**Fragments of Armenian Identity**

*Celeste Nazeli Snowber & Marsha Nouritza Odabashian*

**Abstract**

We come as two artists, one a poet and dancer, Celeste Nazeli Snowber, and the other a visual artist, Marsha Nouritza Odabashian to excavate, reclaim and celebrate our Armenian identities. This offering is a collaboration of poems and visual images which sing a song deep in our bones and cells. Through colors, words, hues, and textures we hearken back to what has been in us all along. We offer it to you as a place to know that cultural identities live within the skin in all their paradox, glory and mystery.

**Bios**

**Celeste Nazeli Snowber,** PhD is a dancer, writer and award-winning educator who is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University outside Vancouver, B.C., Canada. She has published widely in the area of arts-based research and her books include *Embodied Prayer and Embodied Inquiry: Writing, living and being through the body,* as well as two collections of poetry. Celeste continues to create site-specific performances in the natural world as well as full-length performances. She is presently finishing a collection of poetry connected to her Armenian identity, which will be integrated in her next one-woman show. Celeste's mother was born in Historic Armenia in 1912 and survived the Armenian genocide before immigrating to Boston. Integral to Celeste's own healing process is excavating fragments of ancestral memory, which find their way in poems and dances. They become a path to excavate trauma as well as the beauty imbued in the terroir of Armenian culture. A short site-specific performance piece to the poem, “Dissolving all boundaries,” was created as an opening for the article and is linked here: [https://vimeo.com/433807763](https://vimeo.com/433807763) Contact: celeste@sfu.ca / www.celestesnowber.com

Boston based artist and with a MFA, **Marsha Nouritza Odabashian's** drawings and paintings uniquely reflect the tension and expansiveness of being raised in dual cultures, Armenian and American. As a young child she watched her mother cultivate the Armenian tradition of dyeing eggs red by boiling them in onionskins. In her work, vignettes of current events, history and social justice emerge from the onionskin dye on paper, stretched canvas or compressed cellulose sponge. Her numerous solo exhibitions in the United States include Skins at the Armenian Museum of America in Watertown, In the Shade of the Peacock, EXPUNGE and Miasma at Galatea Fine Art in Boston. Group exhibitions include the Danforth Museum and Gallery Z. She has exhibited in Armenia twice: New Illuminations (HAYP Pop Up) and Road Maps (Honey Pump Gallery). Reviews of her work appear in ArtScope, Art New England, the Boston Globe, and the Mirror Spectator. Odabashian studies early and medieval Armenian art and architecture at Tufts University with Professor Christina Maranci, with whom she traveled to Aght’amar and Ani in Historic Armenia. Pairing her ancestral past with the present in her art is her means of fulfillment. Contact: mndonabashian@gmail.com
We come as two artists, one a poet and dancer, Celeste Nazeli Snowber, and the other a visual artist, Marsha Nouritza Odabashian, to excavate, reclaim and celebrate our Armenian identities. As both descendants of Armenian genocide survivors, we integrate our art as a place to explore, excavate and celebrate our Armenian identity. To contextualize our journey it is important to know that the Armenian genocide which began in 1915 resulted in the deaths of 1.5 million Armenians who went through horrific brutalities including death marches in the Syrian Desert. Trauma has a way of getting in the tissues of our bodies, and artistic practices are a vessel for recovering pieces of our own stories.

This offering is a collaboration of poems and visual images which articulate a song deep in our bones and cells. All the visual images are done by Marsha and all the poems by Celeste. Even though we have executed our artistic practices apart, there is a thread of connections and shared stories. We are both deeply affected by each other’s work. There is a visceral resonance, as if one is an expression of the other, even though we are working in isolation, in our own solitudes. Our artistic processes have expanded our understanding that as artists, we can companion each other through our creative journeys.

Through colors, words, hues, and textures we hearken back to what has been in us all along. We offer it to you as a place to know that cultural identities live within the skin in all their paradox, glory and mystery.
Batchig and Geragoor

the two words
    I remember
are imprinted on the body

    batchig: to kiss
    geragoor: food or a meal

the two areas my mother
reminded me of every day
as if they were partners

kissing the food
fooding the kiss

she was a foodie
before it was hip
knowing that taste, colour, texture

    was at the heart
    of loving and living

so here I am left with
what is necessary.

    Celeste Nazeli Snowber
she created beauty in strife
aftermath of Armenian genocide
escaped but the heart
does not cease living lament
of the forefathers and foremothers
the old country’s legacy

at eleven she made paper roses
sold them on the streets
in Cambridge, Massachusetts
brought reapings to her family

at seventy-three
the year of her death
after my father died
she was still bringing flowers to life
nothing could stop living petals
being shaped into modern art

our kitchen was transformed
into an art studio
practices of cooking with color
or creating color through
sculptural objects and plant life

I have kept the tradition
of my artist-mother
knocked out a wall
in my kitchen/dining area
laid a wooden floor
doubles as a dance
studio, torso ecstatic

kitchens are places of love
creating food, art, dance
exchange of hearts through flesh
and always
there shall be flowers

there is strife too in kitchens --
tears and conflict
but connections usually win out
ripeness of beauty over a life-time

we are made and re-made
in the kitchen-studio
colors of soul brought to brilliance
in ordinary living.

Celeste Nazeli Snowber

"In praise of the kitchen-studio."

* A version of the poem, "In Praise of the Kitchen Studio," was first published in the journal, Blue Skies Poetry.
on the other side
of what cannot be seen
fragility goes wild

containing constellations

turquoise galaxies gulp
bodies within bodies
bones blast to sand
swirling in all you ever knew

within the borderlines
where skin meets sky
crying out for a third way
dissolving all boundaries
there are not enough letters
in the alphabet to define
the characteristics of longing

sketched into the Armenian soul
varied, complex and complicated
as the cuisine of food

the alphabet of longing
has aromas which sit
long after it's recognized

even words don't express
the inexpressible haunts
where yearning aches

in the dance of migration

Celeste Nazeli Snowber