane landing in İzmir to show a clear aerial image of its urban spaces and its seashore, a reflection of the imaginary cartography of the place shown to her as a child. The camera often returns to the sea and waves that connect Etel's living room to Joana's first visit to the city. The gaze panning the horizon and the seashore reflects the catastrophe that prompted their estrangement from the place.

ISMYRNA often depicts the landscape of İzmir as well as several old and current maps. As film subjects, the mountains, the sea, the seashore, and even the urbanization of İzmir seem like such innocent bystanders.

Landscape in *ISMYRNA* is presented as nostalgic fragments, yet the entanglement of the urban site, sea, mountains, and horizons with broken oral narratives speaks of hidden traumas that cannot be explained as a simple longing for the past. A similar type of visuality can be found in the work of filmmaker Masao Adachi, a member of the Japanese Red Army who escaped from Japan to live for years in exile in Beirut with Palestinian freedom fighters. He is known (mainly from his 1969 *A.K.A. Serial Killer*) for filming landscapes around people in his films so that the scenery reflects larger spaces of control and power leading up to a catastrophic event.[3] For Adachi, landscape is a site of struggle.

When I spent some time with Joana in Beirut before her first visit to İzmir, I recommended that she visit the Basmane district, whose urban fabric is under continuous transformation as a shelter for Kurdish communities evicted from their villages in Southeast Turkey in the 1990s, and again for Syrian refugees since 2013. Basmane is now mostly occupied by migrants, irregular refugees, precarious laborers, and others. I often walk

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towards Basmane through the old Jewish neighborhood that was lively in the nineteenth century. A few traditional bakeries and shops still remain in this architecturally ornate neighborhood, where you'll find the Kemeralti bazaar and the ancient agora, and where many early twentieth-century mansions have been converted to textile workshops. Other old mansions stand empty.

Spaces where forced dispossessions have taken place can never truly be reconstructed again. The past will always haunt such ruins, between real and labyrinthine time and space. Lebanese thinker and film theorist Jalal Toufic claims that labyrinthine space and time is contained in buildings that are reconstructed on the site of ruins. Regarding houses ruined by war, he writes: "But should we invert the way we consider what was taking place? It was because these houses had become ruins by being deserted that the war got extended until they began to turn explicitly into ruins, to manifest their being already ruins." According to Toufic, these "new" buildings will always remain ruins, and when we experience such buildings, flashbacks will manifest.[4]

Today, the ruins of Basmane's old mansions converted into factories are haunted by post-capitalism and the exploitation of Syrian refugee labor.[5] The dynamism of the labor within these mansions is impressive, though their architectural ornamentation signifies a former life – a dilemma of a forgotten spatial memory and a continuous social trauma of evicted inhabitants, new migrants, and other newcomers. Paired with precarious work practices, where does such an ongoing displacement and replacement of inhabitants leave the narratives of buildings in this district? In fact, it is what connects the Ismyrna of the past to present-day İzmir, the past Beirut to present-day Beirut. The debris of the repurposed buildings can be said to be representative of those precarious labor shifts. Perhaps the refugees who currently work in such mansions once owned by families who left İzmir (or Çeşme) for the Greek islands (i.e., Europe) in 1922 are in fact the ghosts reminding us that the buildings are indeed ruins.

As Joana walks through the abandoned historical mansions, in my mind (or in the mind of the film viewer) they begin to look similar to buildings in the city center of Beirut during and after the war, built in almost the same eclectic early modern Eastern Mediterranean style. In the film, the flow of the scenes between different periods in time moves the narrators and viewers between cartographic views and urban scenes, as if the two might come into alignment through the power of memories.

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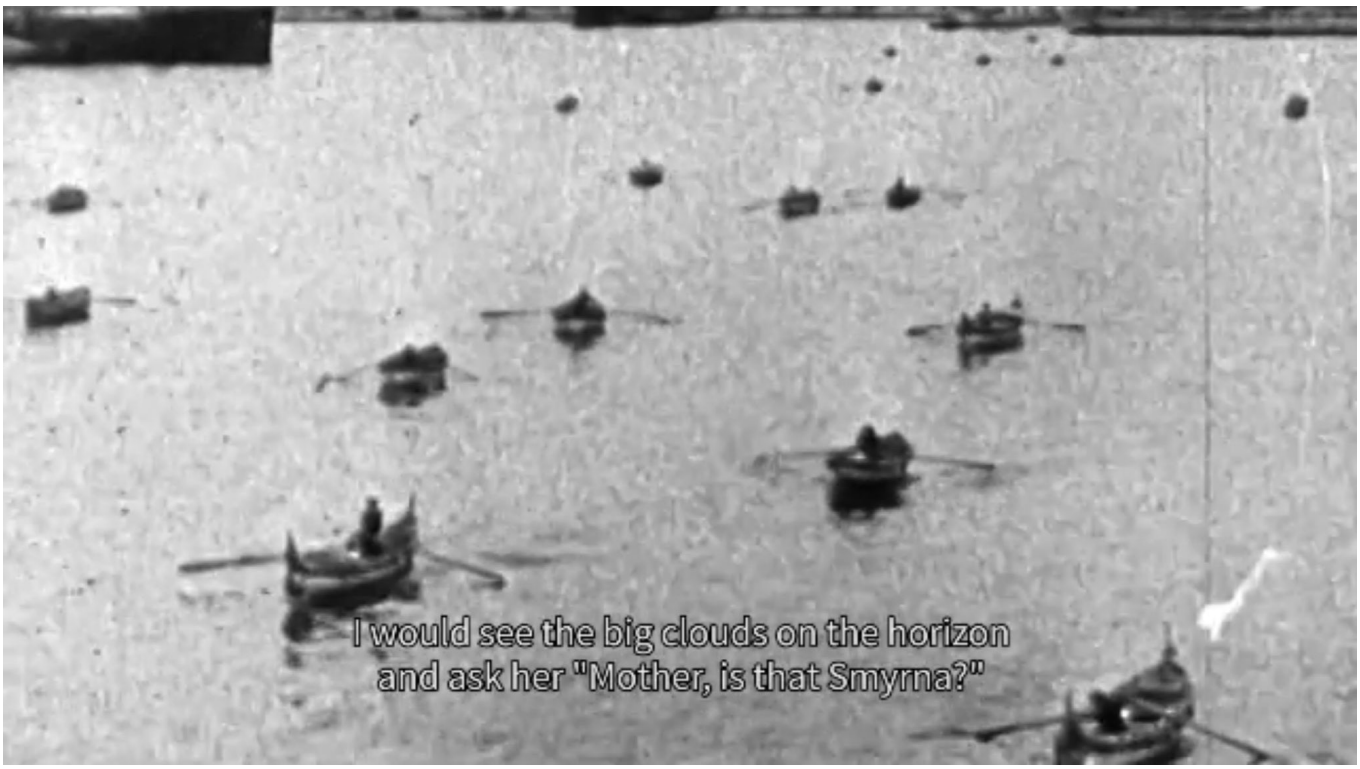

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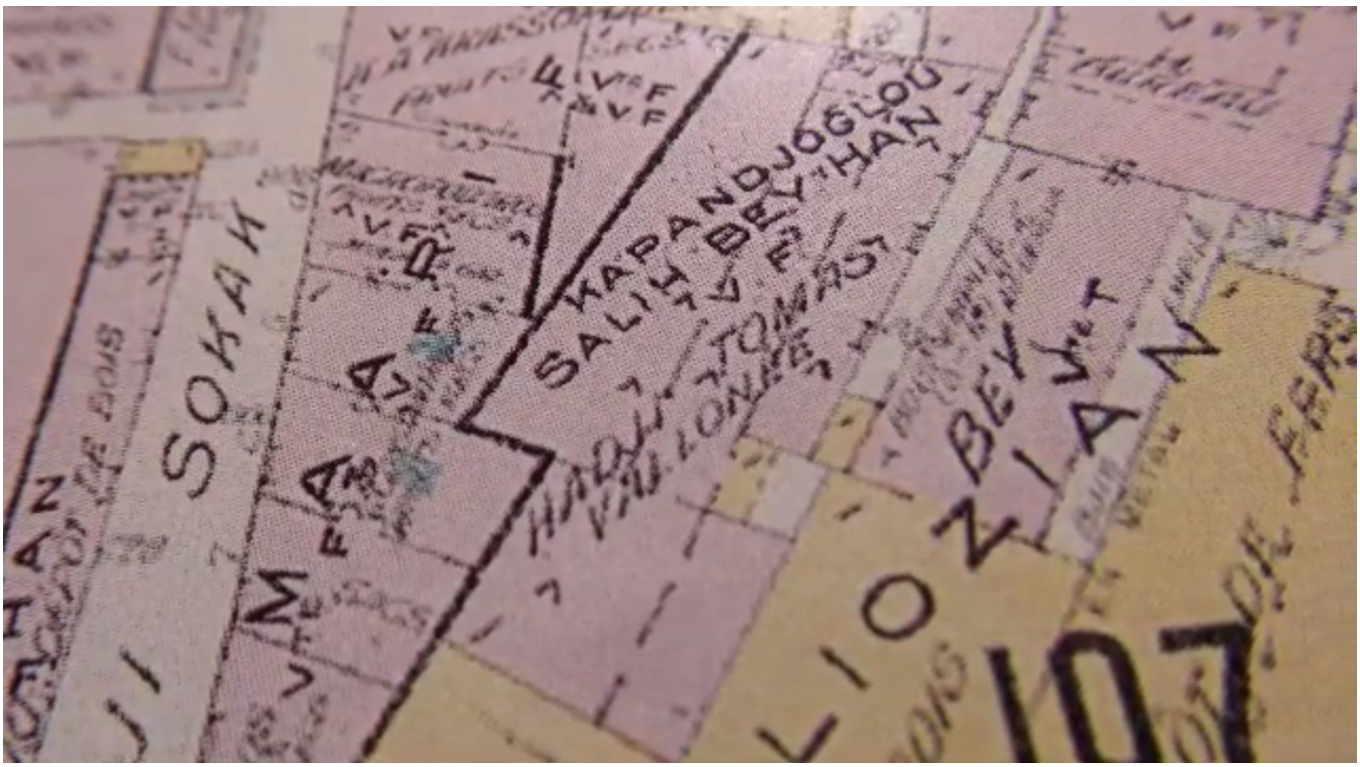

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Joana once mentioned that her grandfather's family lived in the Eşrefpaşa neighborhood, and that many people from Eşrefpaşa migrated to the Ashrafieh district of Beirut. Rûm people, as well as Turkish migrants from Crete and Thessaloniki, used to settle there. I try to find the middle school in Eşrefpaşa where my brother was a young student. Did Joana's grandfather's family live there, or in neighboring Alsancak? Do these neighborhoods even go by the same names as they did in his time?

In *ISMYRNA*, both Etel and Joana search through family letters, papers, and documents for physical traces of their ancestors in İzmir. Have those documents from the beginning of the last century become today's legal testimonials? Etel takes out her family's documents and places them on a table. Together, they seem like an abstraction, a myth for situating at least a part of the oral history. Meanwhile, Joana walks through Alsancak searching for the corresponding buildings, properties as written into deeds from the beginning of the last century.

Documents relating to property or housing are always testaments of forced dispossessions in urban spaces. They speak on behalf of evicted former inhabitants of conflict zones. The scene in the film that focuses on property reminds me of a film by the Karrabing Film Collective in which an Aboriginal community under threat of eviction struggles with filing official documents to claim their houses and land.[6] Since they cannot understand and interpret the documents, they cannot provide proof of ownership. The fictive, semi-documentary film focuses on how to prove property ownership in a settler-colonial setting, but also depicts ancestors appearing, placing blame, and trying to animate myths in order to reconnect with a topography of sea, land, and other nonhuman elements of deep time.

In *ISMYRNA*, by contrast, myths are animated by documents and the family stories that explain their existence. *ISMYRNA* is neither fictive nor documentary, but as a video essay about imagining urban and pastoral landscape, it uses archival materials – moving images, photographs, maps, official documents – and inheritance narratives to animate spatial trauma and longing. The photos and documents Etel brings out do not produce an overarching narrative, but represent memories that are so lost and broken that they almost seem fictional. As the two women look at the photos and documents, Etel describes what she learned from her family. The objects become activated by Etel and Joana's conversation. As Thomas Keenan wrote of Allan Sekula's thinking on the role of photography, "Photographic evidence must be considered in terms of the forum or the debate into which its testimony is entered."[7] An

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image is animated not through a nostalgic longing, but through the reproduction of testimonies and possibilities.

One scene in *ISMYRNA* shows the Ottoman Bank on Fevzipaşa Boulevard (which later became another bank), an impressive building in the eclectic late-Ottoman architectural style. This is the bank where Joana's grandfather once kept his wife's dowry, which they later found had gone missing. I often ride my bike from this corner to the İzmir International Fair. When I was a child, my father would bring me to İzmir from our hometown to show me the fair, which to this day takes place on grounds that were once an Armenian neighborhood called Haynots Mahallesi, before it was burned down in 1922. The Armenian survivors of the attack on Haynots Mahallesi bore witness not only to the destruction and massacre perpetrated by the Turkish army in the town of Izmir, but also to the damage inflicted on the surrounding region, including my little home town Nazilli, where most of them were forcibly exiled.[8]

As the memory of the past fades, it becomes difficult for us to remember which building, house, or street once stood in a given place. When Etel moved from her home in Beirut to the US in 1955, she left a suitcase full of reminiscences of her family's Ottoman past with an Armenian family in Beirut. Years later, when she tried to retrieve it, she learned that the family had destroyed the suitcase. I see this "suitcase" not only as a remembrance, but as something through which this Armenian family might also want to "not remember."

Spaces of trauma are not unfamiliar to Lebanese artists and film directors who have worked with images of lost and destroyed urban spaces. Beirut, a city that has gone through several conflicts and disasters, has been rebuilt as a new urban landscape. The amnesia of Lebanon's post–civil war years led many artists to work with archival images and photographs in order to establish a link between past and present, to deal not only with past traumas but also current urban traumas.[9]

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige often work in the realm of archival and urban research. Both grew up in the civil war period (1975–1990) and during Israel's occupation of Beirut (1982), and took part in a critical approach to images of spaces that also reinterpreted representation in photography and the moving image more broadly. Toufic often writes about surpassing disasters by way of artworks, especially through film and moving images, and the role of montage and labyrinthine time in film. For Toufic, it is possible to reconstruct the past tradition that has been withdrawn through surpassing disasters.[10] A filmmaker needs to resurrect that which came

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before what was forgotten after the disaster. In a film or video essay, the language of montage is central to the movement of the image. Rather than simply being evocative for the viewer, montage can go beyond representation to create images that resurrect what preceded a disaster.

Etel discusses how her family's post-exile lives navigated language; they spoke Turkish at home, and Arabic and French in public space. These broken affiliations with languages traveled from one disaster to another, affecting and connecting her family's construction of identity during periods of exile and war. Etel's mother thought day and night of Smyrna, "suffering from its absence, and often ... I would say too often, I saw her questioning the horizon which encircles Beirut and wondering where Smyrna would have been behind the clouds, on which side of the north of setting sun."[11]

According to Edward Said, the pathos of exile provides an enriching motif for modern culture in the twentieth century.[12] In Kurdish author Mehmed Uzun's narratives of exile, the witnesses are the survivors, the elements of landscapes and descriptions of sounds that move from one disaster to another from the topographies of Mesopotamia to Anatolia, to the Mediterranean and the Levant. One main element is the Tigris river, used by the author to narrate the massacres and disasters that happened to Armenian, Chaldean, and Kurdish tribes and communities in the mid-nineteenth century in the southeast of Anatolia.[13] Uzun uses the nonhuman element to bear witness to exile, but also struggles to find a voice for it in the novel *Hawara Dîcleyê* (The cry of Tigris). The experience of exile becomes a lens, a camera that we look through to witness in the third person what might have happened to us, and why we survived.[14] Here, longing to return home is not the central motif nor the carrier of the notion of exile. It is no longer possible to go back, yet it is possible to convey the impossibility of bearing witness. Reactivating memory through witnesses suggests the responsibility, but also care, implied in what the protagonist utters faintheartedly in Zabel Yesayan's 1922 novella *Hokis Aksoryal* (*My Soul in Exile*): "At least we, we artists could be comrades in exile."[15]

The figure of the seahorse appears in the film through archival and contemporary images, illustrating the beginning of the odyssey of exile through the Mediterranean Sea. The sea is an infrastructure of a long history of exile full of discarded subjectivities. Joana describes how her body was affected after leaving İzmir. Somehow, by leaving the realm of imaginary İzmir and setting foot in the actual city, she released the burden passed down to her by the memories of her parents and grandparents. Etel continues, regarding Joana's visit to İzmir: "Did it affect you? Did you get rid of Smyrna by going there? You absorbed your parents' nostalgia, it's a possession." Joana explains how she developed red rashes of relief after leaving the city.

Joana asks Etel: "Why did you never go there?" Etel replies: "You know, I believe we absorbed our parents' sorrow ... and we don't want to be overcome by it. It's as if I refused to face it, as if I told myself that Smyrna is not there."

ISMYRNA becomes a film about going, seeing, and imagining the city where one's ancestors always belonged, the city they incessantly described through their memories. It presents a certain healing of conflicting roots and senses of spatial belonging, as well as a continuation of oral histories. It provides a map for reconstructing a tradition of withdrawal that might be visible in our common future. As Etel says in the film: "You live in the imaginary [*Tu vis dans l'imaginaire*], and through it, you become who you are."

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1
Etel Adnan, "Voyage, War and Exile," *Al-'Arabiyya*, no. 28 (1995): 5–16 https://www.jstor.org/stable/43192725?seq=1.

2
Çınar Atay, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e İzmir planları* (Yasar Egitim ve Kultur Vakfi, 1998).

3
See the 2015 documentary *Under the Skin*, which includes an interview with Masao Adachi https://youtu.be/fUi2eGEr3oo .

4
Jalal Toufic, "Ruins," in *Thinking: The Ruin*, ed. Matthew Gumpert and Jalal Toufic (Rezan Has Museum, 2010), 37. Toufic continues: "One can preserve a war-damaged or crumbling building, but no one has any control over whether it will remain a ruin. I am fascinated by how and why war-damaged or crumbling buildings turn from ruins, with their idiosyncratic, often labyrinthine temporality, to more or less precisely datable structures in chronological time," 37.

5
Sabu Kosho combines these concepts of ruin, disaster, and capitalism in his explanation of the meaning of Fukushima: "Disaster is the real experience of people the world over. Catastrophe is the synergetic disruption of social and environmental processes, increasingly appropriated by the modus operandi of contemporary capitalism and states. Apocalypse is a metaphysical, imaginative, and affective device for us to confront the world in degeneration and to envision its radical change. These are considered as the conceptual components of what the singular name Fukushima implies for us today." *Radiation and Revolution* (Duke University Press, 2021), 4.

6
Anthropologist, theorist, and filmmaker Elizabeth Povinelli is a member of the Karrabing Film Collective, an indigenous media group of approximately thirty members, most of whom are based in the Northern Territories of Australia. Initiated in 2008 as a form of grassroots activism, Karrabing approaches filmmaking as a mode of self-organization and a means of investigating contemporary unequal social conditions. With their films and installations, the collective exposes the long shadow cast by colonial power. See https://iffr.com/en/persons/karrabing-film-collective.

7
Thomas Keenan, "Counter-Forensics and Photography," in *Autonomous Archiving*, ed. Ozge Celikaslan, Alper Sen, and Pelin Tan (DPR Barcelona Publishing, 2016), 22.

8
For more history on the neighborhood of Haynots Mahallesi, which had a population of fifteen thousand before 1922, see the book R. G. Hovannisian, *Armenian Smyrna/İzmir* (Aras Yayıncılık, 2018), 226–29.

9
See Songul Geldi, "Savas sonrasi Beyrut'ta Mekansal Bellek, Imge ve Travma" (Spatial memory, image, and trauma in postwar Beirut) (Ph.D thesis, Mardin Artuklu University, 2019, advisor: Pelin Tan).

10
"Concerning a surpassing disaster, collateral damage includes much of what those who are insensitive to such a disaster view as having been spared. A filmmaker, thinker, writer, video maker, or musician who in relation to a surpassing disaster still considers that tradition has persisted, never has the impression that he has to resurrect even some of what 'survived' the carnage; who can ask, 'Why have I survived and why has this building been spared while so much else was destroyed?' without any suspicion that the building in question as well as many books and artworks that had the good fortune of not being destroyed materially have nonetheless been immaterially withdrawn by the surpassing disaster, is hypocritical, that is, hypo-critical, still this side of the critical event of the surpassing disaster." Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (Forthcoming Books, 2009), 15 http://jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal_Toufic,_The_Withdrawal_of_Tradition_Past_a_Surpassing_Disaster.pdf.

11
Adnan, "Voyage, War and Exile," 5.

12
Edward Said, *Reflection on Exile and Other Essays* (Granta Books, 2000), 350.

13
Novels by Mehmed Uzun include *Siya Evîne* (Sel Yayıncılık, 2020) and *Hawara Dîcleyê* (Sel Yayıncılık, 2020). Uzun has also published essay collections on the theme of exile.

14
Although the witness is often someone who experienced the disaster first hand, this does not mean they have the language to testify to it. The fragmented language of trauma often cannot communicate the complete lived experience. The testimonies of witnesses are also often affected by accounts of the disaster that appear in newspapers, photos, and films For a related discussion on survivors and witnesses, see Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. D. H. Roazen

(Zone Books, 1999), 17.

15
The novella was originally published in Armenian. The first Turkish version appeared in 2018 as *Surgun Ruhum* (Aras Yayıncılık). The sentence quoted here was translated by Pelin Tan from the Turkish version (p. 33): "Fakat en azından biz, biz sanatçılar sürgünde yoldaş olabiliriz."